

The Bondage of the Will

1525

VOLKER LEPPIN

INTRODUCTION

There would have been no Reformation without humanism: going back to the sources—*ad fontes!*—was the key motto of many of the humanists, and Luther’s program of *sola scriptura* fitted best to it. Also, it was the *Novum Instrumentum*, Erasmus’s new edition of the New Testament, that helped Luther develop his ideas while reading Paul’s letter to the Romans.¹ Even more, when Melancthon came to Wittenberg in 1518, and when Luther was admired by the humanists at the Heidelberg disputation² the same year, the alliance between humanism and reformation seemed to be perfect.³

This is true, although in Heidelberg, among other positions, Luther maintained this radical conclusion: the free will after the fall is nothing more than a name. Later on, this issue would become the point of serious contention between Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536), the leader of the humanists in the north of the Alps, and Luther. Erasmus did not come into the struggle on his own, but he was strongly encouraged by others to write against Luther on the question of the free will. Concerning his planned tract, he was in contact with King Henry VIII of England (1491–1547) as well as with Pope Clement VII (1478–1534). Finally, in the beginning of September 1524, Erasmus’s *De libero*

1. In his 1545 *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings* (LW 34:327–38), Luther recalls his reformation discovery with Romans 1:17: “Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me” (337).

2. Luther’s “friendly” hearing with his Augustinian monks. The twenty-eight theses Luther defended at the disputation were published as the *Heidelberg Disputation* in 1518 (LW 31).

3. Timeline

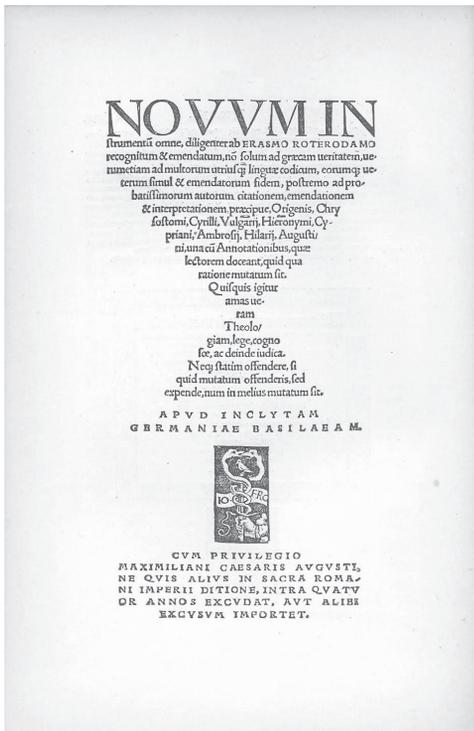
1524 September Erasmus’s *On the Free Will*

1525 January *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments*

- 1525 May: *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*
 1525 June: Luther and Katharina married
 1525 December: *The Bondage of the Will*
 1526, 1527 Erasmus's *Defense of the Diatribe*

arbitrio diatribe sive collation (On the Free Will. Discourses or Comparisons), was published.

The title indicates the two parts of his treatise: the first part was a comparison of biblical sentences relevant to the question of the free will. With this, Erasmus accepted Luther's methodological demand to discuss on biblical grounds only. But at the same time, he argued that the biblical view on this matter was not absolutely evident or decisive. He showed that different passages of the Bible argued for one or the other side of the question and thus led to possibly different answers. This observation gave Luther the justification for the discourse that ensued in the second part where he argued philosophically in a balanced manner.



The title page of Erasmus' text of the New Testament, 1516.



Portrait of Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam by Pilaster Hans Holbein the Younger (1498–1543).

Holding with Luther that human salvation depended fully on God, nevertheless, Erasmus stated that the human free will had survived the fall, but in a weakened mode.

When Luther read this treatise, he was horrified. It was not a surprise to him that the former collaborator did not share all his convictions. But now he was faced with something he could not accept or ignore, even if his first reaction had been to not even bother responding in public, as he wrote to Georg Spalatin⁴ on 1 November 1524.^a Just sixteen days later, Luther announced: “I will answer to Erasmus, not just because of himself, but because of those who misuse his authority for their own glory against Christ.”^b He was not the only one to distance himself from Erasmus: also the Strasburg reformers Wolfgang Capito (1478–1541), Caspar Hedio (1494–1542), and Martin Bucer (1491–1551) supported Luther in his opposition of the man they saw opening the way for the Antichrist—even if, they confessed, they had learned a lot from Erasmus.^c

Actually, Luther had no time to answer quickly. Other problems were coming into the foreground, mainly the Peasants’ Wars. Asked for his statement, Luther suddenly became engaged in a severe debate about the legitimacy of this uproar of peasants demanding their rights. Luther felt his popularity failing and feared that the war could destroy all his efforts for reforms. In addition, he got married in 1525 to Katharina von Bora (1499–1552)—an important step in his development as a man and a reformer—but also one that only further fueled his critics who jeered about the monk becoming a spouse. Luther took the whole spring of 1525 to stew on his answer against Erasmus, as his letters reveal, with several allusions to this issue,^d but he had no time. As late as 27 September 1525, Luther wrote to Nicholas Hausmann (c. 1478–1538):⁵ “I am now fully engaged in confuting Erasmus.”^e Not long after, in December, the *De servo arbitrio* (*The Bondage of the Will*) was published.

