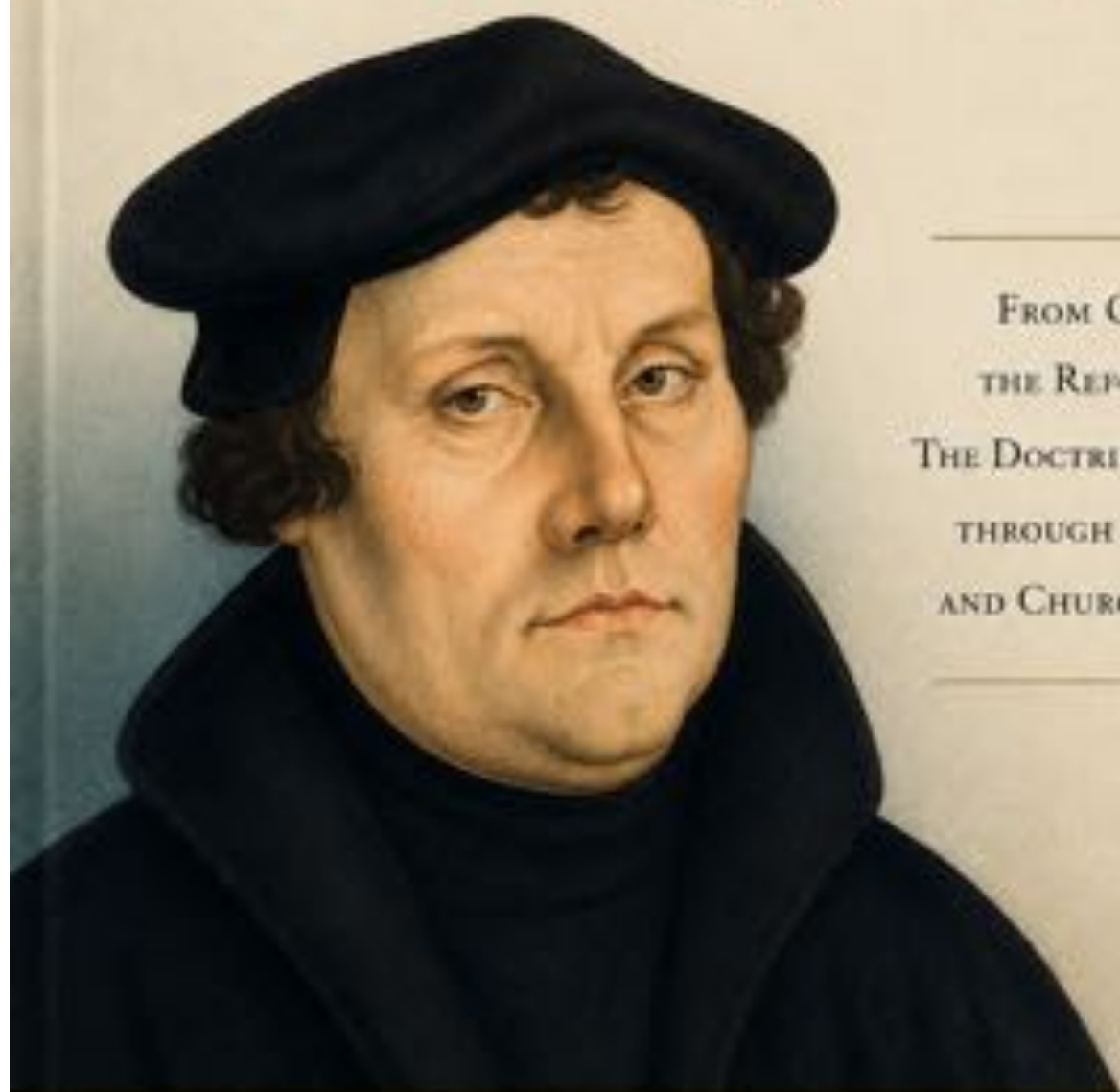


UNDERSTANDING LUTHER

The Biblical and Historical Foundations of
The Bondage of the Will



FROM GENESIS TO
THE REFORMATION:
THE DOCTRINE OF GRACE
THROUGH SCRIPTURE
AND CHURCH HISTORY

DAVID CLARKE

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The Doctrine of Grace Through Scripture
and Church History

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This volume is respectfully dedicated

to

CHRIST-CENTRED CHURCHES INC.

Baguio City, Philippines

With gratitude to God for the ministry of Pastor William Ola Poloc, Senior Director, and to the pastors, teachers, and theological students whose love for the Holy Scriptures and commitment to the Gospel first inspired the preparation of the modern English edition of *The Bondage of the Will*.

This companion volume, *Understanding Luther*, has been prepared to accompany that edition and to assist readers in their study of Luther's great work. It is my earnest prayer that, God willing, both volumes will strengthen Christ's Church and encourage the faithful preaching of the Gospel.

It is my earnest prayer that the Lord may be pleased to use these volumes to strengthen His Church, to encourage the faithful preaching of the Gospel, and to exalt the sovereign grace of God revealed in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

"Holding forth the word of life..."

Philippians 2:16

Soli Deo Gloria

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INTRODUCTION

The Purpose of This Book

The publication of my modern English edition of Martin Luther's *The Bondage of the Will* had its origins in a request from Pastor William Ola Poloc, Senior Director of Christ-Centred Church, Baguio City, Philippines. Desiring to place one of the great theological works of the Protestant Reformation into the hands of pastors and theological students in a clear and readable form, he asked whether a modern English edition could be prepared for use within the churches and theological institute under his care.

That request marked the beginning of a project which, by the good providence of God, grew far beyond what either of us had originally anticipated. The modern English edition of *The Bondage of the Will* was completed, and ninety copies were printed and distributed among pastors and theological students in the Philippines. It was a great encouragement to know that Luther's defence of the sovereign grace of God would once again be studied by men preparing for the Gospel ministry.

Yet, after the books had been distributed, it soon became evident that many readers required more than a modern English text. Luther assumes a knowledge of Holy Scripture, Church history, and theological controversy that many readers today no longer possess. Questions naturally arose. Why did Luther write *The Bondage of the Will*? Why did he regard the controversy concerning free will as the most important issue of his day? What events led to his debate with Erasmus? More fundamentally still, why do the roots of that controversy reach back, not merely to the Reformation, nor even to Augustine and Pelagius, but to the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis?

It was these questions that gave birth to the present volume.

This book has therefore been written to accompany *The Bondage of the Will*, not by replacing Luther's work, nor by asking the reader

to accept his conclusions without examination, but by tracing the biblical and historical foundations of the doctrines which Luther defended. Like every teacher in the Church, Luther himself must be tested by the supreme authority of Holy Scripture. Our purpose is not to exalt Luther, but to understand why he believed what he believed, and to examine those convictions in the light of God's written Word.

For this reason, the study begins where the Bible itself begins.

Before we consider Luther, we first consider Adam. Before we examine the bondage of the will, we examine the freedom of man in his original creation. Before we discuss grace, we consider the Fall. Before we follow the controversies of the Church, we examine the first promise of the Gospel, the earliest acts of faith and unbelief, and the entrance of sin into the world. Only when these biblical foundations have been carefully established do we trace the history of the doctrine through Augustine's controversy with Pelagius, the preservation of the truth throughout the centuries, the challenge of Erasmus, and finally the remarkable work of God in raising up Martin Luther during the Protestant Reformation.

Thus, Luther does not stand at the beginning of this book, but near its conclusion. He appears, not as the originator of a new theology, but as a servant of God whom the Lord raised up to recover and defend truths that had been revealed in Holy Scripture from the beginning and preserved throughout the history of the Church.

Accordingly, this volume is arranged in three parts.

Part One examines the biblical foundations of the controversy. Beginning with the creation of man, it considers Adam's original freedom, the Fall, the entrance of sin and death, the first promise of redemption, and the earliest manifestations of faith and unbelief. These opening chapters demonstrate that the questions addressed by Luther are rooted in the opening pages of Scripture itself.

Part Two traces the historical development of these doctrines

through the life of the Church. We consider Augustine and Pelagius, the preservation of biblical truth during the medieval period, the significance of Erasmus, and the reasons why God raised up Martin Luther at such a critical moment in history. The concluding chapters prepare the reader to approach *The Bondage of the Will* by examining the authority of Holy Scripture, the central question concerning the human will before God, and the theological principles that governed Luther's thinking.

Part Three begins a careful study of *The Bondage of the Will* itself. Here Luther is allowed to speak in his own words, while his arguments are examined in their biblical and historical context. The purpose is not merely to explain Luther's reasoning, but continually to compare it with the testimony of Holy Scripture, by which every doctrine must ultimately stand or fall.

It is my hope that this volume will serve both as an introduction to Martin Luther and as a guide to one of the most important theological works ever written. Yet my greater desire is that it will lead readers beyond Luther himself to the Word of God, where alone the final authority in all matters of faith and doctrine is found.

It is my prayer that the modern English edition of *The Bondage of the Will*, together with the present volume, will, God willing, become the foundation for a future Tagalog edition. My hope is that pastors, students, and churches throughout the Philippines will one day be able to read and study these works in their own language, and that through them many may be encouraged to search the Scriptures and rejoice in the sovereign grace of God revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

If this work helps even a few readers to understand more clearly the grace of God, the greatness of the Gospel, and the authority of His Holy Word, then the labour invested in its preparation will have been richly rewarded. To God alone be the glory.

PART ONE
Biblical Foundations

CHAPTER ONE

Creation, the Fall, and the Origin of the Great Controversy

“Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions.”

Ecclesiastes 7:29

I. God Created Man Upright

The controversy concerning the human will did not begin with Augustine and Pelagius, nor with Erasmus and Luther. Its origin is found in the opening chapters of Holy Scripture. Before the Church could ask what man is now, it had first to understand what man was when God created him, what he became through the Fall, and what God purposed, in His eternal mercy, to accomplish through the promised Redeemer. Every subsequent debate concerning grace, free will, regeneration, and salvation finds its source in the history recorded in Genesis.

The doctrine of *The Bondage of the Will* cannot be understood apart from the biblical account of creation and the Fall. Luther did not invent this doctrine, nor did Augustine before him. Both men sought to explain and defend what they believed the Scriptures plainly taught concerning the condition of man after Adam’s transgression. The question therefore is not, What did Luther teach? but rather, What has God revealed in His Word?

According to the Scriptures, God created man in His own image and after His own likeness (Genesis 1:26–27). Man was not created morally neutral, nor was he created inclined toward evil. Solomon declares, “God hath made man upright” (Ecclesiastes 7:29). Adam came forth from the hand of his Creator holy, righteous, and without sin, possessing every faculty necessary to know, love, worship, and obey God. His understanding was unclouded, his affections rightly ordered, and his will free to delight in the will of God. There was

nothing within his nature that inclined him to rebellion.

II. Adam's Original Freedom

The freedom which Adam possessed before the Fall must be carefully distinguished from the condition of his descendants after the Fall. Much confusion concerning the doctrine of the human will has arisen because this distinction has not always been observed.

When God created Adam, He created him upright (Ecclesiastes 7:29). There was no corruption within his nature, no conflict between righteousness and sin, and no inward inclination towards evil. Adam's will was truly free—not free from God, but free to love God, trust His Word, and obey His commandments. His obedience was neither forced nor mechanical. It flowed willingly from a heart that delighted in its Creator.

This original liberty was itself a gift of God. Adam possessed no independent existence apart from his Creator, nor did he possess any right to live autonomously. His freedom consisted in joyful conformity to the will of God. True liberty is never found in independence from God but in willing obedience to Him.

Yet Adam's freedom was not immutable. God alone is unchangeable. Adam was created holy, but he was capable of falling from that holy estate. The command concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil served as the appointed test of that obedience. When Adam transgressed, he did so willingly. No external force compelled him to sin. The responsibility for his disobedience rested entirely with himself.

The Angels and Adam's Original Freedom

Adam's original freedom was not unique among God's intelligent creatures. The Scriptures reveal that the angels likewise were created holy, delighting to do the will of their Creator. Yet among them a distinction soon appeared. Some "kept not their first estate"

but sinned against God and were cast down under His righteous judgment (Jude 6; 2 Peter 2:4). Others continued in holiness and are described by the Apostle Paul as “the elect angels” (1 Timothy 5:21).

Neither Adam nor the holy angels possessed life or holiness independently of God. Every perfection they enjoyed was the free gift of their Creator. The holy angels did not preserve themselves by their own strength. The Church has long understood from the Scriptures that they continue in holiness because God, according to His eternal purpose, has upheld and confirmed them under the sovereign headship of Christ, who is “the head of all principality and power” (Colossians 2:10).

Adam likewise lived entirely by the goodness of God. His existence, righteousness, communion with his Creator, and dominion over the earth were all gifts freely bestowed upon him. Yet Adam did not then require redeeming grace, for he had not sinned. The grace that pardons, restores, and reconciles belongs to the history of redemption following the Fall. Before his transgression Adam lived in the enjoyment of God’s goodness; after his transgression he stood in need of God’s mercy.

This distinction prepares us for everything that follows. Luther’s controversy does not concern Adam as he came from the hand of God, but mankind as it exists after Adam’s transgression. Adam possessed a will that was truly free. This original condition is of the utmost importance, for unless we first understand what Adam possessed, we cannot understand what was lost through his disobedience. The whole controversy concerning the human will depends upon this question. If man has fallen, how far has he fallen? What remains of the image of God? What effect has sin had upon the understanding, the affections, and the will? These questions have occupied the Church throughout her history and lie at the heart of Luther’s controversy with Erasmus.

“The question is what became of that freedom after sin entered the world.”

III. God's Command in Eden

Having considered the state in which God created man, we must now consider the command by which Adam's obedience was to be demonstrated. Adam was not created to live independently of his Creator, but in joyful fellowship with Him. His liberty consisted, not in acting apart from God, but in willingly obeying the God who had given him life.

