## Introduction

In light of the recent signing of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church on October 31, 1999, it seems appropriate to investigate Martin Luther's understanding of the bondage of the human will. Indeed, the doctrine of justification by grace through faith arose out of Luther's conviction that humanity is totally incapable of determining its eternal destiny. In fact, this conviction is fundamental to most of Luther's theology. For Luther, it is crucial that the Christian has a right understanding of their relationship with God, insofar as that relationship is revealed in Scripture. Our understanding of the human and the Divine wills is the "hinge," "the crucial issue" through which a Christian can know God.[1] In this essay then, I will explore Luther's treatment of this conviction as it is presented in his treatise *The Bondage of the Will*. The first objective will be to examine the historical context that precipitated Luther's conviction as well as the events surrounding Luther's exposition of this conviction in the aforementioned treatise. The second objective will be to examine the conviction itself as it is presented in that treatise.

## The Historical Context

Modern scholars and historians have been unable to arrive at a consensus as to when Luther made his discoveries pertaining to the righteousness of God and the imputed righteousness received by the Christian through Christ Jesus. As Eugene F. Klug notes in his essay "Word and Scripture in Luther Studies Since World War II," there are two major views among scholars. The early view of 1513, supported notably by Klug, Koestlin and Aland, argues that these insights are already present in Luther's writings of 1513 to 1518. These scholars argue that Luther's lectures on Romans, Galatians and Hebrews, preceded by lectures on the Psalms, reveal an understanding that humanity avails of the righteousness of God only through faith. Yet, scholars supporting a late date of 1519, point out that Luther describes his tower experience in the preface to the Latin edition of his works in 1545 and implicitly places it in the midst of his second series of lectures on the Psalms of 1519. Moreover, they point out that Luther was a

monk of the Augustinian order and that this would reasonably explain the content of his earlier lectures. The scholars supporting the late date also suggest that Luther was still grappling with issues of the righteousness of God and that the full implications of the Augustinian tradition had not made an impact on Luther until he returned to the Psalms for the second time. In *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death*, Richard Marius describes the tower experience in this setting:

> Then in his exposition of the Fifth Psalm, he came to verse 8, *Domine deduc me in iusticia tua propter inimicos meus, dirige in conspecu tuo viam mean*—"Lord, from above lead me in thy righteousness because of my enemies; make my way straight before thy face." The word *iusticia* turned him to Romans 1:17, a verse he had scarcely considered in his first lectures on the Psalms, and it seems that here, very suddenly, everything came together for him. "We shall have much to say below about the righteousness of God," he wrote, and without further ado he defined the term. "It is not that a just God condemns the wicked, as is the most common opinion," he said. It is, as St. Augustine has said in his work *On the Spirit and the Letter*, that which God pours into a man which justifies him. It is here, as Luther himself was to say in 1545, that we are to date his Reformation breakthrough—in 1519, or perhaps the winter of 1519-20.[2]

In light of Luther's own statements and the lack of convincing evidence requiring an earlier date, it seems that Marius and the numerous scholars that stand with him are correct in their position. Moreover, there seems to be a significant change in Luther's writings and confidence after this time. Indeed, in late 1519 Luther declared himself against the Roman Antichrist.[3] It was this declaration and the prolific writings against the papacy in the 1520s that confirmed Luther as an enemy to the Roman Catholic Church and made reconciliation impossible. The declaration also set events in motion that led to the controversy that inspired Luther's treatise BOW.

Feeling the pressure and weight of Luther's unrelenting attack against the corruption of the Church and its dogma, the supporters of the papacy turned to the most respected scholar of the period, Desiderius Erasmus, to come to the aid of the Roman Catholic Church. Erasmus, a humanist, desired to avoid controversy. Erasmus believed in peace and intellectual pursuits and did not want to debate Luther. In fact, it seems that for a time, Erasmus and Luther shared a

---

[1] Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, Trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Fleming H. Revell, 1957), 78.

