

The Blessings of Baptism: An Examination of the Doctrine of the Will (in particular, Luther vs. Erasmus, and application)

[Minnesota District Spring Pastoral Conference, St. Cloud, Minnesota, April 16, 1996]

by Arnold J. Koelpin

Introduction

Dear colleagues in the holy ministry,

In calling for an essay on the nature of the will of man, you have touched a nerve. In our day and age we are consumed with studies that dissect the human being inside and out. School curricula are dotted with studies in anthropology, psychology, sociology, and the like. The delicate interrelationship of our inner and outer self fill the newspapers and courtrooms with hotly contested psychosomatic insights. Of the three ideological bombshells dropped on Christianity in the last two centuries by Darwin, Marx, and Freud, it was Freud who opened new vistas to understand the inner self apart from divine influence. In an age of scientific advancements people are amazed by people's potential for both good and evil.

But, according to Luther scholar Eberhard Juengel, there is a consequence of today's scientific studies on human nature that is easily overlooked. He writes: The study of "anthropology is itself a decidedly modern science. Paradoxically, however, the growing inability to make definitive statements about humanity parallels its emergence as a separate scientific discipline. The more we know about humanity, the less we can say what it is. And the less we understand the nature of humanity, the more senseless existence as such appears. ...Humanity cannot be defined, *homo defineri nequit*—this is the basic conviction of modern anthropology" (Juengel 44f).

For good reason, therefore, our study highlights the Christian view of man at its nerve center. To face the world with the message that we stand impotent before God defies the everyday experience of people's abilities. As a result, human potential movements have sprung up like mushrooms in the Christian church in the name of God. From Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral to the spread of Pentecostalism across the globe, preachers and parishioners are drawing from the inside out to come to God. Decision theology is based on the ability of a person's will to make faith commitments to God. The altar call only underlines the exercise of that will.

To gainsay the human potential in the arena of religion seems to dehumanize us at the core of our being. A university professor voiced that perplexity when he said thoughtfully, "How can you say that even the good things we do are evil and unacceptable in coming to God? Aren't you saying, in effect, that good is evil because our will is bound to sin? Doesn't that view of our will destroy all semblance of morality? My experience tells me otherwise. I know Buddhists that live more respectable lives than Christians. Would a just God discriminate?"

Our preaching and pastoral care demand that we give answers. In mission work at home and abroad, we meet people who want to know about themselves and about God, and how this jibes with their own notions. We need to give a testimony from the Scriptures that is clear, forthright, personal, and true. Luther's insistence that Christ's work means nothing if it were not meant "for you" highlights the personal direction of God's work and of our mission. Our mission

is evangelical and pastoral. In bringing people to the knowledge of the truth, Christians teach that our human will is intimately bound up with God's loving will toward us as revealed in the holy Gospel.

A. Bound to Sin

Our modern experience is not unique. Early Christians already faced these questions. As they witnessed to the pagan society, they struggled to express their Christian faith in confessing terms. So God was a *triune* God and Jesus Christ was God *incarnate*, expressions they carved out in the Nicene and Athanasian creeds to fit the Bible Word.

But it was given to St. Augustine to clarify in confessional terms what Scripture says about the nature of man. To do so, Augustine placed the term *original sin* on the table at the center of the church's testimony. In coining the term *de peccato originali* to counteract Pelagius, Augustine put the accent on the will of man. For Augustine the will drives a person's actions in life—his choices, his desires, his intents. The will embraces our memory and intellect, and it has the quality of love, the desire to be reunited with God. Ever since Augustine set the stage, the doctrine of the will has become a battleground of Christian teaching and practice.

In this brief time slot we cannot unfold the debate on the doctrine of man from Augustine to Luther, as profitable or frustrating as that historical journey might be for our understanding. If we had been a mouse in a monastery, we might have listened to the learned discussions and distinctions made by such note worthies as Aquinas and Duns Scotus. They jogged back and forth on the checkerboard of Aristotle. Aquinas holding that the will is subordinate to the intellect; Duns arguing for the primacy of the will in making human value judgments (Seeberg, II, 103,148)

But it remained to Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther to take the debate on the will of man into the public arena in an epoch-making way. Luther recognized that fact from the beginning. He freely admitted that Erasmus had gone after the jugular [*lat. jugulum* in WA 38:786,30]. It was to be a fight to the finish. At stake was the validity of Biblical theology over against humanistic philosophy. At issue was whether people possessed a free will before God or a will enslaved by sin and dead to God. And Luther commended the learned scholar for not piddling around with silly side issues as had his previous Catholic opponents.