The Lord God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden, a place of beauty, abundance, and perfect provision. There he was appointed to dress and keep the garden, exercising dominion over the creation entrusted to his care. His labour was neither burdensome nor grievous, but part of the blessedness of his created state.

It is important at this point to distinguish Adam's original state from that of fallen sinners. Before the Fall, Adam was not called to believe in a promised Redeemer, for no promise of redemption had yet been revealed. He lived in immediate fellowship with God as his Creator, and his obedience consisted in the willing fulfilment of God's revealed command. Only after the Fall, when God promised the Seed of the woman, did faith become the appointed means by which sinners embraced the promise of salvation. Thus the history of redemption introduces, not merely the continued obligation to obey God, but the necessity of believing His gracious promise. The Law declares man's duty; the promise reveals God's mercy; and the faith by which that promise is received is itself the gift of God.

Among the many trees which God caused to grow in the garden stood two of particular significance: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam was freely permitted to eat of every tree except one.

"And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou

eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”

(Genesis 2:16–17)

The command was simple, clear, and entirely reasonable. It arose from the relationship that already existed between the Creator and His creature. Adam required no promise of reward to induce his obedience. Created holy and upright, he delighted to do the will of God, just as the holy angels delight to perform the service appointed to them. Obedience was the natural expression of a heart that loved its Creator.

Neither does the Scripture suggest that Adam possessed life independently of God. His life, like every other blessing, was continually sustained by the goodness of God. The presence of the tree of life reminds us that man’s continuance in life depended upon God’s gracious provision and not upon any inherent immortality within himself. Every breath Adam drew, every joy he experienced, and every privilege he possessed flowed continually from the hand of his Creator.

It is also important to observe that the Scriptures do not speak of Adam as possessing eternal life in the sense later revealed by our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ declares:

“And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.”

(John 17:3)

That revelation belongs to the history of redemption. Adam knew God as his Creator and walked with Him in unbroken fellowship, but the fullness of eternal life as revealed in the incarnate Son awaited the unfolding of God’s redemptive purpose.

When the serpent approached Eve, he appealed to a desire that was not, in itself, sinful.

“...the tree was to be desired to make one wise...”

(Genesis 3:6)

Throughout the Scriptures, wisdom is presented as something to be sought. The error did not consist in desiring wisdom, but in seeking it by distrusting God's Word and by grasping what God had forbidden. Eve accepted the testimony of the serpent above the testimony of her Creator. Adam, though not deceived in the same manner, failed in his own responsibility. Rather than seeking the Lord, whose voice he knew, he knowingly joined his wife in her transgression. Thus both fell under the righteous judgment of God, though each according to the circumstances revealed in the sacred record.

The events in Eden therefore reveal far more than the breaking of a single commandment. They demonstrate that the life, holiness, and happiness of man were never independent possessions. Everything depended continually upon God. When that relationship was broken through unbelief and disobedience, the consequences extended not only to Adam and Eve but to the whole human race.

Yet even here we must remember that the Fall did not surprise God nor overthrow His eternal purpose. Before the foundation of the world, God had already purposed to glorify His Son in the redemption of His people. Through the Fall there would be revealed, not only the justice and holiness of God, but also His mercy, His longsuffering, His redeeming love, and the riches of His grace. Attributes eternally possessed by God would now be displayed in history through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Thus the command given in Eden prepares the way for everything that follows. It leads directly to the Fall, to the first promise of the Gospel, and ultimately to the coming of the Second Adam, in whom God's eternal purpose of redemption is perfectly accomplished.

IV. The Fall of Man

The tragedy of the Fall begins, not with the eating of the forbidden fruit, but with unbelief

The record of man's fall is among the shortest narratives in Holy Scripture, yet no event, apart from the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, has had greater consequences for the human race. Every sorrow, every sin, every grave, and every act of rebellion against God finds its origin in the events recorded in Genesis chapter three.

The temptation did not begin with the fruit, but with the Word of God. The serpent's first assault was directed against the truthfulness and goodness of God.

"Yea, hath God said...?" (Genesis 3:1)

Every temptation to sin begins in the same way. Before man disobeys God, he first questions God's Word. The issue in Eden was therefore not simply the eating of forbidden fruit, but whether God's revelation would be believed or rejected.

The serpent openly contradicted the divine warning:

"Ye shall not surely die." (Genesis 3:4)

Here, for the first time in history, the word of the creature was set against the Word of the Creator. Eve was persuaded that wisdom, happiness, and life could be found independently of God. Adam, though not deceived in the same manner, knowingly joined in the transgression (1 Timothy 2:14). Thus, by one deliberate act of disobedience, sin entered the world.

The Apostle Paul declares:

*"Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world,
and death by sin..." (Romans 5:12)*

Adam did not fall merely as a private individual. He stood as the head of the human race. Consequently, his transgression brought consequences not only upon himself but upon all his descendants.

The history of mankind from Genesis onwards is therefore the history of a fallen race.

Immediately after their transgression, Adam and Eve became conscious of their shame.

“And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.”

(Genesis 3:7)

The innocence they had enjoyed before God was gone. Instead of running to their Creator in joyful fellowship, they sought to hide themselves among the trees of the garden. Fear had replaced confidence; guilt had replaced innocence; hiding had replaced communion.

Yet it is important that we observe carefully what the Scriptures actually say. Adam continued to hear God’s voice. He answered God’s questions. He confessed, however imperfectly, what had occurred. He continued to think, reason, speak, and act as a rational and moral creature. The Scriptures do not teach that Adam ceased to be man, nor that the spirit which God had breathed into him ceased to exist. Rather, Adam now stood before God as a guilty sinner under the righteous sentence of divine judgment.

God’s warning had been unmistakable:

“In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”

The certainty of that sentence cannot be questioned, for God cannot lie. Yet neither can it be denied that Adam and Eve continued to live beyond that day. Here we stand before one of the most profound moments in the whole of Scripture. Divine justice demanded the execution of the sentence, yet divine mercy was already preparing the revelation of redemption.

Before Adam and Eve were driven from the garden, God spoke of the coming Seed of the woman who would bruise the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15). He then clothed them with coats of skins (Genesis 3:21), providing a covering which they could never have provided for themselves.

Whether we fully understand every aspect of these events or not, one truth shines brightly from the narrative: the Fall did not frustrate the eternal purpose of God. Before the foundation of the world, God had already purposed redemption in His Son. Justice would not be set aside, but neither would mercy be denied. From the very entrance of sin into the world, the Gospel began to unfold.

Here, then, lies the true beginning of the great controversy. What was the effect of Adam's transgression? What did mankind lose? Does fallen man retain within himself the ability to return to God, or must salvation begin entirely with the sovereign grace of God? These questions would occupy Augustine, divide the Church in the Pelagian controversy, and ultimately stand at the centre of the debate between Erasmus and Martin Luther.

V. The Consequences of the Fall

The question before us is not whether Adam continued to exist after his transgression, for the Scriptures plainly testify that he did. Nor is it whether he retained those faculties with which God had originally endowed him. After the Fall he continued to hear the voice of God, to answer His questions, to reason, to labour, to know his wife, and to become the father of the human race. The Scriptures themselves leave no room for doubt on these matters.

The question is altogether different. What effect did Adam's transgression have upon his relationship with God? What was lost through sin? What became of that will which had once been truly free to love, trust, and obey its Creator?

Here we must be content to speak where the Scriptures speak.

The Apostle Paul describes fallen mankind as “dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1) and again as “dead in sins” (Colossians 2:13). These are the words chosen by the Holy Spirit, and they are sufficient for the doctrine before us. Likewise, Luther consistently speaks of the bondage of the will, not of the destruction of the will. Fallen man still wills, chooses, thinks, reasons, and acts, but his will is no longer free towards God. It is held in bondage by sin and is unable to recover itself by its own power.

Throughout this volume I have therefore preferred to retain the language of Holy Scripture and of Luther himself. My purpose is not to introduce unnecessary theological terminology, but to let the Word of God define its own doctrine. Where Scripture speaks of man as “dead in trespasses and sins,” I shall use the same expression. Where Luther speaks of the bondage of the will, I shall endeavour to let Luther speak in his own words.

This principle is not merely one of style but of conviction. The clearer our language reflects the language of Scripture, the less danger there is of confusing biblical doctrine with later theological expressions. Luther himself continually appealed, not to the authority of human tradition, but to the testimony of the written Word of God.

The Fall therefore left mankind in a condition from which no man can recover himself. The righteousness in which Adam had been created was lost. Communion with God was broken. The whole race came under sin and death. If man is ever to be restored, the initiative must belong to God. Redemption cannot begin with man seeking God, but with God seeking man. Thus, immediately after the Fall, the Lord called, “Adam, where art thou?” (Genesis 3:9). That question marks the beginning of redemptive history, for the God against whom man had sinned was the first to seek the sinner.

VI. The First Promise of the Gospel

If the history of the Fall ended with the sentence pronounced upon

Adam and Eve, the whole human race would remain without hope. The God who declared, "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:17), is the God of truth who cannot lie. His justice demanded that sin be judged, and His word could not fail. Yet the sacred record reveals that Adam and Eve did not immediately return to the dust from which they had been taken. They continued to live, though now under the righteous sentence of death.

It is here that we must proceed with reverence and care. The Scriptures do not present the continuation of Adam and Eve's lives as a failure of God's warning, nor do they suggest that His justice had been set aside. Rather, they reveal that God's justice and God's mercy were already working together according to His eternal purpose.

Had the sentence of physical death been executed immediately in all its finality, the human race would have perished in its first parents. There would have been no succeeding generations, and the promised Messiah, according to His human nature, could not have come into the world as the Seed of the woman and the Son of Adam. The preservation of Adam and Eve's lives must therefore be understood in the light of God's eternal purpose of redemption. Before the foundation of the world, the Father had already ordained His beloved Son to be the Redeemer of His people. The Fall did not frustrate that purpose; rather, it became the occasion for its first public revelation.

Accordingly, before Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden, the Lord Himself announced the promise that would sustain the hope of every succeeding generation.

*"And I will put enmity between thee and the woman,
and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy
head, and thou shalt bruise his heel."*

(Genesis 3:15)

These words have long been recognised as the first proclamation of the Gospel. While judgment was still being pronounced, God

revealed that the serpent would not have the final victory. A Redeemer would come. Born of the woman, He would destroy the works of the devil and accomplish that salvation which fallen man could never obtain by his own efforts.

It is of great importance to observe that this promise did not arise because Adam first sought God. Adam had hidden himself among the trees of the garden. It was God who sought Adam. Before man uttered a word of faith, God spoke a word of grace. The Gospel therefore begins, not with man's search for God, but with God's gracious search for man. Redemption therefore begins, not with the will of man, but with the sovereign mercy of God.

Immediately following this promise, the Scriptures record another act of profound significance.

*"Unto Adam also and to his wife did the LORD God
make coats of skins, and clothed them."*

(Genesis 3:21)

Adam and Eve had attempted to cover their shame with aprons of fig leaves—the work of their own hands. God rejected that covering and provided another. The sacred text does not explain every detail of this event, yet it clearly teaches that the covering accepted before God was one which God Himself provided. Throughout the history of the Church many have rightly seen in this provision a foreshadowing of that perfect righteousness and atoning sacrifice which would be accomplished by the Lord Jesus Christ. Whether viewed as a type or as an act of divine compassion, the lesson remains the same: sinful man cannot provide a covering for his own guilt; only God can provide the righteousness by which sinners may stand in His presence.

Thus, from the very beginning of human history, justice and mercy meet together. Justice required the judgment of sin; mercy promised a Redeemer. Justice expelled Adam from the Garden; mercy gave him the hope of restoration through the coming Christ. The doctrine

of grace, therefore, does not begin in the New Testament. It begins in Eden, where the God who judged sin also revealed the Saviour.

From this point onward the whole history of Holy Scripture unfolds the fulfilment of that promise. Every sacrifice, every covenant, every prophet, every priest, every king, and every act of divine providence directs our attention to the promised Seed, until at last “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). It is this Gospel, first proclaimed in Eden and fulfilled in Jesus Christ, that Martin Luther defended with such vigour in *The Bondage of the Will*. For if salvation begins with God’s promise, God’s grace, and God’s provision, then it can never begin with the will or merit of fallen man.

CHAPTER TWO

Augustine, Pelagius, and the First Great Controversy Concerning Grace and the Human Will

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.”

(Ephesians 2:8–9)

The opening chapters of Genesis record the creation of man, his fall into sin, and God’s first promise of redemption. Yet they immediately raise a question that has occupied the Church throughout her history. What precisely did Adam lose through his transgression? Did mankind retain the moral ability to return to God by the exercise of the human will, or has the Fall rendered man entirely dependent upon the sovereign grace of God?

These questions did not arise for the first time during the Reformation. More than a thousand years before Martin Luther wrote *The Bondage of the Will*, the Church was compelled to address these very issues in the controversy between Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, and the British monk Pelagius. Although separated by centuries, the debate between Augustine and Pelagius anticipated, in remarkable ways, the later controversy between Erasmus and Luther.

The questions raised by the Fall did not disappear with the passing of Adam. They accompanied every succeeding generation and lay beneath every age of biblical history. How can sinful man be restored to fellowship with God? Does fallen man possess within himself the ability to return to his Creator, or must salvation begin entirely with the grace of God?

For several centuries the Church confessed the necessity of divine grace without being compelled to define precisely the relationship between grace and the human will. The apostles had proclaimed salvation through Jesus Christ alone, and the early Christians faithfully preached repentance, faith, and the grace of God. Yet as new errors arose, the Church found herself increasingly required to

defend more carefully the doctrines revealed in Holy Scripture.

The first great controversy concerning these questions arose during the early fifth century in the conflict between Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, and the British monk Pelagius. Although separated from Martin Luther by more than a thousand years, the issues they debated were essentially the same issues that would later divide Luther and Erasmus. Indeed, Luther himself regarded Augustine as the Church Father who most faithfully understood the Apostle Paul's doctrine of grace.

The controversy was not merely an academic dispute between theologians. At stake was the very nature of salvation. Is man, by nature, able to obey God and believe the Gospel by the exercise of his own will? Or has the Fall so affected mankind that salvation must begin entirely with God's sovereign grace?

Before considering Augustine's answer, we must first understand the teaching of Pelagius, for it was Pelagius who compelled the Church to define with greater precision what the Scriptures teach concerning sin, grace, and the human will.

I. Pelagius and the Freedom of the Human Will

Pelagius was a British monk who arrived in Rome towards the close of the fourth century. Deeply troubled by the moral decline which he observed among those professing the Christian faith, he became convinced that many excused their sins by appealing to the weakness of human nature. In reaction to this, Pelagius began to emphasise man's moral responsibility and ability to obey the commandments of God.

His concern for holy living was commendable. The Scriptures everywhere call believers to pursue holiness and to walk in obedience before God. Yet in seeking to uphold human responsibility, Pelagius gradually attributed to fallen man an ability which, according to Augustine and the Apostle Paul, mankind no longer possessed after

the Fall.

Pelagius maintained that Adam's sin affected Adam alone. Every child, he argued, enters the world in the same moral condition as Adam before the Fall. Sin is therefore learned by imitation rather than inherited through human nature. Consequently, every individual possesses the natural ability to choose good or evil and may obey God without the necessity of an inward work of sovereign grace.

If this teaching were true, the consequences would be immense. Grace would become chiefly an external help rather than the indispensable work of God within the sinner. Redemption would no longer depend entirely upon God's initiative, but would begin with the decision of the individual. The whole controversy therefore centred upon one question:

What did Adam's Fall actually do to mankind?

Pelagius answered:

Very little.

Augustine answered:

Everything.

And it is here that the controversy concerning *The Bondage of the Will* truly enters the history of the Church.

II. Why Pelagius Opposed Augustine

Pelagius was not an atheist, nor did he deny the authority of the Holy Scriptures. On the contrary, he professed to honour the Word of God and sought to encourage Christians to live lives of holiness and obedience. His concern arose from what he perceived to be moral carelessness among many who claimed the name of Christ. If men continually excused their sins by appealing to the weakness of

their nature, Pelagius feared that they would neglect the pursuit of righteousness altogether.

It was therefore his conviction that God would not command what man was incapable of performing. If the Scriptures command repentance, obedience, and holiness, then, he reasoned, every individual must possess by nature the ability to obey those commands. Responsibility, in his understanding, necessarily implied ability.

This argument has possessed a powerful appeal throughout the history of the Church. Indeed, in one form or another, it has appeared repeatedly from the days of Pelagius to the present hour. Whenever man is thought to possess within himself the moral ability to turn to God apart from divine grace, the essential principle of Pelagianism reappears, even though it may be known by another name.

Yet the question before the Church was never whether man remains responsible before God. Augustine agreed entirely that every human being is accountable to his Creator. The real question was altogether different.

Does responsibility necessarily imply ability?

Or has the Fall so affected mankind that, although man remains fully responsible for his sin, he has lost the moral ability to restore himself to the favour of God?

This was the issue which divided Augustine and Pelagius, and it would later become the very heart of the controversy between Erasmus and Martin Luther.

The debate, therefore, was not simply over the freedom of the will, but over the meaning of grace itself. If man possesses within himself the ability to obey God and believe the Gospel, then grace becomes chiefly an aid offered to those who first choose to seek God. If, however, man is unable to recover himself because of the effects of Adam's Fall, then grace must be something far greater. It must be

God's sovereign work from beginning to end, bringing life where there is death, faith where there is unbelief, and salvation where there is only condemnation.

Thus the controversy was ultimately about the Gospel itself.

III. Augustine's Answer

Augustine's Own Testimony

Augustine's doctrine of grace did not arise merely from academic study or philosophical speculation. It was born out of his own experience of the sovereign mercy of God. Having spent many years pursuing worldly ambition and the pleasures of sin, he came to realise that the human heart does not naturally seek God. Looking back upon his conversion, Augustine confessed that it was not he who first sought the Lord, but the Lord who had sought him. What God commanded, God Himself had to enable him to perform. Thus his understanding of grace arose, not from human reasoning, but from the conviction that salvation from beginning to end is the work of God.

The Law Before and After the Fall

Before the Fall, God exercised His rightful authority over Adam by commanding him to fulfil the duties for which he had been created. Adam was commanded to be fruitful and multiply, to replenish the earth, to exercise dominion over the creatures, and to dress and keep the Garden. These commandments were neither grievous nor burdensome. Created holy and upright, Adam delighted to perform the will of his Creator, and his obedience flowed willingly from the righteousness in which he had been made.

After the Fall, God did not surrender His right to command His creature. His commandments remained holy, just, and good. The change was not in God or in His Law, but in man. Having fallen from his original righteousness, Adam no longer possessed the moral ability to render that perfect obedience which God's holiness

required. Thus the Law continued to reveal the righteous character of God while exposing the ruin into which mankind had fallen.

It is also important to distinguish Adam's state before the Fall from that of sinners after the promise of redemption had been revealed. Before his transgression, Adam did not believe in a promised Redeemer, for no such promise had yet been given. He walked with God as his Creator in unbroken fellowship. Only after God promised the Seed of the woman did faith become the appointed means by which fallen sinners embraced God's promise of salvation. Thus the Law declares man's duty, while the promise reveals God's mercy; and the faith by which that promise is received is itself the gift of God, bestowed according to His sovereign grace.

This was the very point Augustine defended against Pelagius. God's commands do not prove that fallen man possesses the ability to obey them. Rather, they reveal both God's perfect righteousness and man's continual need of that grace without which he can neither believe nor obey.

One sentence from Augustine came to summarise his whole doctrine and became the focus of great controversy:

“Give what Thou commandest, and command what Thou wilt.”

In this brief prayer Augustine acknowledged that God is perfectly righteous in commanding obedience, yet fallen man possesses no power to render that obedience unless God first gives what He commands. Pelagius strongly objected to this prayer because he believed that God's commands themselves proved man's natural ability to obey. Here the controversy reached its heart: does God's command imply man's ability, or does it reveal man's need of divine grace?

Into this controversy God raised up Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, whose understanding of the grace of God would profoundly influence the history of the Christian Church.

Unlike Pelagius, Augustine's theology was not born merely from intellectual reflection. It arose from his own experience of sin, his inability to free himself from its power, and the sovereign mercy by which God brought him to faith in Jesus Christ. Having learned by experience that salvation was entirely of grace, Augustine became convinced that the Scriptures teach the same truth throughout.

Augustine accepted without reservation the biblical account of the Fall. Adam had indeed been created upright, possessing a will that was truly free to love, trust, and obey God. Yet through his transgression he lost that original righteousness, and with him the whole human race became subject to sin and death.

For Augustine, the question was not whether fallen man still possesses a will. Of course he does. The question is whether that fallen will can, of itself, return to God.

His answer, drawn from the writings of the Apostle Paul, was an unequivocal No.

Man still chooses.

Man still reasons.

Man still desires.

But apart from the grace of God he does not, and indeed cannot, turn himself savingly to God. Salvation must therefore begin, not with the sinner's decision, but with God's eternal purpose, God's calling, and God's grace.

It was this understanding of divine grace that Augustine defended with remarkable courage throughout the Pelagian controversy. In doing so, he established principles that would later be recovered with renewed clarity during the Protestant Reformation.

God's Commands Before and After the Fall

Before the Fall, God's commandments were addressed to man in his original righteousness. Adam delighted to obey his Creator, and the commands given to him—to be fruitful and multiply, to exercise dominion over the earth, and to keep the Garden—were willingly fulfilled. They belonged to the life of a holy man walking in fellowship with God.

After the Fall, however, God did not surrender His sovereign right to command His creature. His commandments remained holy, just, and good. The change was not in the Law, nor in God, but in man. The command continued to declare God's righteous will, while fallen man no longer possessed the moral ability to render the obedience required. Thus the Law revealed both God's holiness and man's need of divine grace.

Before the promise concerning the Seed of the woman had been revealed, Adam did not live by faith in a promised Redeemer, for no such promise had yet been given. After the Fall, however, God Himself revealed the promise of salvation, and from that moment onward faith became the appointed means by which sinners embraced His promise. The Law continued to command; the promise called for faith; and the faith by which sinners believed was itself the work of God's grace.

IV. The Church's Response to Pelagianism

The controversy between Augustine and Pelagius did not remain a private dispute between two theologians. The issues involved touched the very heart of the Gospel itself and therefore demanded the careful attention of the Church. The question was no longer simply what Augustine or Pelagius believed, but what the Scriptures themselves taught concerning sin, grace, and the human will.

As the controversy developed, the bishops of the Western Church examined the doctrines advanced by Pelagius in the light of Holy

Scripture. Augustine's writings exercised considerable influence, not because they were regarded as possessing authority in themselves, but because they sought to demonstrate from the Scriptures that salvation is entirely the work of God's grace from beginning to end.

Several councils met in North Africa during the early fifth century, most notably those held at Carthage in A.D. 411, 416, and 418. After careful examination, the Church rejected the principal teachings of Pelagius and affirmed that Adam's Fall had affected the whole human race, that divine grace is necessary for salvation, and that man cannot attain righteousness before God by the exercise of his own natural powers.

The controversy, however, did not end with the condemnation of Pelagianism. Although the Church rejected Pelagius's teaching in its clearest form, many continued to seek a middle position. While acknowledging the necessity of grace, they nevertheless maintained that the first movement towards God originated in the human will. Grace, in this view, completed what man himself had begun.

This teaching has become known as Semi-Pelagianism.

It differed from Pelagianism in important respects, yet it continued to attribute to fallen man an ability to make the first movement towards God apart from the sovereign work of divine grace. Augustine regarded this as inconsistent with the teaching of the Apostle Paul, who declares:

"It is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

(Philippians 2:13)

The significance of these controversies extends far beyond the fifth century. They established the questions that would continue to confront the Church throughout the Middle Ages and would reappear with renewed force during the Protestant Reformation. The debate between Erasmus and Martin Luther was not a new controversy but

the continuation of an older one. Luther himself recognised that the issues which divided him from Erasmus had already been contested by Augustine more than a thousand years before.

Yet it must not be imagined that Augustine was regarded as the final authority. Neither Augustine nor any other teacher stands above the Holy Scriptures. Augustine himself repeatedly submitted his writings to the judgment of the Word of God. His importance lies in the fact that he sought to defend, against Pelagius, those truths which he believed the Apostles had received from Christ Himself.

For this reason Martin Luther held Augustine in high esteem, not because he regarded him as infallible, but because he believed that Augustine, more than any other of the ancient Fathers, had understood the Apostle Paul's doctrine of grace.

Thus the first great controversy concerning grace and the human will closed with the formal rejection of Pelagianism, but the questions it raised were far from settled. They continued to shape the theology of the medieval Church and eventually reached their most decisive expression in the debate between Erasmus and Luther.

CHAPTER THREE

From Augustine to Luther: The Eclipse of the Doctrine of Grace

“Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace.”

Romans 11:5

The condemnation of Pelagianism did not bring an end to the controversy concerning grace and the human will. Although the Church rejected Pelagius's teaching in its clearest form, the principles which had given rise to the controversy continued to reappear in different ways throughout the centuries that followed.

History repeatedly demonstrates that doctrinal error seldom disappears altogether. It often returns in a modified form, adopting

new language while preserving the same underlying principles. Thus, although the Church confessed the necessity of divine grace, many increasingly spoke as though salvation depended partly upon the grace of God and partly upon the co-operation of the human will.

The result was a gradual departure from the simplicity of the apostolic Gospel. The doctrine of salvation by grace alone became obscured beneath an increasingly elaborate system of merit, penance, sacramental observance, and human effort. While these developments differed considerably from the teaching of Pelagius himself, they nevertheless raised the same fundamental question: Who takes the first step in salvation—God or man?

It was into this religious climate that Martin Luther was born.

I. The Rise of Semi-Pelagianism

Although the Church condemned Pelagianism, many found Augustine's doctrine of grace difficult to accept in its fullness. They acknowledged that grace was necessary, yet maintained that the first movement towards God originated in man himself. Grace, they argued, completed what the sinner had begun.

This teaching, afterwards known as Semi-Pelagianism, sought to preserve both human responsibility and divine grace. Yet Augustine believed it failed to do justice to the testimony of Scripture, for the Apostle Paul teaches that it is God Himself who works in His people "both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13).

The controversy therefore shifted from the question of whether grace was necessary to the question of how grace operates in salvation. Does grace merely assist the willing sinner, or does it first create the willingness by which the sinner comes to Christ?

This question would remain central throughout the Middle Ages.

II. The Medieval Church

During the centuries that followed, the Western Church developed an increasingly complex system of theology and ecclesiastical practice. The sacraments occupied a central place in the religious life of the people, while acts of penance, pilgrimages, indulgences, and other works were frequently presented as means by which believers might obtain or increase divine favour.

It would be neither fair nor historically accurate to suggest that the medieval Church abandoned every truth of the Gospel. Throughout those centuries God preserved faithful witnesses to His truth, and the Holy Scriptures continued to be read, copied, and preached in many places. Nevertheless, the simplicity of the apostolic doctrine of justification by grace through faith became greatly obscured.

The question was no longer simply whether salvation was by grace, but whether grace alone was sufficient.

III. God's Preservation of the Truth

Yet throughout every age God has preserved a faithful remnant.

Just as the Lord preserved His truth during the days of Elijah, so throughout the medieval period He continued to raise up men who testified to the authority of Holy Scripture and the freeness of divine grace.

1. Claudius of Turin

Among these witnesses was Claudius of Turin (c. A.D. 780–827), often regarded as one of the earliest voices to challenge the growing corruption of the medieval Church. Appointed Bishop of Turin, he opposed the veneration of images, rejected the worship of relics, and insisted that the Holy Scriptures alone must govern the faith and practice of the Church. While not a Reformer in the later sense, Claudius testified that the authority of God's Word stands above the traditions of men, preserving an important witness to biblical truth

during a difficult period.

2. Peter Waldo

More than three centuries later, Peter Waldo (c. 1140–1218) demonstrated the same concern that the Scriptures should be known by ordinary people. Deeply moved by the teaching of Christ, Waldo devoted his wealth to the poor and encouraged the translation and public reading of the Bible in the common language. His followers, commonly known as the Waldenses, sought to live according to the authority of Scripture rather than the traditions of the Church. Although often persecuted, they preserved an enduring testimony to the sufficiency of God's Word.

3. John Wycliffe

In England, John Wycliffe (c. 1328–1384) became one of the greatest forerunners of the Reformation. Convinced that the Bible is the supreme authority in all matters of faith, he laboured to make the Scriptures available in the English language and challenged doctrines and practices which he believed lacked biblical foundation. His teaching concerning the authority of Scripture profoundly influenced later generations and earned him the title, "The Morning Star of the Reformation."

4. Jan Hus

The influence of Wycliffe extended beyond England through Jan Hus (c. 1372–1415), the Czech preacher and reformer of Bohemia. Hus embraced many of Wycliffe's convictions concerning the authority of Scripture and the necessity of reform within the Church. Summoned before the Council of Constance under a promise of safe conduct, he refused to renounce what he believed the Scriptures taught and was condemned to death by burning. His martyrdom became a powerful testimony that truth is often preserved through suffering, and his witness prepared the way for the Reformation that would follow a century later.

“Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace.”

Romans 11:15.

Throughout the centuries between Augustine and Luther, God never left Himself without a witness. The names of Claudius, Waldo, Wycliffe, and Hus remind us that the history of the Church is not merely the history of institutions, councils, or controversies. It is the history of God’s faithfulness in preserving His truth among His people. As the Apostle declares, “Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace” (Romans 11:5). That remnant would, in the providence of God, prepare the way for the great work of Reformation through Martin Luther.

I think that would make Section III one of the strongest historical sections in the book. It shows that Luther did not appear in isolation but stood in a line of faithful witnesses whom God had preserved throughout the centuries.

Among these were men such as Claudius of Turin, Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe, Jan Hus, and many others whose witness prepared the way for the Reformation. Though differing in many respects, they shared a common conviction that the authority of Scripture must stand above the traditions of men.

Thus, when Martin Luther appeared in the sixteenth century, he did not arise in a spiritual vacuum. God had been preparing His Church through many generations.

IV. Why Did God Raise Up Martin Luther?

Martin Luther did not believe that he had discovered a new theology, nor did he imagine himself to be the founder of a new religion. Rather, he believed that the Church must be called back to the teaching of Holy Scripture, which had been proclaimed by the Apostles, defended by Augustine, and preserved by faithful witnesses

throughout the centuries.

The sixteenth century proved to be a remarkable period in the providence of God. The invention of the printing press enabled the rapid circulation of books and pamphlets. The revival of learning encouraged scholars to study the Scriptures in their original languages. Erasmus's publication of the Greek New Testament provided students of the Bible with an invaluable tool for examining the apostolic text. At the same time, increasing dissatisfaction with corruption and abuses within the medieval Church prepared many hearts to hear the Word of God afresh.

Yet these outward circumstances alone cannot explain the Reformation. Scripture teaches that God governs the course of history according to His own eternal purpose. In His providence He raises up men at the time He has appointed. As He had raised Moses, the prophets, the Apostles, and faithful witnesses throughout the centuries, so in His own time He raised up Martin Luther to contend for the Gospel of His Son.

Luther's confidence therefore rested neither in Augustine, nor in the Church, nor in the Reformers themselves. His supreme authority was the written Word of God. Augustine was valued because, in Luther's judgment, he had faithfully understood the Apostle Paul; and Paul was followed because he faithfully proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Every authority stood beneath the authority of Holy Scripture.

It was for this reason that Luther regarded his controversy with Erasmus as the greatest theological issue of his day. The question before them was not merely whether man possesses a will, nor whether human beings make ordinary choices in daily life. The question was whether fallen man possesses any spiritual ability to begin his own salvation, or whether salvation from beginning to end is the sovereign work of God.

The controversy had therefore not changed. The names were

different, but the issue remained the same. Pelagius had argued that fallen man retained the ability to obey God. Augustine answered that salvation begins with divine grace. Erasmus now revived the same fundamental question in a new form, and Luther recognised immediately that the very heart of the Gospel was at stake. It was this controversy that gave rise to *The Bondage of the Will*, one of the greatest theological defences of the grace of God ever written.

Martin Luther did not believe he was inventing a new theology.

Neither did he imagine himself to be restoring Augustine merely because Augustine was Augustine.

Rather, Luther believed that both Augustine and the Apostle Paul had faithfully understood the teaching of Holy Scripture concerning the grace of God.

For Luther, the supreme authority was never Augustine, the Church, or even the Reformers themselves. The supreme authority was the written Word of God.

It was for this reason that Luther regarded his controversy with Erasmus as so important. The question before them was exactly the same question that had divided Augustine and Pelagius:

Can fallen man, by the exercise of his own will, begin the work of his own salvation?

CHAPTER FOUR

Erasmus and the Question of Free Will

“For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.”

1 Corinthians 11:19

Introduction

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, Europe was undergoing profound intellectual and religious change. The revival of classical learning, commonly known as the Renaissance, encouraged scholars to return to the original sources of ancient literature. This movement also stimulated renewed interest in the languages of Holy Scripture, particularly Greek and Hebrew, providing the Church with valuable tools for biblical study.

Among the greatest scholars of this age was Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam. Gifted in learning, widely respected throughout Europe, and deeply committed to moral reform within the Church, Erasmus exercised an influence surpassed by few of his contemporaries. His publication of the Greek New Testament in 1516 became one of the most important scholarly achievements of the age and would later prove invaluable to the Reformers.

Yet Erasmus sought reform without division. He desired the correction of abuses within the Church but remained reluctant to embrace the doctrinal conflict that increasingly surrounded Martin Luther. Where Luther believed that the issues at stake concerned the very Gospel itself, Erasmus preferred moderation, peace, and the avoidance of controversy wherever possible.

For several years the two men avoided direct conflict. Erasmus admired Luther's learning and courage, while Luther respected Erasmus's scholarship. Nevertheless, beneath this outward respect lay a profound theological difference that neither could avoid

indefinitely.

I. Erasmus and Human Freedom

The central question between Erasmus and Luther was not the authority of Scripture, nor the existence of God, nor even the necessity of divine grace. The issue was far more specific.

What part, if any, does the human will play in conversion?

In 1524 Erasmus published his treatise *De Libero Arbitrio* (On Free Will).

He did not deny grace.

He did not deny sin.

He did not deny the necessity of Christ.

Rather, he argued that although grace is necessary, man retains a measure of freedom by which he may either cooperate with or resist the grace of God.

To Erasmus this seemed both reasonable and consistent with the many biblical exhortations calling sinners to repentance and faith.

He feared that if every aspect of salvation were attributed entirely to God's sovereign grace, moral responsibility would be undermined and human effort rendered unnecessary.

Thus, although separated from Pelagius by more than a thousand years, Erasmus found himself asking essentially the same question:

Can fallen man contribute, however slightly, to his own conversion?

II. Luther Recognises the Real Issue

Martin Luther immediately recognised that Erasmus had touched the very centre of the Reformation.

Many disputes occupied the Church in Luther's day.

There were debates concerning indulgences.

The authority of the Pope.

The sacraments.

Monasticism.

Purgatory.

Yet Luther regarded none of these as the fundamental issue.

For him, the decisive question was:

Who saves the sinner?

If even the smallest part of salvation originates with man, then grace is no longer grace in its fullest biblical sense.

If, however, salvation begins, continues, and ends with God, then all boasting is excluded and all glory belongs to Christ alone.

For this reason Luther later wrote to Erasmus words of remarkable significance.

He commended Erasmus because, unlike many of his opponents, he had attacked "the vital spot."

Luther recognised that the controversy concerning the human will was not one doctrine among many.

It was the doctrine upon which every other doctrine concerning salvation depended.

V. Why Did Erasmus Believe It Necessary to Defend Free Will?

Erasmus did not defend free will because he wished to diminish the grace of God or deny the necessity of Christ. On the contrary, he sincerely desired peace within the Church and believed that the doctrine of free will preserved human responsibility, encouraged moral effort, and promoted the pursuit of holiness. He feared that if every aspect of salvation were attributed entirely to the sovereign grace of God, many would conclude that human conduct no longer mattered, that exhortations to repentance were unnecessary, and that the Christian life would descend into carelessness and indifference.

Furthermore, Erasmus believed that many of the questions surrounding predestination, grace, and the human will were too profound to be settled with certainty. He preferred moderation where others spoke with confidence, and was content to leave many matters unresolved rather than insist upon conclusions which he believed exceeded the clear teaching of Scripture. In this respect he differed fundamentally from Luther, who was persuaded that the Gospel itself required certainty concerning the nature of man's salvation.

Behind the controversy, therefore, lay two very different approaches to theology. Erasmus believed that man retained some measure of freedom by which he could cooperate with the grace of God. Luther maintained that if even the smallest part of salvation depended upon the fallen will of man, then the grace of God would no longer be grace in the biblical sense. The issue was not merely philosophical; it concerned the very foundation of the Gospel.

The question therefore stood before the Church with renewed force. Does the fallen sinner retain the moral ability to begin his own return to God, or must salvation begin entirely with the sovereign grace of God? Erasmus answered one way; Luther another. It was this question that gave rise to one of the greatest theological exchanges in

the history of the Christian Church.

The next chapter therefore turns from Erasmus' challenge to Luther's response, examining why *The Bondage of the Will* has been regarded by many as Luther's clearest and most profound defence of the sovereign grace of God.

CHAPTER FIVE

Martin Luther and The Bondage of the Will

*“Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith
without the deeds of the law.”*

(Romans 3:28)

I. The Reformation Was About the Gospel

The Protestant Reformation was far more than a protest against ecclesiastical corruption or the abuses that had developed within the medieval Church. Important as these matters were, they did not lie at the heart of Luther’s ministry. The real issue was the Gospel itself.

For Luther, the supreme question was this:

How is a sinner made right with God?

That question was not merely academic. It arose from his own experience. Before discovering the liberty of the Gospel, Luther had sought peace with God through fasting, prayer, confession, vigils, and every religious exercise that the Church prescribed. Yet the more earnestly he laboured, the more deeply he became convinced of his own sinfulness. The righteousness that God required appeared to him unattainable.

Everything changed when, through the Scriptures, Luther came to understand the words of the Apostle Paul:

“The just shall live by faith.”

(Romans 1:17)

Luther’s discovery did not consist merely in understanding a single verse differently. It transformed his entire view of God, of man, and of salvation. He came to see that the righteousness by which the sinner stands accepted before God is not something gradually produced within man, but a righteousness provided entirely by

Christ and received through faith alone. From that moment onward, every doctrine touching salvation would be examined in the light of this fundamental truth.

II. Why Erasmus Chose the Question of Free Will

For several years Erasmus refrained from openly opposing Luther. He admired Luther's learning and recognised the need for reform within the Church. Nevertheless, he believed that Luther had gone too far.

In 1524 Erasmus finally published *De Libero Arbitrio* (On Free Will).

He did not attack justification by faith directly. Rather, he questioned the condition of the human will upon which Luther believed the doctrine of justification necessarily depended.

Erasmus asked whether fallen man still possessed sufficient freedom to cooperate with the grace of God in conversion. To many this appeared a secondary question. To Luther it was the central question of the Gospel.

III. Luther Recognises the Vital Point

Luther's reply, published the following year under the title *De Servo Arbitrio* (The Bondage of the Will), is one of the greatest theological works of the Reformation.

At the beginning of his reply Luther makes a remarkable observation. Unlike many of his opponents, Erasmus had not occupied himself with lesser controversies.

Instead, Luther writes that Erasmus had attacked the "vital spot."

By this Luther meant that the whole controversy concerned the very heart of Christianity.

If salvation depends, even in the smallest measure, upon the will of fallen man, then the glory of divine grace is diminished.

If, however, salvation is entirely the work of God from beginning to end, then all boasting is excluded, and God alone receives the glory.

Luther therefore regarded this as the greatest issue before the Church.

It was not a debate about philosophy.

It was not a debate about psychology.

It was a debate concerning the Gospel itself.

IV. Luther's Appeal to Holy Scripture

Throughout *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther refuses to rest his case upon philosophy, speculation, or ecclesiastical tradition.

His appeal is constantly to the Holy Scriptures.

He argues from the words of Christ.

He argues from the writings of the Apostle Paul.

He argues from Genesis, the Psalms, Isaiah, John, Romans, Ephesians, and many other passages.

For Luther, the question was never:

“What appears reasonable to human understanding?”

The question was always:

“What has God spoken?”

This explains the remarkable confidence with which Luther writes. He believed that the Scriptures are clear in all matters necessary for salvation and that human reason must submit itself to the testimony of God’s Word.

V. Why This Book Matters

Nearly five centuries have passed since Luther wrote *The Bondage of the Will*, yet the questions raised by Erasmus remain with us.

Can fallen man contribute to his own salvation?

Does grace merely assist the sinner?

Or is salvation wholly the work of God?

These questions continue to divide Christians today.

For this reason, Luther’s work has lost none of its importance.

The purpose of this volume is not to persuade the reader to admire Luther simply because he was Luther.