[2] Richard Marius, "The Attack on Erasmus," *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 203.

mutual respect for one another as both opposed the Church with regard to monasticism, the veneration of the saints and various other traditions. At one point, Erasmus even suggested that Luther should be given the opportunity to present his views to a papal council. As Luther's opposition to the Church became more openly rebellious, Erasmus desired to distance himself from the reformer. Nonetheless, he still had no desire to write against him. Erasmus' prior sympathy and implicit defense of Luther's positions, however, was used against him and so Erasmus was forced to declare himself against Luther or risk being declared with Luther by the Roman Catholic Church. As such, in order to maintain his standing within the Catholic Church, Erasmus, on September 1, 1524, printed his *Diatribe seu collatio de libero arbitrio* (*Discussion, or Collation, concerning Free-Will*). Luther, at first, did not want to write against this work. In his own words, Luther delayed because "it seemed a complete waste of time to reply to your arguments . . . [and] I have already myself refuted them over and over again."[4] Though there is no reason to doubt Luther's statement, it seems important to add that Luther had many demands made upon his time in 1524-25. Nevertheless, persuaded by a sense of duty to his parishioners and supporters, Luther wrote *De Servo Arbitrio*, or BOW, appearing in December 1525. The work, which contains many harsh judgments and ad hominine attacks against Erasmus and his diatribe, irreparably ended any measure of respect the two scholars shared for one another. Erasmus replied to Luther's treatise with a letter in April, 1526 and a two-volume work released in 1526 and 1527 entitled the *Hyperaspistes*. Luther did not reply to either of these works.

## The Characteristics of God's Will

Central to all of Luther's theology is his understanding of God that can be summarized as *Gottes Gottheit*, which means "God is God."[5] In the deepest sense, Luther believes that God is above all and in all. God, through his creative power, reveals that he is free and immutable. He alone can bring life into existence. He alone sustains life. He alone freely wills. Moreover, what God wills can not be impeded or resisted by a mere creature. God is all-powerful and therefore,

[3] Marius, *Martin Luther*, 208.
[4] BOW, 62.

God's will is alone immutable. Any person, therefore, that appeals to the freedom of human will attempts to usurp for themselves an attribute that belongs only to God. The free and immutable will of God is, in Luther's writings, fundamental to a right and proper faith. Without it, God is not God and Scripture would, therefore, have to be annulled. In BOW, Luther constantly emphasizes these two characteristics of the will of God and points out their significance for the Faith. In addition, Luther argues that God has two wills as pertains His nature: (1) the revealed will of His word and, (2) the hidden or inscrutable will. These characteristics of God's will provide the basis for understanding and interpreting Luther's conviction that the human will is enslaved.

***The Free Will of God***

For Luther, the free will of God is not simply God's limitless and unobstructed ability to choose between any set of variables in any set of circumstances. Rather, it is God's unique ability to transcend all these variables and circumstances to perform, or not perform, any action that He desires. God's will is not contingent upon the will of any other being. In ceaseless activity, God creates the possibilities. As such, the free will of God is most plainly revealed to humanity through His creative acts. God freely chooses to create our present reality and likewise, He freely sustains this reality. In fact, reality does not exist except by the will of God. To this all-encompassing extent then, Luther asserts that God is all in all. Nothing is that God does not declare to be. And, it is this creative power that manifests God's freedom, His free will. In recognizing Luther's pronounced emphasis on God's sovereignty, Paul Althaus declares:

> God is the first or principal cause, all others are only secondary or instrumental causes. They are only the tools which he uses in the service of his own *autonomous*, *free*, and *exclusive* working; they are only the masks under which he hides his activity.[6]

In this respect, one realizes why Luther cannot ascribe free will to any created being. For Luther, the concept of free will requires total autonomy that can only exist as an attribute of the Divine, whose will is not subject to any other will. God, in effect, creates the ability to will. God alone has free will. As Luther states, "it follows, therefore, that 'free-will' is obviously a term applicable only

[5] Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, translation of 2nd edition by Robert C. Schultz, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1966), 105.

to the Divine Majesty; for only He can do, and does (as the Psalmist sings) 'whatever he wills in heaven and earth' (Ps 135:6)."[7]

### *The Immutable Will of God*

The second characteristic of God's will that is crucial to Luther's understanding of the bondage of the human will, is its immutability. That is, God's will can not be changed, altered or impeded. The immutability of God's will is the logical conclusion to the freedom of God's will. God's sovereignty and almighty power demands that whatever God wills happens by necessity. Nothing occurs contingently. God's will does not act independently of reality, as the human will does, but rather, God's will creates reality. In Luther's theology, the will of God is not contingent and so likewise, the foreknowledge of God is also not contingent. For whatever God wills, he foreknows and so, whatever He foreknows must, by necessity, happen. For if it did not happen, then God would be fallible and His will contingent, which Luther declares "is *not* to be found in God!"[8] It is the immutable will of God, acting freely, that provides the Christian with "the assurance of things hoped for" (Heb 11:1), namely that the promises of God will be fulfilled. As Luther suggests, "the Christian's chief and only comfort in every adversity lies in knowing that God does not lie, but brings all things to pass immutably, and that His will cannot be resisted, altered or impeded."[9] Indeed, for Luther, the conviction that God's will is free and immutable must be central to the Faith. Yet, Luther's theology presents a problem: if God wills everything and everything He wills comes to pass then one must conclude that God wills the salvation of few and the damnation of many (cf. Mt 22:14). Luther answered this dilemma by teaching that God has two wills, the revealed and the hidden.