"I praise you highly for this also," Luther wrote with sincere flattery, "that unlike all the rest you alone have attacked the real issue, the essence of the matter in dispute, and have not wearied me with irrelevancies about the papacy, purgatory, indulgences, and such trifles... You and you alone have seen the question on which everything hinges, and have aimed at the vital spot [*jugulum*]; for which I sincerely thank you" (LW 33:294).

This high praise masked Luther's evangelical intent. For him the question of the enslaved will was not open for debate or discourse, as little as were the subjects of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. These matter were settled by Scripture, they were articles of faith, and therefore the doctrine of the bound will was as clear as the Scriptures it reflected (LW 33, 295).

From the outset of his writing on *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther laid the foundation of faith on the Bible testimony and not on human analysis. He chided the Biblical Humanist for taking the skeptics position on this teaching because his mind, his experience, and his desire to keep peace in the church led him to take "no delight in assertions" (LW 33:20-24) "The Holy Ghost is no Skeptic," Luther wrote, "and it is not doubts or mere opinions that he has written in our hearts, but assertions more sure and certain than life itself and all experience" (Ibid, 24).

1. Freedom to Choose?

What was Erasmus' hang up? Two issues go to the heart of the debate for this brilliant scholar—two issues that are bound to come up when we talk to people about Christian faith. They are the questions of freedom and responsibility.

Permit an aside at this point. At the Lutheran University of Erlangen in Bavaria, a seminar course was posted as “Original sin?” In separate sessions the doctrine of original sin was viewed historically by professors of each theological discipline. The result of the seminar was reportedly twofold: 1. The doctrine of original sin was said to be an invention of St. Augustine, and 2. This classical teaching was said not square with the Bible. Why? Because the Scripture's basic analogy is that we are responsible for what we do, and therefore God does not let us off the hook and will judge us accordingly. Simply stated the reasoning is this: If, as Luther taught, our will is enslaved, what happens to our human freedom and accountability?

Erasmus picks up on this question. His sense of basic morality as encoded in the Ten Commandments led him to ask the obvious: Why would God command “You shall” without expecting that “You can”? [LW 33:128] To say that you must without the possibility of doing what is asked, not only seems unfair. It leaves us morally irresponsible. We have to be able to choose whether to steal or not to steal, whether to worship God or not worship God. Robbed of the ability to choose good from evil, we would be left no moral choice. And God himself could not hold us accountable for our actions.

The only human alternative to this predicament is to throw up our hands in despair. Robbed of our personal freedom to choose, we must act as we do by chance, not by choice. Then we would no longer be in control of our actions. And such a deterministic view of life was unacceptable and repugnant to Christian teaching.

But for Erasmus the theological alternative to this dilemma was even worse. Robbed of free choice, we must act as we do because God controls our life by divine omnipotence. Then we do everything of necessity. We don't really lead our own lives. We become no more than mere puppets and God is pulling the strings. Everything we do in life is determined, or even predetermined, by God, even to the point of death. How ridiculous! “Does the good Lord deplore the death of his people which he himself works in them?” Erasmus asks with sarcastic rhetoric, and then explodes, “This seems absurd!” (LW 33:139)

What was the scholars line of thinking? As Erasmus saw it, it is absolutely essential that people should have freedom to choose, especially, the freedom to choose God's grace or to refuse it. He himself defined free choice in this way. “By free choice in this place we mean a power of the human will by which a person can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from them” (LW 33:103). For that reason the scholarly linguist chose his words carefully. In making his case for human freedom and responsibility, he avoided the Latin word for will (*voluntas*) and, as Luther before him, stayed with the Latin word for choice (*arbitrium*)—even though his definition shows how the two interact.

The Latin word *arbitrium* envisions two or more things out there which one has to arbitrate, that is, to make a choice or judgment in order to master the matter at issue. For this reason the title of Erasmus' work *De Serve Arbitrio Diatribe* is best translated *An Essay concerning Free Choice*. The question of choice and decision is the issue around which the debate raged.

