

## THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

‘The Bondage of the Will’ is the English title of a book written by Martin Luther in 1525, almost 500 years ago. Why should I draw your attention to a book written so long ago? Surely it is out of date and of no importance today except for historical research. Let me give you some reasons why you should at least be aware of this book.

- The very significant time when it was written. It was just after the formal start of the Reformation which we can date at 1517 when Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenburg. In the history of the Church the Reformation is arguably the most important post-apostolic event resulting in the rise of Protestantism, including the Anglican Church.
- The person who wrote the book. Martin Luther was the individual God used to spearhead the Reformation. It is he who rejected the authority of the Pope in 1519 by burning the ‘Bull’ of excommunication against him. It is he who stood against the Church of the day and the Empire in the Diet of Worms in 1521 and declared that he would not recant his teachings unless it could be proved they contradicted Scripture. This was more than a decade before Calvin had even become a Christian.
- What Luther himself said about the book. He declared it to be about the most important book he wrote. It is said that every two weeks Luther prepared something for the press. His collected writings amount to 55 volumes of about 500 pages each! Apart from his translation of the Bible into German he wanted to be sure that at least three of his many writings were handed down to subsequent generations – the two Catechisms, and this book, *The Bondage of the Will*.
- What others have said about the book. “The manifesto of the Reformation” (Warfield). “The clearest, indeed, the classical elucidation of what the Reformation conflict was all about” (Packer).

**Why did Luther write this most important book?** It was in response to a much smaller book by Erasmus, *Discussion on Free-Will*. Erasmus was the leading scholar of his day. Anyone would have felt vindicated if Erasmus was on his side. To aid scholarly pursuit Erasmus had printed the New Testament in Greek and this became such an important instrument the Lord used for reformation as theologians went back to the original language rather than the Latin translation (Vulgate). Any reader could immediately see that the church of A.D.1500 bore little resemblance to that of the apostles as recorded in Scripture. It was full of “obscurantism, superstition, corruption, and moral laxity”. And Erasmus was as loud as Luther in condemning the evils of the church, so much so that it was rumoured that he was ‘Lutheran’. But he could not let there be any suggestion that he was a follower of Luther, one who had been excommunicated from the Church. He had to clear his name and he chose the subject of free will because Luther had described it a ‘a mere fiction’.

**What was the Reformation all about?** Historians have given many different analyses. It is said that the Reformation was political, as in England when King Henry VIII declared himself the head of the Church instead of the Pope. Others emphasize that it was an attempt to get rid of evil practices in the Church, and this was certainly the attitude of Erasmus. But at the end of his book Luther congratulates Erasmus for 'hitting the nail on the head' in choosing to write about free will. He is declaring that this teaching is the root of the problem in the Church. The basic problem is not morality but doctrine, because morality depends upon doctrine. Let us listen to Luther himself:

You alone ... have attacked the real thing, that is, the essential issue. You have not worried me with those extraneous issues about the Papacy, purgatory, indulgences, and such like – trifles, rather than issue – in respect of which almost all to date have sought my blood ... you, and you alone, have seen the hinge on which all turns, and aimed for the vital spot [literally, 'taken me by the throat']. For that I heartily thank you; for it is more gratifying to me to deal with this issue. (Luther, 319)

Have you considered this? What is the hinge on which the door of true Christianity turns? It is what you believe about the will of man, whether it is free or in bondage to sin. It is not the door itself; that is the doctrine of the Trinity and the work of Christ. But how does the door open so that a sinner can receive the blessing of the work of Christ? In plain words, does "the Christian message tell man how, with God's help, he may save himself", or does "Christianity declare that it is God in Christ who saves, and God alone"? (Packer, 108) Here are the only two alternatives: either God saves from beginning to end; or the sinner has at least some part in being saved.

Let us look at each of these in turn. **Luther** teaches that unless God freely works our salvation we cannot be saved at all. We have no works of our own that can be part of the basis of justification. The Bible is absolutely clear that justification by works is impossible (for example, Galatians 2:16). The only righteousness available is that of Christ. Justification is by faith and not works. How is it possible to have faith? Does the sinner have natural ability to so trust in God, that is, does he have free will? The Bible's answer is No! it is a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8). The Holy Spirit must first work in the heart giving spiritual life out of which flows faith. This is what Ezekiel promises – 36:26-27. This is what Lydia experienced (Acts 16:14-15). The implication is that if there is any dependence upon man then salvation is impossible. The body of Lazarus has lain in the cold tomb for four days. But he is soon going to walk out alive. How is it possible? Does Jesus whisper to the dead man, 'Just give me a little indication that you want me to raise you up. Lift your finger. Blink your eyes.' Of course, he doesn't. Lazarus can't do anything, not the least little thing. Jesus must first give him life, and only then can he do all things pertaining to life. That is the teaching of Luther, of the Reformation and of the Bible. That is the way you became a Christian, if you truly are one.

Let us now turn to the teaching of **Erasmus** which Luther so strongly opposed. Erasmus is an orthodox follower of the Church, and what is called in theology, semi-Pelagianism. Very simply put, the sinner needs God's help to be saved, but he also has a vital part to play. In other words, he can't be saved without God, but neither can God save him unless he plays his part. It sounds familiar doesn't it? How many preachers have argued: 'God has done his part, all He can; it is now up to you'? Erasmus believed that we all have the natural ability to choose God or to reject Him, which may be no more than just the will to do good which merits divine

help for the doing of that good. He gives the illustration of a baby boy who cannot quite walk whose father sets before him a banana beyond his reach. The boy stretches for it but cannot touch it, nor can he walk towards it without help. He wants the banana and his father 'rewards' him by picking him up and carrying him to the fruit. What is wrong with the illustration? In Biblical terms the baby boy is dead and cannot even move his hand (Ephesians 2:1,5)! You may ask, as Erasmus himself did, does it really matter? Isn't what matters that people are saved and live Christian lives? But pleading with the sinner to do something to be saved, like praying the sinner's prayer, has led to a multitude of false professions of faith (see Elly Achok). Preaching morality, even Biblical morality, has led to external religion, for first the heart must be changed.

**What is the will?** There was, and continues to be, much confusion about the idea. Often the will is thought of as if it is something distinct from the person himself, like our faculty of sight. I am a full person even if I lack the ability to see. But to be able to will, to choose, is a necessary part of personhood. Luther, but not Erasmus, was very clear on this. Free will is not simply the ability to choose some things, but rather the ability to choose any of the alternatives presented to me. Specifically, the question is, 'Do I have the ability to do that which leads to eternal salvation?' Erasmus objects that because God commands us to choose the way of obedience then we must have the power to make such a choice. Luther's response is that God commands what we cannot do precisely to show that we lack that power, so that we might humble ourselves and come to God in total dependence. Listen to Luther:

As long as he is persuaded that he can make even the smallest contribution to his salvation, he remains self-confident, and does not utterly despair of himself, and so is not humbled before God; but plans out for himself ... a position, an occasion, a work, which shall bring him final salvation.

Luther teaches us that according to the Bible not only is it impossible to keep the law of God (Romans 8:7-8), but we have no desire to. If it is then proposed that we are able to believe in Christ then Luther responds that is equally impossible. How can one whose mind is "hostile to God" have faith in Him, trust Him? We cannot choose to act contrary to our nature, which is sinful. We would sooner see a lion eat grass! It cannot because it will not, because it is a carnivore.

The necessary implication is that our salvation is all of God from beginning to end. Luther believes this because it is what Scripture teaches (for example, Romans 9:15-16) and he is totally submissive to the authority of Scripture. Luther uses an illustration of Augustine:

Man's will, is like a beast standing between two riders. If God rides, it wills and goes where God wills... If Satan rides, it wills and goes where Satan wills. Nor may it choose to which rider it will run ... but the riders themselves fight to decide who shall have and hold it. (Packer, 114)

If God 'fights' to be the rider then it His grace, and His grace alone. This raises the inevitable question about those who are not saved: 'This is unfair particularly towards those God damns rather than saves.' In his response Luther of course uses the very arguments of Romans 9:14-23. First, he writes, let us not occupy ourselves with debating things that God has not revealed. This is why Paul rebukes one who continues to question God's doings (verse 20). Second, one day we will know all things as fully as they can be known when faith becomes sight:

... it is inexplicable how God can damn him who by his own strength can do nothing but sin and become guilty. Both the light of nature and the light of grace here insist that the fault lies not in the wretchedness of man, but in the injustice of God ... But the light of glory insists otherwise, and will one day reveal God ... as a God who justice is most righteous and evident.

We will let Packer tell us why this conflict between Luther and Erasmus was of the highest importance. "It established once and for all that the Reformation conflict was not primarily about obscurantist superstitions and ecclesiastical abuses ...; but that it was essentially concerned with the substance of the Gospel and the significance of grace." (Packer, 118-119) This means that you must come to a Biblical conclusion about the state of the will of men as sinners, that it is in bondage to sin, and there is nothing you can do towards your salvation. It depends upon the grace of God in Christ received by faith alone.

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