Its purpose is to understand why Luther believed this controversy concerned the Gospel itself and to examine whether his arguments faithfully reflect the teaching of Holy Scripture.

If Luther is correct, then *The Bondage of the Will* is not merely a historical document.

It is a powerful defence of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

PART TWO
Preparing to Read Luther

CHAPTER SIX

The Foundation of Luther's Theology

The Authority of Holy Scripture

“Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.”

(Psalm 119:18)

Few theological books have been more misunderstood than Martin Luther's *The Bondage of the Will*. Many approach it expecting a philosophical discussion concerning free choice, while others suppose that Luther is denying the existence of the human will altogether. Neither conclusion does justice to Luther's purpose.

Luther was not writing a treatise on philosophy, psychology, or human nature in the abstract. He was answering a specific theological question raised by Erasmus: What is the condition of the human will before God after the Fall? The controversy therefore concerns man's relationship to God, not his natural ability to make ordinary decisions in daily life.

Unless this distinction is clearly understood, the reader is likely to misunderstand Luther from the very beginning.

I. What Luther Does Not Mean

Before considering what Luther teaches, it is important to understand what he does not teach.

Luther does not deny that man possesses a will. Throughout his work he assumes that fallen man thinks, reasons, chooses, plans, loves, hates, works, marries, governs nations, conducts business, and exercises countless decisions throughout ordinary life.

Neither does Luther deny that Adam possessed a will that was truly

free before the Fall. Indeed, the whole argument of *The Bondage of the Will* depends upon the distinction between man's original creation and his fallen condition. Adam was created upright, delighting in the will of God. The controversy concerns what became of that freedom after sin entered the world.

Luther's subject is therefore not the existence of the will, but its moral condition before God.

II. The Question Luther Is Answering

Throughout this work the reader should keep one question continually before him:

Can fallen man, by the exercise of his own will, turn himself savingly to God?

This is the question Erasmus answered in the affirmative.

It is the question Luther answered in the negative.

Everything else in *The Bondage of the Will* serves to explain and defend that conclusion from the testimony of Holy Scripture.

The debate is therefore not about whether men make choices, but whether fallen sinners possess within themselves the moral ability to repent, believe the Gospel, and come to Christ apart from the gracious work of the Holy Spirit.

III. Luther's Method

One of the most striking features of *The Bondage of the Will* is Luther's unwavering confidence in the authority and clarity of Holy Scripture.

Again and again he refuses to rest his argument upon human philosophy or ecclesiastical tradition. Instead, he returns continually

to the written Word of God.

For Luther, doctrine must never be established by speculation but by divine revelation.

Consequently, the reader should resist the temptation to judge Luther by modern philosophical ideas concerning freedom or determinism. Luther himself was not attempting to construct a philosophical system. He was expounding what he believed the Scriptures plainly teach concerning man's condition after the Fall and the sovereign grace of God in salvation.

IV. A Principle Followed in This Book

Throughout this volume I have sought to follow Luther's own method by allowing Holy Scripture to govern both the language and the argument.

For this reason I have generally preferred the language of Scripture itself wherever possible. The Apostle Paul speaks of fallen mankind as "dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1) and "dead in sins" (Colossians 2:13), while Luther consistently speaks of the bondage of the will. Those are the expressions that will ordinarily be employed throughout this study.

My purpose is not to reject every later theological expression, but to ensure that the language of Scripture remains primary. The safest theology is that which remains closest to the words chosen by the Holy Spirit.

Likewise, Luther is allowed to speak for himself. Rather than interpreting Luther through later theological systems, this volume seeks to understand his arguments within their own historical, biblical, and theological context.

V. Reading Luther Fairly

Luther wrote as a controversialist. His language is vigorous, direct, and often uncompromising. Modern readers, accustomed to a different style of theological writing, may at first find his expressions severe.

Yet it must never be forgotten that Luther believed the Gospel itself was under attack. He was not writing to win a philosophical debate but to defend what he regarded as the very heart of Christianity.

His strong language should therefore be understood within the context of sixteenth-century theological controversy. Beneath the force of his rhetoric lies a profound pastoral concern—that sinners should look away from themselves and trust wholly in Jesus Christ.

VI. Why *The Bondage of the Will* Still Matters

The questions addressed by Luther have not disappeared. Every generation of Christians must answer them afresh.

Does salvation begin with God's grace or with man's decision?

Is faith ultimately the gift of God or the product of human choice?

Can fallen man come to Christ apart from the gracious work of the Holy Spirit?

These are not merely historical questions. They concern the very nature of the Gospel itself.

For this reason, *The Bondage of the Will* remains one of the most significant theological works ever written. Its enduring value lies not in the authority of Luther himself, but in his determined appeal to the testimony of Holy Scripture.

The chapters that follow will examine Luther's arguments in detail, comparing them continually with the Word of God, so that the reader may judge for himself whether Luther faithfully expounded

the doctrine of divine grace revealed in the Scriptures.

Having established that Holy Scripture alone is the supreme authority in theology, we may now consider the precise question which divided Erasmus and Luther. The issue is not whether man possesses a will, but what the fallen will can do before God.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Central Question

What Can the Human Will Do Before God?

“Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.”

(John 17:17)

Throughout the history of the controversy concerning grace and free will, one question has stood above every other. It is not whether man possesses a will, for Scripture plainly assumes that he does. Nor is it whether fallen men make real choices in the ordinary affairs of life. The question is far more specific: What can the fallen human will do before God in the matter of salvation? Upon the answer to that question depends the doctrine of sin, the necessity of grace, the nature of faith, and ultimately the Gospel itself. It is this question that Luther addresses in *The Bondage of the Will*.

No one can rightly understand *The Bondage of the Will* without first understanding the authority upon which Luther built his entire argument. Before he discusses the human will, grace, or salvation, Luther establishes a far more fundamental principle: the absolute authority of Holy Scripture.

This was not a secondary matter. For Luther, every doctrine concerning God, man, sin, grace, and salvation must be derived from the written Word of God. Human philosophy, ecclesiastical tradition, and the opinions of learned men all occupy a subordinate place. The question is never, “What appears reasonable?” but rather, “What has God spoken?”

It is this conviction that gives *The Bondage of the Will* its remarkable confidence. Luther writes as one persuaded that God has spoken clearly and truthfully in the Scriptures and that man’s duty is not to judge God’s Word but to submit to it.

I. Scripture Alone

The controversy between Erasmus and Luther was not simply about the freedom of the will. It was also a controversy concerning the certainty and clarity of divine revelation.

Erasmus frequently appealed to mystery, uncertainty, and moderation. Where difficult questions arose, he preferred caution, believing that many doctrines should remain open to discussion. Luther acknowledged that there are indeed secret things which belong to God alone, yet he insisted that those things which God has revealed belong to His people and are sufficiently clear to be believed.

Accordingly, Luther distinguished between the hidden will of God, which remains known only to God Himself, and the revealed will of God, which is plainly set forth in Holy Scripture. Christians are not called to speculate concerning God's secret counsels but to believe and obey what He has graciously revealed in His Word.

This distinction governs the whole of *The Bondage of the Will*. Luther refuses to build doctrine upon speculation. He continually returns to the revealed Word of God as the only safe foundation for faith.

II. The Clarity of Scripture

One of Erasmus's arguments was that many passages of Scripture are obscure and therefore cannot settle difficult theological questions.

Luther firmly rejected this conclusion.

He readily admitted that some passages are difficult to understand, yet he denied that the doctrines necessary for salvation are hidden in obscurity. The central truths concerning God, sin, Christ, grace, and salvation are revealed with sufficient clarity that every believer may know them.

For Luther, if the Scriptures are not clear in the doctrines necessary for salvation, then the Church possesses no certain Gospel.

Consequently, *The Bondage of the Will* rests upon the conviction that God has spoken plainly concerning man's condition after the Fall and concerning the grace revealed in Jesus Christ.

III. Why This Matters

This principle is of the utmost importance for everything that follows.

Before asking what Luther teaches concerning the bondage of the will, we must first recognise why he speaks with such confidence. His confidence does not arise from his own learning, nor from the authority of the Church, nor from the writings of Augustine.

It arises from the conviction that Holy Scripture is the very Word of God.

For this reason Luther constantly appeals to Genesis, the Psalms, the Prophets, the Gospels, and above all to the writings of the Apostle Paul. His theology is exegetical rather than philosophical. He argues from the biblical text because he believes that God Himself speaks through the Scriptures.

This also explains why Luther refused to compromise. If the doctrine of salvation rests upon the revealed Word of God, then it cannot be altered to satisfy human reason or to preserve outward peace. Truth must be confessed because it is God's truth.

IV. The Beginning of the Debate

Having established the authority and clarity of Holy Scripture, Luther turns to the question raised by Erasmus.

What is the condition of the human will after the Fall?

Everything that follows in *The Bondage of the Will* seeks to

answer that question, not by appealing to human philosophy, but by examining the testimony of God's Word.

The discussion therefore begins, not with speculation concerning free choice, but with the authority of divine revelation.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Understanding *The Bondage of the Will*

“Without me ye can do nothing.”

(John 15:5)

Before examining Luther’s arguments in detail, it is important to understand the nature of *The Bondage of the Will* itself. The previous chapters have traced the controversy from the Fall through Augustine, the medieval Church, Erasmus, and finally to Luther. We have also considered the authority upon which Luther argues and the central question he seeks to answer. We are now prepared to examine one of the greatest theological works of the Reformation.

The issue is not whether man possesses a will. Neither is it whether man is capable of making ordinary decisions in the affairs of daily life. Men continue to buy and sell, marry and raise families, govern nations, cultivate the earth, and exercise judgment in countless matters relating to this present life.

The question is altogether different.

What power has the human will in those things which pertain unto God and salvation?

It is here that Luther believes Erasmus has touched what he himself calls “the vital point.”

I. Defining the Question

Luther rejects the common habit of speaking about “free will” as though the term explained itself. Words must be carefully defined. Unless the subject under discussion is clearly stated, the entire controversy becomes confused.

Accordingly, Luther asks not whether man has a will, but whether fallen man possesses the ability to fear God, believe His promises,

repent of sin, and come willingly to Christ apart from the gracious operation of the Holy Spirit.

The distinction is of the utmost importance.

A man may possess great intelligence, remarkable wisdom in earthly affairs, and considerable moral discipline, yet still remain utterly unable to bring himself into fellowship with God. The controversy therefore concerns man's ability before God, not his natural abilities within the world.

II. The Bondage of the Will

The title of Luther's work has often been misunderstood.

By "the bondage of the will," Luther does not mean that man is compelled against his own desires, as though he were an unwilling prisoner dragged by force.

Rather, Luther teaches that fallen man acts willingly according to the condition of his nature.

The sinner sins because he desires sin.

He rejects God because he does not love God.

His will is not destroyed.

It is not removed.

It is not replaced.

It is in bondage because it cannot free itself from the dominion of sin.

Thus the sinner acts voluntarily, yet never independently of the condition into which Adam's Fall has brought the whole human race.

This is why Luther continually returns to the words of our Lord:

“Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin.”
(John 8:34)

The will remains active.

Its bondage lies, not in the absence of willing, but in its inability to will that which is pleasing to God apart from divine grace.

III. The Testimony of Holy Scripture

Luther’s argument is never philosophical.

He does not ask,

“What seems reasonable?”

He asks,

“What has God revealed?”

Accordingly, he gathers together the testimony of Scripture.

Our Lord declares:

“Without me ye can do nothing.”
(John 15:5)

The Apostle Paul writes:

“The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.”
(Romans 8:7)

Again:

*“No man can come to me, except the Father which
hath sent me draw him.”*

(John 6:44)

For Luther these passages do not merely describe human weakness.

They describe inability.

Not physical inability.

Not intellectual inability.

But moral inability before God.

IV. Why This Doctrine Matters

Luther never discusses *The Bondage of the Will* merely to win an argument.

His concern is entirely pastoral.

If salvation depends in any measure upon the sinner’s own ability, then no troubled conscience can ever possess certainty before God.

How much faith is enough?

How much repentance is sufficient?

How sincere must one’s decision be?

Such questions leave the soul in continual uncertainty.

But if salvation rests wholly upon God’s gracious work in Christ, then hope rests, not upon the weakness of man, but upon the faithfulness of God.

It is for this reason that Luther regarded *The Bondage of the Will* as one of the most comforting doctrines of Holy Scripture. It removes every ground of human boasting and directs the sinner to Christ alone.

We have now reached the point where Luther himself must speak. From this point onward our purpose will not be merely to describe *The Bondage of the Will*, but to follow Luther's argument carefully, comparing every claim with the testimony of Holy Scripture and considering its significance for the Church today.

CHAPTER NINE

Luther's Introduction

Why This Debate Matters

I. Why Luther Wrote *The Bondage of the Will*

Luther's purpose was not simply to refute Erasmus.

His greater purpose was to defend the Gospel itself.

Throughout *The Bondage of the Will* he returns repeatedly to one fundamental conviction: salvation belongs entirely to God. If any part of man's acceptance before God depends ultimately upon the fallen will of man, then the grace of God is no longer the sole cause of salvation. The controversy, therefore, was not merely about the extent of human freedom but about the source of salvation itself.

Luther understood that every doctrine concerning redemption is connected. The doctrine of sin determines the necessity of grace. The doctrine of grace determines the nature of faith. The doctrine of faith determines the glory that belongs to Christ alone. For this reason, he regarded the controversy concerning the human will as the point upon which the whole doctrine of salvation turns.