### *The Two Wills of God*

As Luther declares in BOW, God's decree to damn "the undeserving . . . [who are] compelled by natural necessity to sin and perish" does indeed seem horrible (314). Moreover, all rational and philosophical knowledge of God can not avoid the terrible reality of this conclusion,

---

[6] Althaus, *Theology*, 107.
[7] BOW, 105.
[8] BOW, 81.

for as Luther concedes, the "injustice of God . . . is traduced as such by arguments which no reason or light of nature can resist" (316). So, then, how can the Christian find comfort amidst this incredible obstacle to understanding the righteousness of divine justice? How does Luther understand this horrible decree in light of God's justice, grace and love? For Luther, the answer to these questions is twofold: (1) we must simply believe that God's justice is righteous because in Christ God has proven His love and compassion and, (2) we should not probe into the hidden or inscrutable will of God wherein God operates paradoxically, i.e. righteousness made evident through unrighteousness.

Luther's twofold answer to the questions of damnation reveals a high view of God's sovereignty and majesty. Moreover, the answer is in accordance with Luther's view that God's will is uniquely free and immutable. The answer also demands that the Christian simply trust in God. The Christian must believe all that is revealed in Scripture, not merely those things that are pleasant to the senses, and as such, we are compelled to accept the fact that God actively chooses to reject certain people. Nevertheless, if God has said in His Word that He is loving and gracious, and He has revealed himself to be such through His forbearance with the Israelites and the glorious plan of salvation through Jesus Christ, but what right can we judge the manner in which God oversees and sustains the world? For Luther, this is precisely the point at which the Christian must heed the words of God, spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa 55:8-9). Luther would likewise appeal to God's answer to Job in Job 38-41 and the words of Paul in Romans 9:20 as yet other examples of the futility of comprehending the incomprehensible and inscrutable will of God. Luther, therefore, answers the critics of predestination and defends God's decree to affect unbelief in people by appealing to this inscrutable wisdom and will of God, a will that cannot be understood by any attempt of human reason. Because God is God, He has the

[9] BOW, 84.

right to condemn man for sins that God works in Him.[10] And so, it is by faith that the Christian simply trusts that God is righteous, loving and gracious in so working. Luther consoles the Christian by exhorting them to look only to the revealed will of God that promises salvation to all who receive Christ:

> Thus, He does not will the death of a sinner—that is, in His Word; but He wills it by His inscrutable will. At present, however, we must keep in view His Word and leave alone His inscrutable will; for it is by His Word, and not by His inscrutable will, that we must be guided.[11]

Yet, for Luther, knowing that God does possess a hidden and inscrutable will of God provides valuable insights for the Christian. The inscrutable will of God tempers the revealed will of God. The doctrine of the free, immutable and inscrutable will of God, therefore, contributes three important foundations to the Christian Faith: (1) God is sovereign, all-powerful and therefore, even evil is under the sway of His goodness and as such, the Christian can be certain that the promises of God will be realized, (2) humanity is not free to earn or demand anything of God and so, God's gift of salvation can truly be called free and gracious and, (3) the Christian, in response to these truths, is properly humbled and learns, in reverent adoration, to fear God, who acts freely and immutability for His glory.

## The Characteristics of the Human Will

In consequence of his view of God's will, Luther's view of the human will is necessarily placed in total subjection to the Divine. It is in this respect that Luther stands in contrast to Erasmus. Luther's discussion of this topic is theocentric, beginning with a discussion of God and His attributes whereas Erasmus belies an anthropocentric view, beginning with human experience. For Luther, that God's will is immutable logically demands that man's will is mutable. For if God's will is not contingent but immutable and free, no other will can be also be immutable and free otherwise these wills could impede one another and consequently, these wills would no longer be immutable and free but rather, they would be subject to one another. As such, Luther

[10] It is important to note here briefly that while Luther does not hesitate in saying that God works evil or sin in man, Luther does not attribute cause or guilt to God for that evil or sin. As with all theologians representing this view, