

## **Preface:**

If one spends any time in the presence of Reformed lectures, sermons and classes, *Bondage of the Will* by Martin Luther was a work often referenced. When I went to read this book, I had to keep a dictionary and internet browser at hand. There were many words and references that were obscure. The gift of genius was given to Luther and his writings and logic displays this gift. However, to a simple-minded man, it was a chore to read.

I do not praise Luther as anything else than a man who loved God and was loved by God. God gifted him greatly and the gifts of God are for the common good of the believers (1 Cor 12:7). Therefore, we should study the saints of old. Saints, who may be at times difficult to understand or follow. It is to be compared to mining for gold. Much labor is spent seeking that beautiful nugget of knowledge that gives another glimpse into the glory of God.

*Bondage of the Will* was Luther's written response to Erasmus book On Free Will, which Luther refers to frequently as "Diatribes". Erasmus' book was the first public attack on Luther in which he stated that mankind has the ability to choose good or evil. Luther's position was an Augustinian in position, Erasmus' position was semi-Pelagian or Arminian. However, in Luther's Bondage of the Will he was able to show clearly at times Erasmus leaned full Pelagian.

To be clear, Free-Will is used through this book to mean that man has the ability to choose to obey and follow Christ and to do that which is pleasing to the Lord. It appears, as stated in the paragraph above, that Erasmus argued ambiguously. Stating at times this to be done without the help of God and at times that the help of God would be needed (what is called today prevenient grace).

Below are summaries of each section. This is not done perfectly. The purpose of this writing was/is personal. It is for my personal edification to help me focus and learn. This is the result of over 40 hours of work which is not said as a boast but rather, emphasis. The emphasis is on the size of Luther's *Bondage of the Will*.

Each section is written in summary form and is made available to benefit anyone else who may want to seek to read and understand this book. These notes can be used to help you understand and if something is incorrect in my note taking you can correct it and expand.

One of the great things I noticed about *Bondage of the Will* is Luther's logic is extremely sharp. He reasons from a humble place. His sharp recall and wit are to be admired. There may be points where the reader seems to think Luther's reasons is making little progress, however, stick with it for his logic builds up. He will write his orations and keep writing and then there is a crescendo. At this point a beautiful thought is completed and it ties everything together.

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# Summary on the Bondage of the Will

Martin Luther

## Introduction:

This writing is in response to Erasmus with whom Luther had disagreed on this item. Even though history remembers Luther in far greater terms, Martin Luther held Erasmus in high regard as he complimented his status and intellect at various times through the book.

*“You not only by far surpass me in the powers of eloquence, and in genius (which we all concede to you as your desert, and the more so as I am but a barbarian and do all things barbarously)” (p.12) “I willingly and deservedly, arrogate eloquence and genius to you, and derogate it from myself.” (P13)*

Evidently, Luther’s response was slow. He apologizes for the slow response and assures that it was not due to Luther feeling intimidated by Erasmus. Luther asserts that Erasmus’ artful way of discussing the topic of the Human Will was done so well that Luther couldn’t get upset, angry, or incensed at him. Conversely, Erasmus did not introduce anything new on the subject. Everything he had said, had already be said and disproven before. In fact, he had said “Less than the Sophists have said”

Sophist: a paid teacher of philosophy and rhetoric in ancient Greece, associated in popular thought with moral skepticism and specious reasoning. A person who reasons with clever but fallacious arguments.

Luther was under the thoughts that this topic had been delt with many times. Philip Melancthon, both successor and contemporary of Luther, also wrote a book “Concerning Theological Questions”. Luther felt so strongly that this topic had been dealt with thoroughly that it should have been included with the canon of Holy Scripture. This was hyperbole of course.

Luther has a way of pointed humor and making sarcastic statements. *“I greatly feel for your having defiled your most beautiful and ingenious language with such vile trash. . . that such unworthy stuff should be born about in ornaments of eloquence so rare; which is as if rubbish, or dung, should be carried in vessels of gold or silver.”*

Luther compares himself to Erasmus in this way: Luther describes himself as RUDE in speech, but by the grace of God is not rude in understanding. He **does** designate himself in understanding but **does not** designate Erasmus with understanding. While also saying he does not designate himself to be eloquent and genius he gives both of those terms to Erasmus. Luther’s stance is supported by weighty Scriptures.

Luther can support his arguments on the basis of Scripture. If you read the Bible without the Spirit it is no wonder they are driven to and fro like a reed with every wind. He asserts Erasmus arguments are light and trivial. Luther’s slow response was a result of Erasmus’ writing

depressing him. Luther's brothers encouraged him to write a response. He also felt if he stayed silent it would not be right.

**Free will is a downright lie.** *"Like the woman in the gospel, the more it is taken in hand by physicians, the worse it is made."* (p.14)

Luther said, the greater thanks would be given by him to Erasmus if Erasmus gains more information as Luther had gained MORE CONFIRMATION (that his theology of bondage of the will is correct). Luther prays that God would be the Teacher in the midst of both of them. **He hoped that Erasmus would be patient with Luther in his lack of eloquence and that Erasmus would be patient in his ignorance.** (p.15)

### **Erasmus' Preface Reviewed**

**SEC 1:** Luther begins by focusing on the "heads" or chief points in the PREFACE of Erasmus' book.

1. He censures Luther in all his former books.
2. Defines several ASSERTIONS he makes – constant adhering, affirming, confessing, defending and invincibly persevering. This is the teaching of the Scriptures delivered by the Holy Spirit.

Erasmus thought that spending time teaching about free will is not necessary.

Luther spends time on confessions Which ARE assertions. He quotes Romans 10:10, Matthew 10:32; 1Peter 3:15. The Holy Spirit is given to believers from heaven that he may glorify Christ and confess him even unto death. (these are assertions). To die with confession and assertions.

The Holy Spirit is given to us from heaven that we may confess even unto death John 16:8  
Timothy is to reprove poor theology in and out of season 2 Tim 4:2

It is the duty of a believer to make assertions – to teach and to correct bad doctrine.

Luther scolds Erasmus for teaching talking about Free Will is a waste of time.

### **Erasmus' Skepticism (Sec 2)**

Proteus- Ancient Greeks called the God of the Sea Proteus. The "Old Man of the Sea". Constant changeable, mutable, assuming many forms.

Luther's charge to Erasmus is that he is an "all-changeable Proteus". An assertion that his logic is all over the place and not rock solid like the Scriptures.

*"What say you, Erasmus? Is it not enough that you submit your opinion to the Scriptures? Do you submit it to the decrees of the church also? What can the church decree that is not decreed in the Scriptures?"* (p18)

We do not need to understand fully or perfectly all Scriptures in order to follow them. Erasmus prefer to have no argument over doctrine. That all believers should not quarrel over doctrine. If there is disagreement, then we should abandon the discussion.

Erasmus was more concerned over peace in the body of Christ and having no disagreements. This is more important than proper doctrine.

*“it matters not what is believed by any one, any where, if the peace of the world be but undisturbed; and if every one be but allowed, when his life, his reputation, or his interest is at stake, to do as he did, who said, “If they affirm, I affirm, if they deny, I deny.” and to look upon the Christian doctrines as nothing better than the opinions of philosophers and men: and that it is the greatest of folly to quarrel about, contend for, and assert them, as nothing can arise therefrom but contention, and the disturbance of the public peace: “that what is above us, does not concern us.” This, I say, is what your declarations amount to. — Thus, to put an end to our fightings, you come in as an intermediate peace-maker, that you may cause each side to suspend arms, and persuade us to cease from drawing swords about things so absurd and useless.” P.19*

Luther felt that Erasmus had a good intention.

Let us be asserters (defend faith, have doctrine). Let us delight in assertions.

*“The Holy Spirit is not a skeptic, nor are what he has written on our hearts doubts or opinions, but assertions more certain and more firm than life itself and all the human experience.” (p. 20)*

### **SEC 3:**

Erasmus some Christians doctrines are necessary, and some are unnecessary. Luther responds: there are things which we as believers won't know. (Matthew 24:36 the last day; Acts 1:7 only God is to know certain things; John 8:18; 2 Timothy 2:19 God knows who are the elect) There are some things that only God knows.

Luther says there are some things that are hard to understand in Scripture. That we should understand ALL things has frightened some men away from reading the Bible because some of them are indeed hard to understand. Some things are difficult to understand but that does not mean we abandon all Scripture.

*“For who would say that the public fountain is not in the light, because those who are in some dark narrow lane do not see it, when all those who are in the Open market place can see it plainly?” (P.21)*

If we remove the hard to understand things out of the Bible and what do we have? (God is Trinity and Unity, Christ is made into a man, Christ suffered for us and will reign to all eternity) Some things in Scriptures are obscure, some of them are not.

#### **SEC 4:**

Corycian Cavern (Cave) = a Greek cave area place of refuge during war and foreign invaders. A place of sanctuary.

What you adduce (cite as evidence) about the darkness of the Corycian Cavern amounts to nothing. This is the first phrase of section 4. Seems to continue to argument that this topic Luther is exploring IS one that needs exploring even if it may appear as difficult to understand. Just because it is difficult to understand, does not mean we leave it alone.

Christ has opened our understanding of the Scriptures. (Luke 24:45) All Gospel is preached to every creature (Mark 16:15; Col 1:23) All things are written for our instruction (Rom 15:4) All Scripture is inspired from above and is profitable for instruction (2 Tim 3:16)

If we don't understand the Scriptures, it is our own blindness. It is not a fault of the Scriptures.

Luther sees understanding the bondage of the will AGAINST man free willing ability to choose to follow Christ being a FUNDAMENTAL truth. He quotes 2 Cor 3:15, 4:3-4 about the cause of Spiritual blindness.

*With the same rashness any one may cover his own eyes, or go from the light into the dark and hide himself, and then blame the day and the sun for being obscure. Let, therefore, wretched men cease to impute, with blasphemous perverseness, the **darkness and obscurity of their own heart to the all-clear Scriptures of God.** (22)*

Erasmus' writing appeared to make the statement that "His judgements are incomprehensible" refer to Scripture. The pronoun "HIS" Erasmus was saying, points to Scripture. Paul does not say judgements of Scripture are incomprehensible but the judgements of God. (see also Is 40:13) Not who has known the mind of Scripture but who has known mind of the Lord. We can know the mind of the Lord when he allows us (1 Cor 2:10 and 16)

Clearness of Scripture is 2-fold: external and internal. **External** is the ministry of the word and the internal is how the Spirit of God works. The unregenerate are not able to understand the Bible. **Internal** what the Holy Spirit reveals to the believer. This is specific to believers.

*"You speak of the internal clearness, no man sees one iota in the Scriptures, but he that hath the Spirit of God. All have a darkened heart; so that, even if they know how to speak of, and set forth, all things in the Scripture, yet, they cannot feel them nor know them: nor do they believe that they are the creatures of God, nor any thing else." (23)*

The connection here Luther is trying to make that because something is difficult to understand in the Bible does not mean it should be dismissed. The fact is, the Bible teaches that only those who have the Spirit of God will accept and understand the Bible. IF we reject it because it is difficult to understand then we would reject the entire Scriptures.

## **SEC 5:**

Lucian Greek satirist frequently ridiculed religious practices. Epicurus taught against Plato and that the purpose of life is to be happy.

Surfeit – to over indulge in something.

Erasmus set up a form of what is necessary and unnecessary to understand or know for Christians. Is understanding free will necessary? Luther seems to think it is.

The claim is made by Luther that Erasmus found acceptance by other Papists because he was writing against Luther. If it were not the case, if he were writing about anyone else, or against anything else and said these same things as he did in the Diatribe, he would have been torn to pieces.

Cultural QUOTE: ***“Plato is a friend; Socrates is a friend; but Truth is to be honored above all.”***  
(p. 24)

## **SEC 6:**

What Erasmus put forth is *“That we should strive with all our powers, have recourse to the remedy of repentance and in all ways TRY TO GAIN THE MERCY OF GOD”* (emphasis mine) *“that no one should despair of pardon from a God by nature most merciful”*

These assertions by Erasmus are Without Christ, without the Spirit are more cold than ice. Assertion made that the fear of the Popes made Erasmus serve them and not the Scripture.

This assertion says:

1. That there is an ability in us
2. There is a striving with all our powers
3. There is a mercy in God and there are ways we can obtain that mercy

*“It is irreligious, curious, and superfluous, (you say) to wish to know, whether our own will does any thing in those things which pertain unto eternal salvation, or whether it is wholly passive under the work of grace.” — But here, you say the contrary: that it is Christian piety to “strive with all the powers;” and that, “without the mercy of God the will is ineffective.”* (25)

WHAT DOES THE WILL DO?

The Question or statement Erasmus is dealing concerns our will is it passive or active in knowing God.

1. How far does God’s mercy extend?
2. How far our own will extends?
3. What does our own will does to enjoin God?
4. What does the mercy of God do?

## **SEC 7: The Necessity of Knowing God and His Power**

Luther places several similitudes to show the quality or state of Erasmus' convictions: (26)

What if a person did not consider his abilities as a poet but just wanted to write poetry?

What about someone who just wanted to farm but knew nothing of the quality of soil but just went about vigorously to the work of farming.

What about someone going to war not knowing if there was enough money or soldiers?

What would we think of these people? KEY THOUGHT: COUNT THE COST. Luke 14:28-32

Therefore – if we are to gain righteousness – what are we to do = not knowing our ability.

*“But into this state you are driven by your confidence, so impose upon the understandings of us all, that no one shall discover the design which you secretly hug in your heart and what you aim at in all those your plain writings.”(p27)*

The point Luther is trying to make in this section is if a **person does not know what to do, they cannot repent, and impenitence is the unpardonable sin**. It is necessary and essential for Christians to know whether or not the will does anything in those things which pertain unto Salvation. This is the very heart of the subject.

What can free will do? How does it relate to the grace of God?

**KEY THOUGHT:** *But when you enjoin Christians themselves to become rash workers, and charge them not to be curious about what they can do and what they cannot do, in obtaining eternal salvation; this, evidently, and in reality, is the sin unpardonable. For while they know not what or how much they can do, they will not know what to do; and if they know not what to do, they cannot repent when they do wrong; and impenitence is the unpardonable sin: and to this, does that moderate and skeptical theology of yours lead us. Therefore, it is not irreligious, curious, or superfluous, but essentially wholesome and necessary, for a Christian to know, whether or not the will does any thing in those things which pertain unto Salvation. Nay, let me tell you, this is the very hinge upon which our discussion turns. (27)*

If I do not understand what I can do and my ability I will be ignorant about how much God can do. 1 Cor 12:6 if I know not how God works then I cannot worship him, praise him or serve him properly.

**KEY THOUGHT:** *For, if I know not how much I can do myself, how far my ability extends, and what I can do God-wards; I shall be equally uncertain and ignorant how much God is to do, how far His ability is to extend, and what He is to do toward me: whereas it is “God that worketh all in all.” (1 Cor. xii. 6.) But if I know not the distinction between our working and the power of God, I know not God Himself. And if I know not God, I cannot worship Him, praise Him, give Him thanks, nor serve Him; for I shall not know how much I ought to ascribe unto myself, and how*

*much unto God. It is necessary, therefore, to hold the most certain distinction, between the power of God and our power, the working of God and our working, if we would live in His fear.” (27-28)*

We must **have knowledge of ourselves and knowledge of God.**

Luther exposes ambiguity in Erasmus’ writings. He notes things that Erasmus had correctly stated:

*“you yourself see that all our good is to be ascribed to God and you assert that in your Form of Christianity: and in asserting this, you certainly, at the same time assert also, that the mercy of God alone does all things and that our own will does nothing, but is rather acted upon: and so it must be, otherwise the whole is not ascribed unto God. And yet, immediately afterwards you say that to assert things and to know them is irreligious, impious and vain. But at this rate a mind, which is unstable in itself . . .” (p28)*

### **SEC 8:**

Another part of Christian living is does God know all future things without certainty OR do we do all things because God makes the Necessary (sovereign or providential will)

Luther says you cannot talk about Free Will and exclude these parts. Accusation made towards Erasmus that he tried at every turn to avoid discussing this.

Avoiding this discussion is like a teaching a speech class and avoiding things like arrangement, memory, pronunciation. These are def. needed in the art of speaking well. These are necessary to talk about this topic. Likewise, Erasmus’s argument avoiding God’s sovereignty is a major mistake and error.

KEY PHRASE IN THIS SECTION: ***“It is impossible that you should know that ‘Free-will’ is, unless you know what the human will does and what God does or foreknows.”*** (p29)

The purpose of the book is to force Erasmus and the Sophists to define what Free Will can do.

**KEY PURPOSE:** *“I will push you, and the Sophists together, until you shall define to me the power of “Free-will,” and what it can do: and I hope I shall so push you, (Christ willing) as to make you heartily repent that you ever published your Diatribe.”* (p29)

### **SEC 9: The Sovereignty of God**

**God’s Sovereignty Defined:** God foreknows nothing by contingency. (That is a future even or circumstance which is possible but not certain.) God foresees, purposes, and does all things according to His immutable, eternal and infallible will. You either deny this or ignore it (push it away)

If this is true, then TOTAL FREE WILL (my term) is dashed to pieces.



TO say that man is the ULTIMATE decider of his fate, is to deny the sovereignty of God.

Luther Does not use scripture to define Free Will in this section. He uses Erasmus' own words and argues them from a logic standpoint.

Erasmus said God is by nature Just and by nature Most merciful. Also, this nature is immutable and unchangeable. THEREFORE, does this mean that God's justice and mercy is unchangeable?

IF this is true about the nature of his justice and mercy it is true about all his attributes: knowledge, wisdom, goodness, will and all of his attributes.

The question that Luther reasons back to Erasmus is IF these things are true, then why do you assert the contrary position that it is vain to irreligious to assert God has certain foreknowledge? Erasmus denies God's immutable Prescience (knowing something before it takes place).

Does God will in ignorance? KEY THOUGHT *"If then, He foreknows, willing, His will is eternal and immovable, because His nature is so: and if He wills, foreknowing, His knowledge is eternal and immovable because His nature is so."* (p.30)

Even though we act, and it seems to us we act in freedom, it is in reality that we are acting with respect to the will of God. God cannot be hindered.

### **SEC 10:**

Luther desires another word than necessity be used. Because in this discussion on will the reality is the will, human or divine, **does not do anything out of compulsion but simply by willingness or desire.**

*"for Will, whether divine or human, does what it does, be it good or evil, not by any compulsion but by mere willingness or desire, as it were, totally free. The will of God, nevertheless, which rules over our mutable will, is immutable and infallible . . . And our own will, especially our corrupt will, cannot of itself do good; therefore, where the term fails to express the idea required, the understanding of the reader must make up the deficiency, knowing what is wished to be expressed — the immutable will of God, and the impotency of our depraved will" (31)*

I am not made to do sin; I sin because of the flesh and I act upon this on my own wanting of sin.

**God's will: RULES OVER OUR WILL and is immutable and infallible.**

**OUR WILL: specifically, the corrupt will cannot do good, impotent and depraved**

*“This asserted truth, therefore, stands and remains invincible — that all things take place according to the immutable will of God!” (32)*

Isaiah 62:10 Gods counsel will stand and his will, shall be done.