This explains why Luther speaks with such seriousness throughout his reply. He is not defending a theological system of his own invention but what he believes to be the plain teaching of Holy Scripture. His concern is that sinners should abandon all confidence in themselves and rest entirely upon the mercy of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

II. Luther Commends Erasmus

One of the most surprising features of *The Bondage of the Will* is the manner in which Luther begins his reply to Erasmus. Rather than opening with condemnation or ridicule, he acknowledges Erasmus's exceptional learning and expresses genuine appreciation for the

subject Erasmus has chosen to discuss. Luther had engaged many opponents during the early years of the Reformation, yet few had addressed what he regarded as the heart of the controversy. Most had occupied themselves with indulgences, papal authority, monastic vows, the Mass, and other important, yet secondary, questions. Erasmus, however, had directed his attention to the condition of the human will in relation to salvation.

Luther therefore writes words that have become among the most famous in the whole of *The Bondage of the Will*:

“You alone have attacked the real thing, that is, the essential issue.”

These words should not be understood as an endorsement of Erasmus’s conclusions. Luther believed Erasmus was fundamentally mistaken in his doctrine of free will. Rather, he commends Erasmus because he had recognised that the controversy ultimately concerned the very foundation of the Gospel. If the human will retains the ability to begin or contribute towards its own salvation, then the whole doctrine of grace must be understood in one way. If, however, fallen man is wholly dependent upon the sovereign grace of God, then salvation belongs entirely to the Lord. Luther saw no middle ground between these two positions.

This observation reveals much about Luther’s priorities. He was not interested in theological controversy for its own sake, nor did he delight in argument merely to display learning. His concern was always the Gospel. For this reason he could genuinely thank an opponent who had finally brought the debate to what he himself called “the essential issue.” The controversy was no longer about ceremonies, ecclesiastical authority, or questions of church practice. It had become a controversy concerning the salvation of sinners and the glory of God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

III. The Essential Issue

Having expressed his appreciation for Erasmus’s learning and

for the subject he had chosen, Luther immediately explains why he considered this controversy to be of such importance. He writes:

“You alone have attacked the real thing, that is, the essential issue.”

These words deserve careful consideration, for they reveal Luther’s understanding of the whole controversy. He does not say that Erasmus has reached one important question among many. He says that Erasmus has reached the essential issue—the hinge upon which the entire doctrine of salvation turns.

The question was not whether man possesses a will. Luther never denied that men think, choose, desire, love, and hate. Nor was the question whether man is responsible for his actions. Holy Scripture everywhere holds mankind accountable before God for sin and unbelief. The controversy concerned something far more specific: What can fallen man do before God in the matter of salvation?

If fallen man retains the moral ability to turn himself to God, however small that ability may be, then salvation depends, at least in part, upon the exercise of the human will. Grace may assist, persuade, or encourage, but the decisive act ultimately belongs to man. If this is true, then the difference between the saved and the lost rests finally upon something found within man himself.

Luther rejected this conclusion entirely. He maintained that the Scriptures teach that fallen man is spiritually dead in trespasses and sins, blind to the things of God, hostile to His law, and unable to come to Christ apart from the gracious work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, if any sinner is saved, the whole work—from election to glorification—must be attributed to the sovereign grace of God.

It is for this reason that Luther regarded the doctrine of the human will as inseparable from every other doctrine of salvation. The nature of sin determines the necessity of grace. The necessity of grace determines the nature of faith. Faith leads to justification, justification to assurance, and all alike direct the believer to give

glory to God alone. If the first principle is misunderstood, every doctrine that follows is affected.

The controversy, therefore, was never merely about philosophy or the definition of free will. It concerned the character of God, the authority of Holy Scripture, the certainty of salvation, and the glory due to Christ alone. Luther recognised that Erasmus had touched the point upon which the whole Gospel either stands or falls.

IV. The Necessity of Divine Truth

Having identified the controversy concerning the human will as the essential issue, Luther next turns to a principle even more fundamental. Before the question of free will can be answered, another question must first be settled: Can the Christian know the truth with certainty?

This was one of the deepest differences between Luther and Erasmus. Erasmus believed that many theological questions were so difficult that Christians should avoid making firm assertions concerning them. He regarded such caution as evidence of humility and wisdom. Where Scripture appeared obscure, he preferred moderation rather than dogmatism.

Luther rejected this approach entirely. He argues that the Christian faith is founded upon the revelation of God. If God has spoken, then His Word is not given to leave His people in perpetual uncertainty but to instruct them in the truth. For this reason Luther begins his reply with a striking declaration:

“The first and chief question before us is whether a Christian should hold anything with certainty, or whether it is a mark of wisdom to suspend judgment on matters of faith.”

Luther's answer is unequivocal. He writes:

“To delight in assertions, to confess the truth openly, and to hold firmly to the Word of God is not arrogance but the very spirit of Christian faith. Take away certainty, and you take away Christianity itself.”

By “assertions,” Luther does not mean opinions founded upon human reasoning or speculation. He means the confident confession of those truths which God has plainly revealed in Holy Scripture. Christianity is a revealed religion. It proclaims that God is, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that He died for sinners, rose again from the dead, and that salvation is found in Him alone. These are not possibilities to be considered, but divine truths to be believed and confessed.

Luther therefore distinguishes between two very different kinds of certainty. There is a false certainty founded upon human wisdom, which deserves no confidence. But there is also a true certainty founded upon the unchanging Word of God. It is this latter certainty that belongs to faith. The believer does not trust in the strength of his own understanding but in the truthfulness of the God who cannot lie.

At the same time, Luther does not encourage speculation concerning matters which God has chosen not to reveal. Throughout this work he distinguishes between those things God has made known in His Word and those secret counsels that belong to God alone. Scripture itself teaches this principle:

“The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever...”
(Deuteronomy 29:29).

True humility, therefore, does not consist in doubting what God has revealed. Rather, it consists in believing His revealed Word while refusing to speculate beyond it. Faith receives with confidence what God has spoken and bows in reverence before what He has chosen

to keep hidden.

For Luther this principle was indispensable. If Christians cannot know with certainty what God has revealed, then there can be no certainty concerning the Gospel itself. But if God has spoken clearly in His Word, then the Church is bound to confess that truth faithfully, whatever opposition it may encounter. It is upon this conviction that Luther builds the whole of *The Bondage of the Will*.

V. Christianity Is a Religion of Divine Assertion

Having rejected the idea that Christians should remain uncertain concerning the great doctrines of the faith, Luther proceeds to explain why certainty is essential to Christianity itself. His argument rests upon a simple but profound principle: Christianity is founded upon the revelation of God. Since God has spoken, His people are called to receive His Word with faith and to confess it without hesitation.

Luther therefore challenges Erasmus's praise of theological restraint. He asks why anyone should commend a spirit that refuses to make firm assertions if the subject under discussion concerns the very heart of the Gospel. If the doctrine of free will is of little importance, there is no need for controversy. But if it concerns the salvation of sinners and the grace of God, then the Church is bound to speak plainly and without uncertainty.

One of Luther's most memorable statements occurs at this point. He declares that to confess the truth openly and to hold firmly to the Word of God is not arrogance but the very character of Christian faith. Indeed, he argues that if certainty is removed from Christianity, Christianity itself is destroyed. The believer does not live by probabilities or human speculation, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

By "assertions," Luther does not mean opinions formed by human wisdom or philosophical reasoning. He means those truths which God Himself has revealed in Holy Scripture and which the Church

is therefore obliged to confess. The Christian faith is built upon such divine assertions. God is the Creator of all things. Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God. He was crucified for sinners, rose again the third day, and now reigns at the right hand of the Father. Salvation is found in Him alone. These are not theories to be debated endlessly, but revealed truths to be believed, proclaimed, and defended.

The preaching of the Apostles illustrates this principle. On the day of Pentecost, Peter did not say, “Perhaps Jesus has risen from the dead.” Rather, he declared with confidence:

“This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses.” (Acts 2:32)

Such confidence was not the product of human certainty but of divine revelation. The Apostles spoke boldly because they proclaimed what God had made known. Their authority rested not in themselves but in the truthfulness of the God who cannot lie.

Luther therefore distinguishes between two very different kinds of certainty. There is a false certainty grounded in human pride, tradition, or speculation. Such confidence deserves no trust. But there is also a true certainty that rests entirely upon the written Word of God. This certainty is the confidence of faith. It believes because God has spoken.

This principle governs the whole of *The Bondage of the Will*. Luther refuses to build his doctrine upon philosophy, ecclesiastical custom, or human reason. He appeals continually to Holy Scripture, convinced that what God has revealed may be confessed with humble confidence. Thus, Christianity is indeed a religion of divine assertion—not because believers trust their own understanding, but because they trust the God who has revealed Himself in His Word.

VI. The Limits of Christian Certainty

Luther's insistence that Christianity is a religion of divine assertion requires an important qualification. The certainty he defends is not unlimited. Christians are not called to pronounce confidently upon every question that may arise, nor are they free to speculate concerning matters which God has chosen not to reveal. True certainty is confined to the revelation of God contained in the Holy Scriptures.

This distinction is fundamental to Luther's theology. He firmly rejects the uncertainty of those truths that God has plainly revealed, yet he equally rejects curious speculation concerning the secret counsels of God. Faith rests, not upon human imagination, but upon divine revelation.

The Scriptures themselves establish this principle:

"The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law."

— Deuteronomy 29:29

This verse provides an important key to understanding Luther's argument. There are mysteries known only to God. His eternal decrees, His secret providences, and the reasons for all His dealings remain hidden within His infinite wisdom. These belong to Him alone. They are not the proper object of Christian enquiry.

On the other hand, God has graciously revealed everything necessary for His glory and for the salvation of His people. The Gospel is not hidden in secret counsels but openly proclaimed in Holy Scripture. Christ is freely offered to sinners. Repentance and faith are commanded. Salvation by grace through faith is plainly declared. These are the truths upon which faith rests.

Luther therefore distinguishes between what later theologians have often described as the hidden will of God and the revealed will

of God. Christians are never called to penetrate the hidden counsels of the Almighty, but they are called to believe, obey, and proclaim His revealed Word.

This distinction protects the Church from two opposite errors. It guards against presumption by forbidding speculation where God has remained silent. At the same time, it guards against scepticism by requiring believers to receive with confidence those truths which God has clearly made known. Humility is shown, not by doubting God's Word, but by refusing to go beyond it.

For this reason, Luther's confidence must never be mistaken for arrogance. His certainty was not confidence in his own intellect, but confidence in the truthfulness of God. Where Scripture speaks plainly, the Christian may speak with humble assurance. Where Scripture is silent, the Christian must also be silent.

Thus the limits of Christian certainty are determined, not by human reason, but by the extent of divine revelation. Faith neither diminishes what God has spoken nor attempts to discover what He has chosen to conceal. It rests entirely upon the promises of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Author's Observation

At this point it is important to recognise that Luther's distinction between God's hidden and revealed will is not a philosophical invention but arises from the teaching of Holy Scripture itself. Deuteronomy 29:29 provides the governing principle. Throughout *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther repeatedly directs the reader away from speculation concerning God's secret purposes and back to the promises revealed in the Gospel. This principle safeguards both the sovereignty of God and the free proclamation of salvation. Faith rests, not upon what God has hidden, but upon what He has graciously revealed in His Son.

VII. The Threshold of the Great Debate

By the close of his Introduction, Luther has already established the principles that govern everything which follows. He has shown that the controversy concerning the human will is not a secondary matter but the very heart of the Gospel. He has insisted that the Christian faith rests upon the certain revelation of God in Holy Scripture and that believers are neither permitted to doubt what God has clearly spoken nor to speculate concerning those things He has chosen to keep hidden.

These principles prepare the reader for Luther's reply to Erasmus. The discussion that follows is therefore not an exercise in philosophy or abstract reasoning, but an appeal to the written Word of God. Luther is convinced that Scripture alone must determine the condition of fallen man, the nature of divine grace, and the way of salvation.

The reader should therefore approach the chapters that follow with the same question that governed Luther himself: What saith the Scripture? Every argument advanced by Erasmus will be weighed against the testimony of God's Word, for it is there alone that the truth concerning the human will and the grace of God is finally revealed.

The controversy now begins in earnest.

CHAPTER COMPLETE

Chapter complete pending final review against Luther's Preface.

PART THREE
Walking Through *The Bondage of the Will*

CHAPTER TEN

The Discussion Begins

Erasmus' Preface Reviewed

Having completed his Preface, Luther now enters the discussion itself. He does not immediately address the doctrine of free will, but begins by examining Erasmus' Preface. This reveals an important aspect of Luther's method. Before answering his opponent's conclusions, he first considers the principles upon which those conclusions rest. By reviewing Erasmus' opening remarks, Luther prepares the reader to understand the fundamental differences that separate them throughout the remainder of the work.

I. Erasmus' Preface Reviewed

Before addressing Erasmus' arguments concerning the human will, Luther first considers the Preface with which Erasmus introduces his work. This is characteristic of Luther's method throughout *The Bondage of the Will*. He understands that theological conclusions are often determined by the principles upon which they are built. Consequently, before examining Erasmus' doctrine, he examines Erasmus' approach to theology itself.

Luther observes that Erasmus writes with great caution. Rather than making firm assertions concerning disputed doctrines, he repeatedly commends moderation, restraint, and the suspension of judgment where certainty appears difficult to attain. Erasmus presents this attitude as a mark of humility, believing that many theological questions are too obscure to permit confident conclusions.

It is precisely this principle that Luther challenges. Before discussing the human will, he asks whether such hesitation is compatible with the Christian faith. Can the Church remain uncertain where God has spoken? Is theological moderation always a virtue, or may it

become a denial of divine revelation? These questions, rather than the doctrine of free will itself, occupy Luther at the beginning of the discussion.

Thus, Luther's review of Erasmus' Preface serves an important purpose. He prepares the reader to recognise that the controversy is not merely about one doctrine among many. It concerns the very manner in which Christians approach the Word of God. Before deciding what Scripture teaches concerning the human will, one must first determine whether Scripture speaks with sufficient clarity to be believed with certainty.

