

**27.** Luther had stated this as early as in his 1518 *Heidelberg Disputation* (WA 1:353–74; LW 31:[37–38] 39–70). Here he explains the free will to be just a word, not a real thing (*res de solo titulo*).

**28.** As evident with the biblical and traditional wording, Luther does not find the law just in the Old but also in the New Testament.

**29.** The Skeptics in antiquity denied the possibility of finding the absolute truth. Augustine (354–430), in his *Contra academicos*, gave severe criticism of skepticism.

For although you think and write wrongly about free choice,<sup>k</sup> yet I owe you no small thanks, for you have made me far more sure of my own position by letting me see the case for free choice put forward with all the energy of so distinguished and powerful a mind, but with no other effect than to make things worse than before. That is plain evidence that free choice is a pure fiction;<sup>27</sup> for, like the woman in the Gospel [Mark 5:25f.], the more it is treated by the doctors, the worse it gets. I shall therefore abundantly pay my debt of thanks to you, if through me you become better informed, as I through you have been more strongly confirmed. But both of these things are gifts of the Spirit, not our own achievement. Therefore, we must pray that God may open my mouth and your heart, and the hearts of all human beings, and that God may be present in our midst as the master who informs both our speaking and hearing.

But from you, my dear Erasmus, let me obtain this request, that just as I bear with your ignorance in these matters, so you in turn will bear with my lack of eloquence. God does not give all his gifts to one man, and “we cannot all do all things”; or, as Paul says: “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit” [1 Cor. 12:4]. It remains, therefore, for us to render mutual service with our gifts, so that each with one’s own gift bears the burden and need of the other. Thus we shall fulfill the law of Christ [Gal. 6:2].<sup>28</sup>

## [Part I. Review of Erasmus’s Preface]

### [Christianity Involves Assertions; Christians Are No Skeptics]

I want to begin by referring to some passages in your Preface, in which you rather disparage our case and puff up your own. I note, first, that just as in other books you censure me for obstinate assertiveness, so in this book you say that you are so far from delighting in assertions that you would readily take refuge in the opinion of the Skeptics<sup>29</sup> wherever this is allowed by the

<sup>k</sup> In Latin, there is a difference between *voluntas*, which means “will” as a power in terms of psychology, and *arbitrium*, which stresses the ability to choose. Luther and Erasmus address mainly the latter.

inviolable authority of the Holy Scriptures and the decrees of the Church, to which you always willingly submit your personal feelings,<sup>30</sup> whether you grasp what it prescribes or not. This [you say] is the frame of mind that pleases you.

I take it (as it is only fair to do) that you say these things in a kindly and peace-loving mind. But if anyone else were to say them, I should probably go for that person in my usual manner; and I ought not to allow even you, excellent though your intentions are, to be led astray by this idea. For it is not the mark of a Christian mind to take no delight in assertions; on the contrary, a human being must delight in assertions to be a real Christian. And by assertion—in order that we may not be misled by words—I mean a constant adhering, affirming, confessing, maintaining, and an invincible persevering;<sup>31</sup> nor, I think, does the word mean anything else either as used by the Latins<sup>32</sup> or by us in our time.

I am speaking, moreover, about the assertion of those things that have been divinely transmitted to us in the sacred writings. Elsewhere we have no need either of Erasmus or any other instructor to teach us that in matters that are doubtful or useless and unnecessary, assertions, disputings, and quarreling are not only foolish but impious, and Paul condemns them in more than one place.<sup>l</sup> Nor are you, I think, speaking of such things in this place—unless, in the manner of some foolish orator, you have chosen to announce one topic and discuss another, like the man with the turbot,<sup>33</sup> or else, with the craziness of some ungodly writer, you are contending that the article about free choice is doubtful or unnecessary.

Let Skeptics and Academics<sup>34</sup> keep well away from us Christians, but let there be among us “assertors” twice as unyielding as the Stoics themselves.<sup>35</sup> How often, I ask you, does the apostle Paul demand that *plerophoria* (as he terms it)<sup>m</sup>—that most sure and unyielding assertion of conscience? In Romans 10[:10] he calls it “confession,” saying, “with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” And Christ says, “Everyone who confesses me before people, I also will confess before my Father” [Matt. 10:32]. Peter bids us give a reason for the hope that is in us [1 Peter 3:15]. What need is there to dwell on this?