In his analysis Erasmus clearly was arguing from the thought world of the ability of a human being to choose in matters of faith, no matter how weak or enabled by divine grace his will may be. In the discussion over free choice, the religion of the human potential stood at loggerheads with the doctrine of the enslaved will, as clearly as human works differed from the gift of faith. In Luther's eyes there was no middle ground between them. Free choice before God and the enslaved will were as diametrically opposed to one another as are God and Satan. And Luther said as much:

Thus the human will is placed between the two [God and Satan] like a beast of burden. If God rides it, it wills and goes where God wills, as the Psalm says: 'I am become as a beast [before you] and am always with you' [Psalm 73:22]. If Satan rides it, it wills and goes where Satan wills; nor can it choose to run to either of the two riders or seek him out, but the riders themselves contend for the possession and control of it (LW 33:65f).

Thus we live our lives between God and the Devil. Such a reading of Scripture seemed to Erasmus to be too absurd. From his interpretation of Scripture, he rejected the enslaved will out of hand in favor of free choice. Now it remained for Luther to explain himself and to clarify the issues of freedom and responsibility from his newly-won insights into the Gospel of free grace.

2. Free Will, a Misnomer

Writing on the nature of the will was not new to Dr. Luther, a devoted Augustinian. The subject had occupied his pen ever since the *Ninety-five Theses* put him on the defensive. Under pressure from Rome he clarified his stance before his fellow monks in Heidelberg by opening up the doctrine of the will. A reading of the *Heidelberg Theses* shows that Luther dug deeply into the Scriptures. Even today, perhaps especially today, these theses should be recommended reading for everyone who studies the nature of man.

In the Heidelberg theses Luther takes up the doctrine of man according to the Biblical paradigm on human will in four states. That is, the will as it exists

1. Before the Fall when our original parents had a *free* will, potentially open to sin or not,
2. After the Fall when our will is so *bound* to sin that it is impossible for us not to sin,
3. After rebirth when our still sinful will is *freed* by the righteousness of Christ, and
4. In heaven when our will is *perfected* and forever free from sin.

In the theses Luther expands on the nature of the will in the second state, that is, our will after the fall into sin. Clarity on this point, he felt, is necessary for understanding Christian teaching. It is the background for the theology of the cross as opposed to the theology of glory. Clarity on this point helps us to know ourselves as we really are and to know God as he really is, to know what we can do before God and what God has done for us in Christ.

To know the nature of the unregenerated will is foundational for Gospel preaching and, I suspect, the reason why this essay was assigned. For what we teach about man's will after the fall describes every baby born into the world. It describes the life of every person on earth apart from Christ's redemption. It describes the reason why Christ came to our rescue. It is the point at which a flood of questions come from those who want to know what Christians teach about the nature of man and the work of God.

Luther is well aware of all these implications at Heidelberg when he takes up the question of the will and asserts categorically that "free will, after the fall, is nothing but a word" (LW 31:48f; WA 1:354 *arbitrium*). It is simply a misnomer. To say otherwise goes contrary to what Jesus himself taught when he said, "I tell you the truth, every one who commits sin is a

slave to sin” (John 8:34). Six years later Erasmus took up the cudgel against Luther on this very point and challenges the contention that free choice is a misnomer.

In response, Luther reasserts what he had written at Heidelberg. The enslaved will is Biblical truth, as contrary as it seems to the mind. But more serious still, in Luther’s eyes, are the consequences of deluding ourselves that we possess a free will before God. As he had made clear at Heidelberg, we actually compound our guilt by imagining we are able to draw good out of a sinful heart. For as long as the human will “is doing what is within it (*facere quod in se est*),” Luther concludes, “it is committing deadly sin” (Trans. in *Dillenberger*, 502; also LW 33:48).

This self delusion has serious consequences. To make claims on our inner goodness before God as if what we do were a matter of merit, Luther concludes, merely adds sin to sin and makes a person doubly guilty. We are guilty in the first place because sin has separated us from God and we lack true fear and faith in God. But when we presume to act on our inborn sense of right and wrong, of good and evil, we become self righteous and put our self-chosen deeds in God’s face rather than our sin. It just doesn’t wash, as Jeremiah graphically put it to Israel in the name of God, “For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water” (Jeremiah 2:13; LW 31:50).

B. Free Choice and Responsibility

To bring clarity out of confusion, Luther seeks to explain the problem of freedom and responsibility. He approaches Erasmus’ question of free choice from three directions. He contrasts the freedom in which *God* acts with our free choice in civic matters and with our lack of freedom before God. This interaction between God and us raises the important questions of input. If God acts toward us in absolute freedom doesn’t that limit our human freedom and, as Erasmus feared, make us into play actors? Or, better still, as Erasmus would have it, isn’t the way God acts toward us in the final analysis contingent on the way we act in life?

1. God is in Control

The questions beg a reply and Brother Martin takes them up one by one from Scripture’s perspective. For Luther it is necessary to approach the question of freedom, first of all, from God’s point of view as the all-powerful Creator. For what makes God to be God is that no will or law is above him. God acts as he does toward us in absolute freedom because he is the omnipotent creator of all things whose royal will knows and wills all that happens according to his good pleasure. Nothing happens in life without his will and determination. “Free choice is plainly a divine term,” Luther observes, “and can properly be applied to none but the Divine Majesty; for he alone can do and does (as the psalmist says [Ps. 115:3]) whatever he pleases in heaven and on earth” (LW 33:68). Thus God is in control and works all in all in life.

Such absolute power and independence blows our minds. It simply won’t do for us to play God and try to bring him down to our level of understanding. To ask the critical question, as Erasmus did, “Why some are touched by the law and others not, so that some receive and others scorn the offer of grace” lies hidden in God’s will and is for Luther “by far the most awe-inspiring secret of the Divine Majesty, reserved for himself alone” (LW 33:139).

To follow up with questions such as, “Why does God not cease from that movement of omnipotence by which the will of the ungodly is moved to go on being evil,” or to ask, as every

pastor has been asked at least once in his ministry, “Why [God] permitted Adam to fall, and why he creates us all infected with the same sin when he could either have preserved Adam or created us from another stock or from a seed which he had first purged,” Luther says, “is to desire that for the sake of the ungodly God should cease to be God” (LW 33:180f).

As natural as these questions may be to our human inquiry, they knock on the secrets of God’s divine majesty. We are trying to go to a place where no human being is able to go. The whys and hows of *God* are the unanswerable questions of life. They lie hidden with God himself in the inner recesses of his will. When contemplating the ways of God to man—his absolute freedom from all contingencies—we must put our finger to our lips and say with St. Paul: “Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!” (Romans 11:33). It is enough for us to worship God in his absolute independence and freedom and humbly to confess with Luther:

God is he for whose will no cause or ground may be laid down as its rule and standard. For nothing is on a level with it or above it, but it is itself the rule for all things. If any rule or standard, or cause or ground, existed for it, it could no longer be the will of God. What God wills is not right because he ought, or was bound, so to will. On the contrary, what takes place must be right because he so wills it. Causes and grounds are laid down for the will of the creature, but not for the will of the Creator—unless you set another Creator over him! (LW 33:181, as translated in Dillenberger, 197)

Thus the dear Doctor makes a basic and critical distinction in pursuing the question of free choice. He distinguishes between God’s hidden will (*deus absconditus*) and his revealed will (*deus revelatus*), that is, between God in his majesty and God in his Word, between God nude and God clothed. “God in his own nature is to be left alone,” Luther appeals, and he begs all of us who like Erasmus seek to limit God’s free choice to drop the inquiry. “In this regard, we have nothing to do with him, nor does he wish us to deal with him. We have to do with him as clothed and displayed in his Word” (LW 33:139 as in Dillenberger, 191).

In distinguishing God from God in this way, Luther knew exactly where he was headed. From the beginning of his work on the enslaved will, Luther observed that “you cannot possibly know what free choice is unless you know what the human will can do, and what God does” (LW 33:36). The problem we have with the questions of the will and free choice comes from the fact that God deals with us in contraries, contrary to our will and our way of doing things. Why? Simply because our sinful nature cannot take God nude in his unapproachable majesty as Moses once learned first hand on Mount Sinai. (Exodus 33:19-23, as carried out in the Heidelberg Theses)

2. His Control is Hidden From Our Eyes

For this reason God hides his control in the events of life, as a butterfly is hidden in a cocoon. What we observe with our eyes masks God’s actions. Therefore he comes to us in a way that makes room for faith which grasps the ungraspable. In a double-take on God’s work among his creatures, Luther calls our attention to the difference between God’s hidden will and his revealed will. In both cases God hides himself.

In his majesty God hides from us the unanswerable *whys* and *hows* of life. We simply do not know how to match God’s omnipotent control with the fact that some are saved and others are not. In our frustration we make the mistake of imagining that it finally falls back upon our human freedom to choose for or against God’s will. Even worse, as blind sinners, we make an

attempt to inquire into God's hidden will and try read his mind. If this were possible, God would be no greater than our mind and we would be God. We would have reduced God to a system.

But God is God. He acts toward us in absolute freedom and omnipotence. And we can rightly say that he controls all things. He is really and actively present in all that happens. He is the active doer in all human decisions and happenings. He is the fixed point from which all things began and toward which all things are headed. He alone is the creator and we are his creatures. He alone is without law and control. But his control remains hidden from our eyes, like the butterfly in a cocoon.

Only by faith can we understand what is hidden to the human eye. And Luther steers us in that direction. "It is necessary that everything which is believed should be hidden," Luther states as a matter of fact. That is exactly why God deals with us in contraries. "Nothing is more deeply hidden than under an object, perception, or experience which is contrary to it," he observes, "Thus when God makes alive he does it by killing, when he justifies he does it by making men guilty, when he exalts to heaven he does it by bringing down to hell, as Scripture says" 'The Lord kills and brings to life' [1 Sam 2:61]" (in LW 33:62).

Now we know why God revealed himself to us in his Word, in a promise, in the cross. In the cross God comes out of secrecy and reveals his will to us in a most peculiar way. Contrary to all human experience, God reveals himself by hiding himself. That seems mighty strange to us. Revelation normally occurs when something comes out of hiding. But when God comes out of secrecy, he hides himself. That is exactly what St. Paul told the Corinthians: "We speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been *hidden* and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ...But God *revealed* it to us by his Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:7-10).

Now we understand what Luther means by God Clothed. Because of our sin God wrapped a veil around himself. The creator came in the form of a creature. He put on human clothes and came in the form of a man. Already before time began, God's secret plan was to reveal himself by hiding himself. From eternity God planned the coming of Christ under the veil of flesh to suffer and die on the cross for all who had no other choice but to live and die in their sin.

But God remains hidden in the cross. As Luther had once set forth in the Heidelberg Thesis 20, "He deserves to be called an theologian who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross." What does this mean? It means that "it does not help anyone nor does him any good to recognize God in his glory and majesty unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross" (LW 31:52f).

The cross is God's great contrary that knocks out all free choice. Why? Because in the cross, God acted beyond our will and choosing. In the cross God made the dead alive. He took our sin, our death, our impotence as his lot. And he gave us his righteousness, his strength, and his life as ours. For the cross is not glorious to the human eye. Like the electric chair, it is an instrument of torture and death.

In the cross God shows our will for what it is—enslaved to sin and dead to God. In the cross God makes us appear before him nude and impotent. He exposes our total lack of freedom to come to him on our own. The cross is the ultimate preachment of God's anger over sin. In the cross God uproots the root sin from which all the fruit sins grow, our pride and selfishness, our disobedience and debauchery, our hatred and selfish desires.

But God hides himself under the contrary of the cross for a reason. Unseen to all human eyes and beyond all human choice and comprehension, "*God* was in Christ reconciling the world

to himself.” Not the human will nor free choice has access to God hidden in the cross. God is both the initiator and the fulfiller. For the mask behind which God is hiding himself in the cross is his love for us. The cross is God’s ultimate control over life. And this mystery would have remained forever hidden if it were not for the work of the Spirit of the Living God. The Holy Spirit lifts the veil for us to see God himself hidden in the cross. By the gift of faith the will that was the Devil’s riding horse becomes the instrument of God. Our still sinful will is freed by the righteousness of Christ.

3. Responsible Action

As lovely as this gospel sounds, does it really answer Erasmus’ concern about free will? Does not God’s sole action effectively eliminate the will of man? If God controls all things are we merely going through the motions in life without a will of our own? Or if the human will is a riding horse either of God or Satan, who is riding it and what are we to do? Is our will merely a plaything between two superpowers?

Our experience tells us otherwise. In life *people* are the doers and decision makers, not God. People are the crafters of the future, the doers of good deeds and evil, the humanitarians or destroyers in society. The decisions of people and nations and individuals determine the course of events. History is replete with such stories. If Christianity teaches that we have no free choice and God controls all in all, then what remains of human freedom and responsibility?

To answer, Luther turns the perspective around from God’s point of view to ours. As we view the question of free choice from the underside, we are confronted with a paradox (LW 33:64ff). In dealing with us, God does not take away our freedom to act. God is the essential doer in all that happens because that is what makes God to be God. But in our daily life God does not make puppets of us or rob us of the freedom to act. How are we to understand this seeming contradiction?

In a striking passage Luther takes up the issue of human freedom. He frankly admits to Erasmus that as creatures of God we have a so-called free will and are responsible for what we do. But the term is loaded and deceptive and we should use it only in an improper sense. It is loaded because free choice does not pertain to our relationship to God. It is deceptive because free choice is limited to matters below us.” “A person should know,” Luther says with measured precision, “that with regard to his faculties and possessions he has the right to use, to do, or to leave undone, according to his free choice” (LW 33:70).

The scenario is this. Far from being robots, we can and do make daily decisions with regards to things below us. We decide whether to marry or not to marry, whether to flee the plague or not flee the plague, whether to chop down a tree or to let it stand. We are free to choose, even though our will is dead to God, enslaved by sin, and bears sin’s consequences. In this way our deeds can be judged. God lets us be ourselves with all our foibles and frustrations, however limited our choices and actions might be in the light of God’s judgment.

Thus individuals, peoples, nations, and tribes act and make decisions that have consequences. In all we do God expects us to act, and to act responsibly. In every situation of life we act according to the measure of wisdom given us by virtue of reason and conscience. God gave us Ten Commandments to guide us. On the surface we have the potential to act decently, morally and ethically, even to the point of giving reverence to god by whatever name we call him. But this action is limited to things “below us,” to the earthly civic realm and receives God’s temporal blessings only there. In this world we act, and we live with the consequences of our

actions. But at bottom—and this is Luther’s major concern, it is either a world of trust in God or a world of unbelief.

Faith or unbelief—one or the other determines our actions and our eternal destiny. The first is a free gift of God’s Spirit and clings to his free grace. The other is a product of our sinful will and celebrates our free choice. Therefore Luther brings the discussion of the proper use of the term “free choice” to an end by asserting with Biblical force: “in relation to God, or in matters pertaining to salvation or damnation, a person has no free choice, but is captive, subject and slave either to the will of God or the will of Satan” (LW 33:70).

4. The Will as a Riding Horse

We have come full circle. Denial of access to God by free choice raises the most decisive question of all. How then do we stand in the presence of God? And what does Brother Martin mean by asserting that our will is either God’s riding horse or Satan’s? This unsettling observation is the flash point in the entire discussion for Luther the theologian. It is his final answer to all human speculation about free will, and it looks squarely at two basic Bible truths, as contrary as they might appear to the human mind.

In the entire discussion Erasmus fails to understand the depths of our sin and the greatness of God’s grace. For this reason the function of the Law and the Gospel go right over his head. In his analysis of free choice Erasmus was arguing from the thought world of human morality. His fatal flaw was that he could not extract free choice from the human ability to do law works. Earth-bound reason led him to conclude that if God commanded us to live a life acceptable to him, we must have the inner potential to do so. Ours is the choice. By free choice we actually ride our own will either for God and against Satan, or for Satan and against God.

The great humanist clearly bases his case on a law attitude. It is that legal attitude by which all people live since Adam’s fall. For back then Satan made a promise and kept it: “If you obey me, you will be *like* God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 2). Adam and his children gained a good-evil knowledge—but at a price. They separated from God, lost the image of God, and scuttled the source from which all true goodness, righteousness and holiness flows (Ephesians 4:24).

Mankind was now fated to live by the knowledge of good and evil. From that fateful time in Eden good-evil morality was to be the world religion of peoples and nations and tribes, the religion of natural man, the religion of all civic life and secular education. It is a religion of human performance, of free will and free choice. Ignorant of God, we are turned back upon ourselves (*incurvatus in se*). Freedom from God is bondage to self. “Man cannot by nature want God to be God,” Luther once wrote, “but instead wants to be God himself, and God not to be God” (WA 1:225, 1f).

At this point Luther begins his instruction by once again invoking the contraries in God’s Word. “It is Satan’s work,” Luther states, “to prevent people from recognizing their plight and to keep them presuming that they can do everything they are told” (LW 33:130). As long as Satan rides our will, he will convince us of free choice before God as he did in Eden. He does not want us to know God as revealed and preached in his Word. In an incisive passage Luther chides Erasmus for attempting to push God and Satan out of the picture and to steer a neutral course between them:

You, who imagine the human will as something standing on neutral ground and left to its own devices, find it easy to imagine also that there can be an endeavor of the will in

either direction, because you think of both God and the devil as a long way off, and as if they were only observers of that mutable free will. For you do not believe that they are movers and inciters of a servile will and engaged in a most bitter conflict with one another. ...For either the kingdom of Satan in man means nothing, and then Christ must be a liar. Or else, if his kingdom is as Christ describes it, free choice must be nothing but a captive beast of burden for Satan, which can only be set free if the devil is first cast out by the finger of God [Luke 11:20]. (LW33:237).

Because the neutral middle ground is an illusion, Luther puts us face to face with God as revealed in his Word. There God lets us know in no uncertain terms two things about his will and ours: 1. He tells us that as far as God's will is concerned he "wills all men to be saved" [I Timothy 2:4], and 2. "It is right to say, 'If God does not desire our death, the fact that we perish must be imputed to our own will.' ...The fault is in the will that does not admit him, as he says in Matthew 23 [:37]: 'How often would I have gathered your children, and you would not!'" (LW 33:140).

If there is no logic to the fact that the merciful God wills all to be saved, yet not all are saved because of a defect in their will, so be it. The Scriptures reveal these contraries to us beyond our comprehension. Let reason be taken captive by faith. We have no right to ask "why that majesty of his does not remove or change this defect of our will in all people, since it is not in man's power to do so, or why he imputes this defect to man, when a person cannot help having it" (Ibid). It is enough that God's Word warns us about the impotence of our enslaved will in coming to faith.

That is the very reason why God gave us the Law. Through the Law God unmasks Satan and his power over us. "The work of Moses or a lawgiver," Luther points out, "is...to make man's plight plain to him by means of the law and thus to break and confound him by self-knowledge, so as to prepare him for grace and send him to Christ that he may be saved" (LW 33:130f). "The words of the law are spoken, therefore, not to affirm the power of the will, but to enlighten blind reason and make it see that its own light is no light, and that the virtue of the will is no virtue" (LW 33:127).

That is exactly what the Apostle Paul meant, Luther indicates, when he writes, "Through the law comes the knowledge of sin" [Rom. 3:20]. So the law does not confer any will-power, as Erasmus wrongly imagined, but it furnishes us the knowledge of our sin-bound will and its impotence to do what God commands. At this point Luther takes the great teacher into the lecture hall for a lesson in Biblical grammar. Erasmus and all of us need to understand the use of the imperative and indicative moods of the verb form. When God gives a command in the imperative mood, Luther explains, "man is shown what he ought to do, not what he can do."

If Erasmus objects that the Ten Commandments are given in the future indicative, "You *shall have* no other gods," or "You *shall* not kill or commit adultery," Luther explains that "the Hebrew frequently uses the future indicative for the imperative." If the Ten Commandments "were taken indicatively (as they are expressed)," Luther continues, "they would be promises of God, and since God cannot lie, the result would be that no man would sin, and then there would be no need of them as precepts" (LW 33:125f).

The lesson done, the application follows. Why did God give the Law? The answer is simply that "blind self-confident man may through them come to know his own diseased state of impotence" (LW 33:128). Through Moses the enslaved will is unveiled for a reason. By knocking out free choice God leads us to a knowledge and appreciation of his free choice in the work of Christ.

How different and distinct from the Law is the work of God's free grace. When God says, "I desire not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn and live" [Ezek. 18:23, 32], this is not an expression of the Law. And all moralists, like Erasmus, misread God when they say that God means this: "I do not want a person to sin mortally or become a sinner liable to death, but rather that he may turn from his sin, if he has committed any, and so live" (LW 33:137). In such an interpretation the devil is still the rider, not God.

The truth of the matter is that this evangelical Word is "the sweetest comfort," the loveliest thing in Ezekiel." For note it well: God does not say, "I desire not the death of a man; God says, "I desire not the death of a *sinner*." This plainly shows, Luther writes in a glorious finish, that God is speaking of "the penalty of sin, ...the fear of death. And he lifts up and comforts a sinner from his affliction and despair, to give hope of pardon and salvation, so that a person may be converted and live at peace" (LW 33:136f).

Thus God in grace rides our will, freed from sin by Christ the Crucified, still balky because of our sinful nature, but living by the forgiveness of sins. In Christ our once enslaved will has become a "slave to righteousness," as St. Paul explains in his great exposition of the meaning of baptism in Romans 6.

We have come a long way in looking at the doctrine of man. With Luther we have learned to rest the case in God's hands and in his Word, to let God be God and man be man. Our faith-born self knowledge now turns to worship of God, as we join the dear Doctor in his wrap up:

Since God has taken my salvation out of my hands into his, making me depend on his choice not mine, and has promised to save me, not by my own work or exertion, but by his grace and mercy, I am assured and certain both that he is faithful and will not lie to me, and also that he is too great and powerful for any demons or any adversaries to be able to break him or snatch me from him [John 10:28f]. ...So it comes that, if not all, some and indeed many are saved, whereas by the power of free choice none at all would be saved, but all would perish altogether. What is more, we are also certain and sure that we please God, not by the merit of our own doing, but by the favor of his mercy promised us, and that if we do less than we should or do it badly, he does not hold this against us, but in a fatherly way pardons and corrects us. [LW 33:289]

To this we say, Amen! So it shall be.