II. Erasmus' Method Examined

Having reviewed Erasmus' Preface, Luther now turns his attention to the principles that underlie Erasmus' entire argument. Before discussing the doctrine of free will itself, he asks a more fundamental question: What attitude should the Christian adopt towards divine truth?

Luther observes that Erasmus consistently commends moderation and restraint. He prefers not to make firm assertions where theological difficulties arise, believing that such caution reflects humility and wisdom. Indeed, Erasmus suggests that there are many doctrines upon which Christians should hesitate to speak with confidence, lest they presume to know more than God has revealed.

At first sight, such an approach appears attractive. It discourages arrogance, avoids unnecessary controversy, and seeks peace within the Church. Yet Luther immediately recognises the danger that lies beneath it. If this principle is accepted without qualification, it will eventually undermine every doctrine that God has plainly revealed in Holy Scripture.

Luther therefore distinguishes between two kinds of uncertainty. There are matters which God has not revealed, concerning which Christians must remain humble and refrain from speculation. But

there are also truths which God has clearly declared in His Word. In these matters uncertainty is not humility but a refusal to believe what God Himself has spoken.

For Luther, the Christian does not create certainty by the strength of his own understanding. Rather, certainty arises because God has spoken. The authority rests not in the believer but in the One who cannot lie. Consequently, faith is not the expression of human opinion but the confident reception of divine revelation.

This principle governs the whole discussion that follows. Before Luther considers the human will, he establishes the authority of God's Word. If Scripture is the very voice of God, then its teaching concerning sin, grace, and salvation must be received with certainty. If Scripture is treated merely as a source of probable opinion, then no doctrine can remain secure.

Thus, Luther exposes what he believes to be the weakness of Erasmus' method. The controversy is not simply over the meaning of particular passages of Scripture, but over the manner in which Scripture itself is to be approached. Erasmus begins with human caution; Luther begins with divine revelation. From these two starting points, two very different doctrines of salvation inevitably emerge.

Author's Observation

Luther's criticism of Erasmus remains highly relevant. Every generation is tempted to soften doctrines that offend human reason or to treat revealed truth as though it were merely one opinion among many. Luther reminds us that Christian certainty rests neither upon ecclesiastical authority nor upon personal conviction, but upon the Word of the living God. Where God has spoken plainly, the Church must speak with humble confidence. Where God has remained silent, the Church must also be silent. In this balance, both faith and humility are preserved.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Erasmus' Scepticism

Introduction

Having reviewed Erasmus' Preface, Luther now turns to one of the most revealing statements made by his opponent. Erasmus openly admits that, were it not for the authority of Holy Scripture and the decrees of the Church, he would gladly adopt the position of the sceptics. Luther immediately recognises the seriousness of this confession. Before the controversy concerning free will can proceed, he believes it necessary to examine the place of certainty within the Christian faith itself. The issue is no longer merely the doctrine of free will, but the believer's attitude towards divine revelation.

I. Erasmus' Attraction to Scepticism

Luther begins by drawing attention to Erasmus' own words. Erasmus declares that, apart from the authority of Scripture and the Church, he would willingly embrace the position of the sceptics. Luther finds such language deeply troubling. It suggests that certainty is regarded as a burden rather than a blessing, and that scepticism is viewed as the more desirable state of mind.

Luther is careful to distinguish between legitimate humility and scepticism. Every Christian readily acknowledges that there are mysteries belonging to God which lie beyond the reach of human understanding. Yet this is not what Erasmus is describing. Rather, he appears to long for a position in which certainty itself may be suspended. To Luther, this strikes at the very nature of faith, for faith rests upon the sure testimony of God, not upon perpetual uncertainty.

The Reformer therefore asks a searching question: How can a man profess reverence for the authority of Holy Scripture while simultaneously expressing a desire to escape its certainty? Divine revelation does not leave the believer wandering among probabilities. It calls him to receive with confidence what God has graciously made

known. Thus, before Luther examines the doctrine of free will, he insists that the authority and certainty of God's Word must first be established.

Author's Observation

Luther immediately exposes the real issue. The controversy is not simply about the freedom of the human will, but about the certainty of divine revelation. If God's Word speaks with authority, then it demands faith. If its teaching may be held in continual suspense, then certainty disappears and theology becomes little more than informed opinion. Luther therefore refuses to begin with philosophical arguments concerning free will. He begins where every Christian discussion must begin—with the authority of God's revealed Word.

II. Can a Christian Desire Scepticism?

Having quoted Erasmus' own words, Luther now exposes what he believes to be a fundamental inconsistency. Erasmus professes the highest respect for the authority of Holy Scripture and the Church, yet at the same time expresses a desire for the liberty of scepticism. Luther cannot reconcile these two positions. To acknowledge God's authority while wishing to remain uncertain concerning His revelation is, in Luther's judgement, a contradiction that strikes at the heart of the Christian faith.

Luther does not accuse Erasmus of rejecting Scripture outright. On the contrary, Erasmus repeatedly speaks of his submission to its authority. The difficulty lies elsewhere. Luther asks whether such submission can be genuine if it is accompanied by a longing to suspend judgement whenever doctrine becomes difficult. If God has spoken, then His Word is to be believed. The believer's certainty rests, not upon his own understanding, but upon the certainty of the God who has revealed Himself.

Luther therefore presses the issue beyond the question of personal

opinion. The authority of Scripture is not merely an abstract doctrine to be acknowledged in theory; it demands a practical response of faith and obedience. To confess that Scripture is the Word of God while treating its teaching as uncertain is to empty that confession of its true meaning. Divine authority and religious scepticism cannot comfortably exist together.

The Reformer is careful, however, to distinguish between those truths which God has revealed and those secret things which He has chosen to withhold. Christians are not called to speculate beyond Scripture. Yet neither are they permitted to doubt what God has plainly declared. The humility of faith consists in receiving God's revelation with confidence while refusing to venture beyond its limits. This, Luther believes, is the proper balance that Erasmus has failed to maintain.

Author's Observation

Here Luther introduces a principle that governs the whole of *The Bondage of the Will*. Christian certainty is not the confidence of human reason but the confidence of faith resting upon divine revelation. The believer does not claim to know because he is wiser than others; he knows because God has spoken. Where Scripture is clear, uncertainty is not humility but unbelief. Where Scripture is silent, humility requires that we remain silent also. In this way, Luther preserves both the authority of God's Word and the reverence due to its divine Author.

III. The Difference Between Hidden Things and Revealed Truth

Luther now introduces an important distinction, one that governs not only this controversy but the whole study of Christian doctrine. He readily acknowledges that there are matters concerning which believers should exercise caution. Not every question admits of an immediate or certain answer. Where God has not spoken clearly, speculation is both unwise and unnecessary. In such matters, Christian humility requires restraint rather than dogmatism.

Having conceded this point, Luther immediately asks whether Erasmus is speaking only of such questions. If his remarks concern matters that are doubtful, speculative, or of little consequence, then there is no disagreement between them. Every faithful teacher recognises that Christians should avoid quarrelling over issues which God has not clearly revealed.

The difficulty arises when the same principle is applied to the essential truths of the Christian faith. Here Luther draws the line firmly. The doctrines that reveal the way of salvation cannot be treated as though they were uncertain opinions. God has not left His Church to speculate concerning sin, grace, Christ, faith, or salvation. These truths have been revealed in Holy Scripture and are to be believed with confidence because they rest upon the authority of God Himself.

Luther therefore insists that the Christian's certainty is limited by the extent of God's revelation. He does not claim certainty where God has remained silent, but neither does he permit uncertainty where God has spoken plainly. To confuse these two categories is to blur the distinction between divine mystery and divine revelation.

The issue before Erasmus is therefore not whether mystery exists within the Christian faith. Luther gladly admits that it does. Rather, the question is whether the Gospel itself belongs among those mysteries. Luther's answer is unequivocal. The Gospel is not hidden from the Church but proclaimed to the Church. It is God's revealed truth, given that sinners may know the way of salvation with certainty.

Author's Observation

This distinction is one of the keys to understanding Luther's theology. Throughout *The Bondage of the Will*, he carefully separates what God has chosen to keep secret from what God has graciously revealed. Christians are not called to penetrate the hidden counsels

of God, but neither are they permitted to doubt the truths He has plainly made known in Scripture. Faith rests upon revelation, not speculation. Consequently, certainty belongs wherever God has spoken, while humility governs those matters that remain within His secret will.

IV. Christian Faith Seeks Certainty

Having distinguished between matters which God has revealed and those He has chosen to keep secret, Luther now describes the proper attitude of every Christian towards divine revelation. He boldly declares that the believer should take the very opposite position to that suggested by Erasmus. Rather than longing for the liberty of scepticism, the Christian desires to cling firmly to the Word of God wherever He has spoken.

For Luther, this certainty is not a mark of intellectual pride but of genuine faith. Faith rests, not upon the wisdom of man, but upon the truthfulness of God. Because God cannot lie, His Word provides an unshakable foundation for the believer. The Christian therefore seeks certainty, not for the sake of argument or personal triumph, but because God has graciously revealed Himself in the Scriptures.

Luther goes further still. He asks what condition could be more miserable than uncertainty concerning divine truth. If the believer cannot know with confidence what God has spoken regarding sin, grace, forgiveness, and eternal life, then faith itself is deprived of its proper foundation. The conscience remains unsettled, assurance becomes impossible, and the promises of the Gospel are reduced to little more than hopeful opinions.

This explains why Luther consistently links certainty with the comfort of the Gospel. The troubled conscience does not require probabilities but promises. It does not rest upon human opinion but upon the sure Word of God. Throughout *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther returns repeatedly to this pastoral concern. His defence of certainty is not merely an academic exercise; it arises from his desire

that sinners should find true peace through the promises of God in Jesus Christ.

Accordingly, Luther insists that the Christian's confidence is always bounded by Scripture. He does not encourage presumption or speculation. Rather, he teaches that wherever God has spoken, the believer may rest with complete confidence upon His Word, while leaving all unrevealed matters in the hands of God. Thus certainty and humility are not enemies but faithful companions within the life of faith.

Author's Observation

This section reveals the pastoral heart of Luther's theology. His concern is not simply to win an argument with Erasmus but to strengthen the assurance of God's people. A doubtful Gospel can never bring lasting comfort to a burdened conscience. Only the certain promises of God, received by faith, can give peace to those who seek salvation in Christ. Luther therefore defends certainty because he believes it belongs to the very nature of the Gospel itself.

V. True Submission to the Word of God

Luther now examines another statement made by Erasmus, one which he believes reveals an even deeper inconsistency. Erasmus declares that he submits his judgement to the authority of Holy Scripture and the Church, whether or not he follows what they command. Luther immediately pauses over these words, asking what such submission can possibly mean. Submission, if it is genuine, cannot be separated from obedience. To acknowledge an authority while refusing to follow it is not true submission but an empty profession.

Luther first considers the place of Holy Scripture. He asks why it should not be sufficient to submit one's judgement to the written Word of God alone. If Scripture is indeed the supreme authority, then every doctrine, every tradition, and every decree of the Church must

ultimately be examined in its light. The Church possesses authority only because it faithfully teaches what God has already revealed in the Scriptures. It has no authority to establish doctrines independent of that revelation.

This leads Luther to a second and equally important question. If the decrees of men are to be received alongside Scripture, by what standard are those decrees themselves to be judged? Luther reminds his readers that the Apostle Paul commends spiritual discernment within the Church. Christians are not commanded to surrender their judgement blindly, but to examine what they hear according to the Word of God. The authority of the Church is therefore ministerial rather than absolute. It serves the Scriptures; it does not stand above them.

Luther then addresses Erasmus' statement that he submits whether he follows or not. Here he believes the contradiction becomes unmistakable. Faith always produces obedience. While believers remain imperfect and often fail in practice, the attitude of faith is one of willing submission to God's revealed will. To profess submission while reserving the right to disregard what God commands empties the very idea of submission of its biblical meaning.

Finally, Luther reminds the reader that obedience does not depend upon complete understanding. No Christian comprehends every mystery of God's providence or every depth of His wisdom. Yet faith obeys because it trusts the One who speaks. The believer follows Christ, not because every question has been answered, but because God's character is worthy of absolute confidence. Thus, true submission is grounded not in perfect knowledge but in faith in the God who has revealed Himself.

Author's Observation

Here Luther quietly reaffirms one of the great principles of the Reformation. The authority of the Church is always subordinate to the authority of Holy Scripture. The Church is called to proclaim,

explain, and defend God's Word, but never to add to it or stand above it. Likewise, genuine submission to God is never merely intellectual assent. It is the response of faith, expressed in humble obedience to the truth God has revealed.

VI. Peace Without Truth Cannot Preserve the Church

Luther now presses Erasmus' argument to what he believes is its inevitable conclusion. If certainty concerning divine truth is surrendered in the interests of peace, then the very purpose of Christian doctrine is lost. Erasmus appears willing to tolerate uncertainty provided public harmony is maintained and unnecessary controversy avoided. Luther understands the desire for peace, but he refuses to separate peace from truth.

According to Luther, the Christian faith cannot be reduced to a collection of opinions which may be affirmed or denied according to circumstance. If doctrines concerning God, Christ, salvation, and grace are treated as matters of indifference, then the Church is left without a firm confession. Peace purchased at the expense of revealed truth is not the peace of Christ but merely the absence of conflict.

Luther therefore distinguishes between needless quarrels and necessary controversy. Christians should never contend over questions that God has not answered, nor should they delight in argument for its own sake. Yet when the Gospel itself is endangered, silence ceases to be a virtue. To remain silent while divine truth is obscured is not charity but unfaithfulness.

He therefore rejects the suggestion that controversy should always be avoided. Throughout the history of God's people, truth has often been preserved through faithful confession in the face of opposition. The prophets contended for the truth against false religion. The Apostles defended the Gospel against false teachers. Above all, our Lord Jesus Christ Himself bore witness to the truth before a hostile world. Faithfulness has never been measured by the absence of controversy, but by steadfast obedience to the Word of God.