**30.** Indeed, Erasmus, in his *Diatribae*, had confessed his willingness to submit his sense to the Holy Scriptures and the decrees of the church.

**31.** These remarks, however, from the beginning on show the different approaches Luther and Erasmus had regarding the dispute: while Erasmus sees the question of free will as a matter of discussion, Luther is convinced that he has already found the unquestionable truth in the Bible.

**32.** Luther refers to the Latin authors from antiquity as examples for modern humanists.

**33.** This figure of speech derives from Juvenal’s fourth *Satire*, 65–150. Luther jokes about orators who do not see or understand the issue of their speech exactly.

**34.** The Academics were the followers of Plato in antiquity. Cicero had presented them as skeptics. From this stemmed Augustine’s criticism against them.

**35.** The Stoics, the most important philosophical school in antiquity, maintained that the whole cosmos is dominated by the godly *logos* (reason/word).

*l* Cf. 1 Tim. 1:6; 2 Tim. 2:23; Titus 1:10; 3:9.

*m* Cf. 1 Thess. 1:5.

Nothing is better known or more common among Christians than assertion. Take away assertions and you take away Christianity. Why, the Holy Spirit is given them from heaven to glorify Christ [in them] and confess him even unto death—unless it is not asserting when one dies for one’s confession and assertion. Moreover, the Spirit goes to such lengths in asserting that she takes the initiative and accuses the world of sin [John 16:8], as if she would provoke a fight; and Paul commands Timothy to “exhort” and “be urgent out of season” [2 Tim. 4:2]. But what a droll exhorter he would be, who himself neither firmly believed nor consistently asserted the thing he was exhorting about! Why, I would send him to Anticyra!<sup>36</sup>

But it is I who am the biggest fool, for wasting words and time on something that is clearer than daylight. What Christian would agree that assertions are to be despised? That would be nothing but a denial of all religion and piety, or an assertion that neither religion, nor piety, nor any dogma is of the slightest importance. Why, then, do you too assert, “I take no delight in assertions,” and that you prefer this frame of mind to its opposite?<sup>37</sup> [ . . . ]

### [The Clarity of Scripture]

I come now to the second passage, which is of a piece with this. Here you distinguish between Christian dogmas, pretending that there are some which it is necessary to know, and some which it is not, and you say that some are [meant to be] obscure and others quite plain. You thus either play games with other human beings’ words or else you are trying your hand at a rhetorical sally of your own. You adduce, however, in support of your views, Paul’s saying in Romans 11[:33]: “Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God,” and also that of Isaiah 40[:13]: “Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, or what counselor has provided instruction?”

It was easy for you to say these things, since you either knew you were not writing to Luther, but for the general public, or you did not reflect that it was Luther you were writing against, whom I hope you allow nonetheless to have some acquaintance with the Holy Scriptures and some judgment in respect of it. If you do not allow this, then I shall force you to it. The distinction I make—in order that I, too, may display a little rhetoric or

36. In Anticyra, hellebore was produced as a medicine against insanity (cf. Erasmus, *Adagia* 1,8,52). Luther means therefore that one should go to Anticyra to become cured from one’s insanity.

37. With this rhetorical question, Luther suggests that Erasmus writes without any religious intention.

dialectic<sup>38</sup>—is this: God and the Scripture of God are two things, no less than the Creator and the creature are two things.

That in God there are many things hidden, of which we are ignorant, no one doubts—as the Lord himself says concerning the last day: “Of that day no one knows but the Father” [Mark 13:32], and in Acts 1[:7]: “It is not for you to know times and seasons”; and again: “I know whom I have chosen” [John 13:18], and Paul says: “The Lord knows those who are his” [2 Tim. 2:19], and so forth. But that in Scripture there are some things abstruse, and everything is not plain—this is an idea put about by the ungodly Sophists, with whose lips you also speak here, Erasmus; but they have never produced, nor can they produce, a single article to prove this mad notion of theirs. Yet with such a phantasmagoria<sup>39</sup> Satan has frightened people away from reading the sacred writings and has made Holy Scripture contemptible, in order to enable the plagues it has bred from philosophy to prevail in the Church.<sup>40</sup>

I admit, of course, that there are many texts in the Scriptures that are obscure and abstruse, not because of the majesty of their subject matter, but because of our ignorance of their vocabulary and grammar; but these texts in no way hinder a knowledge of all the subject matter of Scripture. For what still more sublime thing can remain hidden in the Scriptures, now that the seals have been broken, the stone rolled from the door of the sepulcher [Matt. 27:66; 28:2], and the supreme mystery brought to light, namely, that Christ the Son of God has been made man, that God is three and one,<sup>41</sup> that Christ has suffered for us and is to reign eternally? Are not these things known and sung even in the highways and byways? Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what will you find left in them?<sup>42</sup>

The subject matter of the Scriptures, therefore, is all quite accessible, even though some texts are still obscure owing to our ignorance of their terms. Truly it is stupid and impious, when we know that the subject matter of Scripture has all been placed in the clearest light, to call it obscure on account of a few obscure words. If the words are obscure in one place, yet they are plain in another; and it is one and the same theme, published quite openly to the whole world, which in the Scriptures is sometimes expressed in plain words, and sometimes lies as yet hidden in obscure words. Now, when the item is in the light, it does not matter if this or that sign of it is in darkness,<sup>43</sup> since many other

**38.** Together with grammar, rhetoric and dialectics were parts of the studies of arts in the Middle Ages, together framing the so-called *Trivium*.

**39.** A delusion, a picture in a dream.

**40.** Luther’s main argument against the Scholastics consists of criticism of their theology and philosophy. In general, Luther does not deny the means of philosophy but its use in theology. It is a kind of human wisdom, while theology has to deal with divine insights.

**41.** For Luther, the Trinity was clearly witnessed in the Holy Scriptures, which he read, in this regard, through the lenses of the ecumenical creeds’ trinitarian formulation.

**42.** From his first lectures on the Bible (on Psalms and Romans) in the years 1513–1516, Luther was convinced about Christ being at the core of Scripture.

**43.** Luther here alludes to the famous distinction Augustine made between item/matter (*res*) and sign (*signum*) to interpret the sacraments, and widely used in the Middle Ages for that purpose.

44. Erasmus compared human knowledge of God with the antic knowledge of this cave near Tarsus with many hallways.

45. See n. 16, p. 159.

46. Referring to the public preaching.

47. Luther here describes the situation of human beings after the fall, stressing their loss of all good powers.

48. This verse was very famous in medieval theological literature: Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) used it to show the possibility of human beings denying God's existence. Against this attitude, he wrote his *Proslogion*, demonstrating God's existence.

signs of the same thing are meanwhile in the light. Who will say that a public fountain is not in the light because those who are in a narrow side street do not see it, whereas all who are in the marketplace do see it?

Your reference to the Corycian cave,<sup>44</sup> therefore, is irrelevant; that is not how things are in the Scriptures. Matters of the highest majesty and the profoundest mysteries are no longer hidden away, but have been brought out and are openly displayed before the very doors. For Christ has opened our minds so that we may understand the Scriptures [Luke 24:45], and the gospel is preached to the whole creation [Mark 16:15]; “Their voice has gone out to all the earth” [Rom. 10:18], and “Whatever was written was written for our instruction” [Rom. 15:4]; also: “All Scripture inspired by God is profitable for teaching” [1 Tim. 3:16]. See, then, whether you and all the Sophists<sup>45</sup> can produce any single mystery that is still abstruse in the Scriptures.

It is true that for many people much remains abstruse; but this is not due to the obscurity of Scripture, but to the blindness or indolence of those who will not take the trouble to look at the very clearest truth. [. . .]

To put it briefly, there are two kinds of clarity in Scripture, just as there are also two kinds of obscurity: one external and pertaining to the ministry of the Word,<sup>46</sup> the other located in the understanding of the heart. If you speak of the internal clarity, no human being perceives one iota of what is in the Scriptures unless he has the Spirit of God. All human beings have a darkened heart,<sup>47</sup> so that even if they can recite everything in Scripture, and know how to quote it, yet they apprehend and truly understand nothing of it. They neither believe in God, nor that they themselves are creatures of God, nor anything else, as Ps. 13[14:1] says: “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no god.’”<sup>48</sup> For the Spirit is required for the understanding of Scripture, both as a whole and in any part of it.<sup>49</sup> If, on the other hand, you speak of the external clarity, nothing at all is left obscure or ambiguous, but everything there is in the Scriptures has been brought out by the Word into the most definite light and published to all the world.