^a WA Br 3:368, 30–31 (No. 789).

^b WA Br 3:373, 6–8 (No. 793).

^c WA Br 3:386, 207–15 (No. 797).

^d See for example WA Br 3:462, 6 (No. 847): “I must [write] against the Free will.” WA Br 3:462, 6 (No. 789).

^e WA Br 3:582, 5 (No. 926).

4. Georg Spalatin (1484–1545) was Luther’s friend and a counselor/diplomat of the Elector of Saxony.

5. A Lutheran preacher in Anhalt-Dessau, superintendent, and teacher—from Bavaria but with the call in Bohemia—Hausmann was interested in the worship reforms and actively corresponded with Luther.

The treatise is important on four accounts: (1) as a witness of the serious intellectual debates in the Reformation time; (2) as a contribution to the developing Lutheran teaching on the Holy Scripture; (3) on free will; and (4) on God. Concerning the culture of debate in which Luther operated, one sees Luther acting as someone who wanted to show his own humanist education. No text of his is as full of allusions to antic traditions as *De servo arbitrio* is. Luther wanted to show Erasmus and, even more, the public that he was not intellectually inferior, even if he, in a figure of humility, confessed his own limitations. And he did not hide the main difference: while Erasmus tried to open the discussion and left it to his readers to decide which position would be right, Luther impressed upon his readers that the struggle was about the truth and that it was urgent to come to the conclusion that Luther himself clearly suggested.

Luther's absolute conviction about what was right lay in his doctrine of Scripture. Against Erasmus, who had maintained that the question of free will could not be decided just on the basis of the Bible, Luther stressed the clarity imbedded in Scripture: if human beings did not understand Scripture satisfactorily, this was not the failure of Scripture but of the human reason, which was not able to understand the depth of God's truth. With these passages, Luther laid the grounds for the fundamental Lutheran understanding of the infallibility of Scripture and its centrality in Lutheran theology, especially prominent in the so-called Lutheran orthodoxy.⁶

Luther's position on the main question seems easy to summarize—and yet it is not. There is no question at all that he upheld his early conviction that human beings do not have free will. But he tried to reconcile this with the human experience, which calls on individuals to be able to decide on many things in everyday life. Luther thus stressed that his denial of the free will pertained to the issue of salvation, while in other areas of life, not relevant for this fundamental existential matter, free will could be acknowledged. Luther's conclusions have continued to stir reflection and debate among Lutherans over the centuries and continue even today. Luther's argument on the matter of bound/free will poses a challenge and an invitation for constructive contemporary theology.

The same can be said about the fourth question: Luther's doctrine of God. He introduces the distinction of the revealed

6. Lutheran orthodoxy refers to a period from the compilation of the 1580 *Book of Concord* to the Age of Enlightenment.

and the hidden God to make clear that a Christian must focus on God as shown in Jesus Christ rather than speculating about God's potency in general. Depending on one's own convictions, one can see this as one of Luther's deepest spiritual insights, or as a speculative idea, leading to a destruction of a consistent image of God. However, the idea is rooted in Luther's early conversations with his confessor Johann von Staupitz (c. 1460–1524),⁷ who was instrumental in directing Luther's mind and attention to move from the fear of predestination⁸ to trust in the Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

These basic ideas are part of a long and sometimes confusing text that Luther completed hastily. The original Latin text was addressed to the learned scholars, but soon Luther's colleague and the Wittenberg city pastor, Justus Jonas (1493–1555), provided a German translation to make it known also for the broader public. Erasmus himself was mainly disturbed with Luther's style. He criticized Luther's ferocity, idiosyncrasy, and even malice^f and wrote his answer, *A Defense of the Diatribe (Hyperaspistes diatribae)*, which was published in two volumes in 1526 and 1527. Again, external challenges and his inner reluctance prevented Luther from returning the favor with his new answer. Thus the debate eventually petered out between the two, while the issue did not die.

The consequences of this relatively brief public debate were immense: many humanists retreated from Luther because of his intransigent manner of debating. The coinciding Peasants' Wars made things even worse. Luther's glory failed; the former hero became a representative of intellectual headiness. Nevertheless, the text of *De servo arbitrio*, read independently from its immediate context, provides an abundance of theological insights for new generations of theologians to address the fundamental concerns about human freedom, God's omnipotence, and the premise of the God–human relationship—and thus, naturally, the question about salvation.

In the text of *The Bondage of the Will* that follows, several cuts have been made in order to provide a representative portion of the whole. The following symbol [. . .] is used to indicate where content has been edited out.

7. Staupitz was a university preacher, the Vicar-General of the Augustinians in Germany, and Luther's abbot and spiritual father who had a significant influence on his theology of grace. See Franz Posset, *The Front-Runner of the Catholic Reformation: The Life and Works of Johann von Staupitz* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2003).

8. The concept of predestination, rooted in Romans 9–11, was shaped by Augustine. To him, all human beings formed a mass of perdition after the fall. But with divine incomprehensible volition, God decided to save some of them by no reason than God's good will alone, which on the other hand meant there was no other reason why the other human beings should not be preserved.