C. Human Potential in Modern Guise

As we today spread the Word, we thank Luther for his Bible work. It helps us understand where people are coming from as we face the Erasmian understanding of man in modern guises. Following the Scriptures we know that to turn a person's attitude from free choice to free grace is God's work through his revealed Word.

Scripture indeed testifies that our sinfulness is "so deep a corruption that nothing sound or uncorrupted has survived in man's body or soul, in his inward and outward powers" (FC: Ep 1:8). Scripture describes the total depravity of our will before God in clear and uncertain terms. In Genesis [8:21] Moses states the case pointedly: "Every inclination of [man's] heart is evil from childhood." Likewise the Apostle Paul instructs us on the depths of our corruption: "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Romans 8:7). The result? Blinded by our own sinfulness, we are unable to recognize the depth of the damage "by a rational process, but only from God's Word" (FC:Ep 1:9).

Following the Confessors we need to recall Scripture's teaching on the root sin as we face today's human potential movements in many guises. Secular education does not have a corner on spreading the gospel of the potential, of the, human will in spiritual matters. Despite all disclaimers much that passes under the name Christian or evangelical attempts in some way to draw on our inner strengths, our thinking and choosing, to come to God on our own.

The Roman Catholic theologian, Thomas Merton, does just that. He describes our earthly journey as a reverse journey with a false start:

If we were to return to God, and find ourselves in Him, we must reverse Adam's journey, we must go back by the way he came. The path lies through the center of our soul. Adam withdrew into himself from God and then passed through himself and went forth into creation. We must withdraw ourselves (in the right and Christian sense) from exterior things, and pass through the center of our souls to find God. We must recover possession of our true selves by liberation from anxiety and fear and inordinate desire. And when we have gained possession of our souls, we must learn to "go out" of ourselves to God and to others by supernatural charity. [Merton, 316]

The words of Merton compare favorably with many eastern religions for whom the strengthening of the will by meditation is the way to reunion with the divine.

More subtle in the use of the will is the synergistic approach of many so-called evangelists. With fervid conviction they proclaim a catalog of modern sins and point to Christ as the way to salvation. At the same time, they call on the spiritually dead to muster up strength and with God's help to come to God.

"You've got to take the pencil," a sectarian preacher recently stated as he stood on our doorstep. "God offers us salvation, just as I am offering you this pencil. But you've got to take it to be born again." The object lesson was as striking as it was appealing. But on the strength of God's Word it must be turned down. We have neither the power nor the strength by nature to choose to take God's salvation, nor the will to be reborn. We are dead in trespasses and sins. "As little as a corpse can quicken itself to bodily, earthly life, so little can a man who through sin is spiritually dead raise himself to spiritual life, as it is written, 'When we were dead through our trespasses, he made us alive together with Christ'" (FC:Ep 11:3).

The doorstep conversation called for a response. "Sir, you suggest that I can assist in my rebirth by an act of my will, by accepting God's offer. But that is impossible. Let me explain. Here you are standing before me as big as life. But you did not will or choose to be born; you did not will your first birth. Your father and mother gave you life because of God's command and promise, 'Be fruitful and multiply.'"

"Like your first birth, you cannot will your rebirth. Just like your first birth, it is a gift of God through his Word and promise. By baptism God raises us from death to life, as St. Paul says to the Romans, 'We were therefore buried with [Christ] through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life'" (Romans 6:4).

With God's Word to guide us, we are able to meet the monster of the enslaved will in ourselves and in its many guises. Dear God, we pray, give us your Spirit to believe what you say in your Word. Only through you can we understand and apply the lessons of the, enslaved will and free grace in our ministry.

Works Cited

- Bible = *New International Version*. International Bible Society, 1984.
- FC = "Formula of Concord," as found in *The Book of Concord*. Tappert edition, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959
- LW = *Luther's Works*, American Edition. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972.
- WA = *D. Martin Luther's Werke*. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Weimar, 1883-
Dillenberger, J. *Martin Luther, Selections from his writings*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co, Inc, Anchor Books, 1961.
- Merton, Thomas. "Spirit in Bondage," as found in Neeleemann et al. *Religion for a New Generation*. New York: the Macmillan Co, 1973.
- Seeberg, R. *Textbook of the History of Doctrines*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1956.