For this reason, Luther urges Erasmus to consider where his reasoning ultimately leads. If peace becomes the supreme goal, truth will gradually be surrendered whenever it proves inconvenient. But if truth remains supreme, then genuine peace may be sought without sacrificing the Gospel entrusted to the Church.

Author's Observation

This distinction remains profoundly relevant. Christians are commanded to pursue peace, yet never at the expense of the truth revealed by God. The New Testament repeatedly exhorts believers both to preserve the unity of the Spirit and to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints. These duties are not contradictory. True unity is established upon the truth of God's Word, not upon the neglect of it.

VII. The Holy Spirit Is Not a Sceptic

“The Holy Spirit is not a sceptic. What He writes upon the hearts of believers are not doubts, probabilities, or human opinions, but convictions. These convictions are **more certain than life itself and more reliable than all human experience.**” — Martin Luther

Luther now reaches the climax of his criticism of Erasmus' scepticism. Having shown that Christian doctrine cannot be reduced to uncertain opinion, he explains the reason with remarkable simplicity. The certainty of the Christian faith does not arise from human reasoning, ecclesiastical authority, or personal experience. It arises from the work of the Holy Spirit.

This statement strikes at the heart of the controversy. Erasmus had treated theological certainty with caution, fearing that firm assertions encouraged unnecessary controversy. Luther responds that certainty is not the product of an argumentative spirit but the fruit of divine revelation. The Holy Spirit does not produce hesitant opinions concerning God's truth. He bears witness to the Word of

God within the hearts of believers, creating a conviction that rests upon God's own authority.

For this reason, Luther distinguishes Christian faith from philosophical speculation. Philosophers are content with probabilities and human conclusions, continually revising their opinions as new arguments arise. Faith, however, rests upon the unchanging testimony of God. Because God cannot lie, the believer possesses a certainty that no merely human reasoning can provide.

Luther's words must not be misunderstood. He is not claiming that Christians possess exhaustive knowledge of every doctrine or that believers never experience seasons of doubt or spiritual conflict. Rather, he is speaking of the objective certainty of God's revealed truth. The promises of the Gospel remain true because they depend upon God's faithfulness, not upon the fluctuating emotions or imperfect understanding of those who believe them.

Thus, the ministry of the Holy Spirit is inseparably joined to the ministry of the Word. The same Spirit who inspired the Scriptures also persuades the hearts of God's people of their truth. Faith therefore rests upon divine testimony. It is this gracious work of the Spirit that enables believers to confess with confidence that Jesus Christ is Lord and that salvation is wholly of God's grace.

Luther concludes this section by declaring that the convictions produced by the Holy Spirit are "more certain than life itself and more reliable than all human experience." Such language reveals the depth of his confidence in the promises of God. Human experience changes from day to day. Feelings rise and fall. Circumstances alter continually. But the Word of God remains steadfast, and the Holy Spirit seals its truth upon the hearts of those who believe.

Author's Observation

This paragraph provides one of the clearest windows into Luther's understanding of saving faith. Faith is not mere intellectual agreement,

nor is it wishful thinking. It is the settled conviction produced by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God. For this reason, the believer's assurance rests ultimately neither upon his own faithfulness nor upon his changing experience, but upon the unchanging promises of God revealed in Holy Scripture. The certainty of faith is therefore the certainty of God's truth received by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Clarity of Holy Scripture

Introduction

Having answered Erasmus' scepticism, Luther now turns to another fundamental question. Is the Holy Scripture itself obscure? Erasmus had suggested that many doctrines remain hidden and uncertain because of the difficulty of Scripture. Luther rejects this entirely. Before discussing free will further, he establishes one of the great principles of the Reformation: although God Himself is infinite and incomprehensible, the Scriptures He has given are sufficiently clear in all things necessary for salvation.

I. God Is Infinite—Scripture Is His Revelation

Luther begins by making an essential distinction. There is a profound difference between God Himself and the Holy Scriptures through which God has chosen to reveal Himself. No Christian denies that there are depths within the being, wisdom, and purposes of God that remain beyond the reach of human understanding. God is infinite, and finite creatures cannot comprehend Him exhaustively. The secret counsels of His eternal will belong to Him alone.

Yet this is not the question under discussion. Erasmus had blurred the distinction between the incomprehensibility of God and the clarity of God's written revelation. Luther insists that these must never be confused. Although God Himself remains beyond our complete comprehension, He has nevertheless spoken clearly in Holy Scripture concerning all that is necessary for faith and salvation.

To support this distinction, Luther appeals to the words of Christ and the Apostles. There are indeed matters known only to the Father, such as the precise day and hour of Christ's return. Likewise, God alone possesses the complete knowledge of His eternal purposes. These belong to the secret things of God and must be received with reverent humility.

But Luther immediately adds that these hidden things are not the same as the Gospel. The doctrines revealed in Scripture have been given for the instruction, comfort, and salvation of God's people. To suggest that they remain inaccessible because Scripture is obscure is, in Luther's judgement, to confuse God's hidden majesty with His gracious self-revelation.

Thus, the question is not whether God is greater than human understanding. Every Christian gladly confesses that He is. The question is whether God has spoken clearly enough for sinners to know Him savingly. Luther answers with unwavering confidence that He has.

Author's Observation

This distinction is indispensable to a right understanding of Luther's theology. Christians do not claim to comprehend everything about God. Rather, they gratefully receive everything that God has chosen to reveal. Theology therefore begins, not with human speculation concerning the hidden things of God, but with humble submission to the Scriptures through which God has made Himself known. The mystery of God's being should never be used as an excuse to question the clarity of God's Word.

II. Is Scripture Obscure?

Having distinguished between the hidden majesty of God and the Scriptures He has graciously given to His Church, Luther now confronts a widely accepted opinion of his day. Many of the medieval Schoolmen, often referred to by Luther as the Sophists, taught that Holy Scripture was so obscure that ordinary Christians could not safely understand it without the authoritative interpretation of the Church. Erasmus, in Luther's judgement, had unknowingly adopted this same assumption.

Luther rejects this doctrine without hesitation. He declares that the obscurity attributed to Scripture is not found within Scripture

itself but has been imposed upon it by men. Those who insist that the Bible is fundamentally dark and inaccessible have never demonstrated that its essential doctrines are hidden. Rather, they have confused the existence of difficult passages with the supposed uncertainty of the Gospel itself.

According to Luther, this distinction is of the utmost importance. Every reader of Scripture recognises that certain passages require careful study. The Scriptures contain historical narratives, prophetic visions, poetic expressions, and difficult grammatical constructions. Such passages may demand patience and diligent comparison with other portions of God's Word. Yet these difficulties do not obscure the central message of salvation.

Luther therefore refuses to allow isolated difficulties to determine the character of the whole Bible. The great truths upon which salvation depends are not concealed within secret codes or accessible only to learned scholars. God has spoken plainly concerning man's sin, the person and work of Jesus Christ, the necessity of repentance and faith, and the promise of eternal life to all who believe. These truths are proclaimed throughout the Scriptures with remarkable consistency and clarity.

For this reason Luther regards the charge of obscurity as both unnecessary and dangerous. If believers are persuaded that the Scriptures cannot be understood, they will naturally seek another authority to interpret them. In practice, the authority of God's Word is gradually transferred to the opinions of men. Thus the claim that Scripture is obscure does not exalt God; it weakens confidence in His revelation and places human authority in its place.

Author's Observation

Here Luther touches one of the great principles recovered by the Reformation. The clarity of Scripture does not mean that every passage is equally easy to understand. Rather, it means that everything necessary for salvation has been revealed with sufficient

clarity that the believer, using the ordinary means God has appointed and depending upon the illumination of the Holy Spirit, may truly know Christ through His Word. Difficult passages should therefore encourage careful study, not diminish confidence in the Scriptures themselves.

III. The Great Truths of the Gospel Have Been Revealed

Having rejected the claim that Holy Scripture is inherently obscure, Luther now asks a simple but decisive question: What essential truth has God left hidden? He challenges his readers to produce a single doctrine necessary for salvation that remains concealed because of any failure or obscurity in the Scriptures themselves. In Luther's judgement, no such doctrine can be found.

To demonstrate his point, Luther directs attention to the central truths of the Christian faith. The great mysteries of redemption are no longer hidden from mankind. What was once foreshadowed under the Old Covenant has now been openly revealed in Jesus Christ. The coming of the Messiah, His atoning death, His resurrection, His exaltation, and His everlasting kingdom are proclaimed throughout the Scriptures and preached openly before the world.

Luther therefore declares that the seals have been opened and the stone has been rolled away. These striking expressions remind the reader that the Gospel is not a hidden philosophy reserved for a privileged few, but God's public declaration of salvation through His Son. The mystery once concealed has now been revealed. Christ has come in the flesh. God has made Himself known in the person of His Son. Redemption has been accomplished and proclaimed for all nations to hear.

For Luther, these are not isolated doctrines scattered throughout Scripture. They are the very substance of God's revelation. Everything necessary for the salvation of sinners centres upon Jesus Christ. Consequently, the Scriptures cannot rightly be described as obscure, for their principal message shines clearly from beginning to end.

This does not mean that every verse presents the same degree of difficulty. Luther readily admits that some passages require careful study and comparison with other portions of Scripture. Yet these difficulties never obscure the central message. The Gospel itself remains plain. Christ is openly set forth before the world as the crucified and risen Saviour, and all who read the Scriptures with humble faith are directed to Him.

The clarity of Scripture is therefore Christ-centred. Luther does not defend the Bible as a merely clear book; he defends it as the book that clearly reveals Jesus Christ. Remove Christ from the Scriptures, and their purpose is lost. Read them as God's testimony concerning His Son, and their great design becomes unmistakably clear.

Author's Observation

Luther's argument reaches beyond the question of biblical interpretation to the very purpose of divine revelation. The Scriptures were not given merely to satisfy human curiosity or to provide endless material for theological debate. They were given that sinners might know Christ and believe the Gospel. Wherever Christ is faithfully proclaimed from the Scriptures, God's saving purpose in giving His Word is being fulfilled. The clearest evidence for the perspicuity of Scripture is not found in abstract argument but in the fact that generation after generation of believers have come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ through its pages.

IV. Christ Is the Centre of Holy Scripture

Having shown that the great truths of redemption have been openly revealed, Luther now reaches the very heart of his argument. He asks a question that every student of the Bible should consider carefully:

“Remove Christ from the Scriptures, and what remains?”

This question is not merely rhetorical. It expresses Luther's entire understanding of the Bible. Holy Scripture was not given simply to record history, preserve moral instruction, or satisfy intellectual curiosity. From Genesis to Revelation, its supreme purpose is to bear witness to Jesus Christ. Every promise, every prophecy, every sacrifice, every priest, every king, and every act of divine redemption finds its fulfilment in Him.

For this reason Luther rejects the suggestion that Scripture is obscure. The central message of the Bible is neither hidden nor reserved for a select company of scholars. Christ Himself is openly proclaimed throughout its pages. The Old Testament prepares the way for His coming. The Gospels record His life, death, and resurrection. The Epistles explain the saving significance of His work. The whole of Scripture points to the same glorious Person.

Luther therefore insists that whatever difficulties may exist in individual passages, they do not obscure the principal message of the Bible. The light of Christ shines throughout the Scriptures with sufficient clarity that sinners may know the way of salvation. The Bible was written, not to conceal Christ, but to reveal Him.

This Christ-centred understanding of Scripture governs Luther's entire theology. Every doctrine must ultimately be understood in relation to the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is in Him that God's promises are fulfilled, His righteousness revealed, His grace displayed, and His salvation accomplished. Consequently, to read Scripture apart from Christ is to miss its central purpose.

Author's Observation

Luther reminds us that the unity of Scripture is found in Christ Himself. The Bible is not merely a collection of sacred writings but one unfolding revelation of God's redeeming purpose in His Son. Whenever Scripture is read with Christ at its centre, its message becomes wonderfully clear. The believer is led, not merely to knowledge, but to the Saviour of whom all the Scriptures testify.

CONCLUSION TO VOLUME ONE

The purpose of this volume has been to prepare the reader for a careful and profitable study of Martin Luther's *The Bondage of the Will*. Before entering Luther's detailed arguments, we have traced the biblical foundations of the controversy from the opening chapters of Genesis, followed the development of these doctrines through the history of the Christian Church, and examined the principles established by Luther in the opening sections of his great work.

It has been my conviction throughout that *The Bondage of the Will* cannot be fully appreciated apart from the Scriptures upon which it rests. Luther did not invent the doctrines he defended. Rather, he sought to proclaim and preserve those truths which God had revealed in His Word from the beginning and which had been faithfully maintained throughout the history of His Church.

This volume has therefore been prepared as a guide for those who are studying *The Bondage of the Will*. It is intended to be read alongside the modern English edition, helping the reader to understand Luther's historical setting, his theological method, and the biblical principles that govern his argument. My prayer is that it will encourage pastors, theological students, and all serious readers to search the Scriptures more diligently and to examine every doctrine in the light of God's Holy Word.

The modern English edition of *The Bondage of the Will* has already been placed into the hands of pastors and theological students in the Philippines. It is my hope that this companion volume will now assist them in their study of Luther's work and encourage a deeper understanding of the sovereign grace of God revealed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The exposition of *The Bondage of the Will* is not yet complete. Luther's discussion now moves into the detailed examination of the doctrine of the human will, the nature of grace, and the sovereign work of God in salvation. Those sections remain to be written and,

God willing, will appear in a subsequent volume, continuing the work from the point at which this first volume concludes.

Until then, I commend both this volume and *The Bondage of the Will* to the reader, with the prayer that the Lord Himself, by His Holy Spirit, may grant wisdom, understanding, and an ever-deepening love for His truth.

“Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.”

John 17:17

Soli Deo Gloria

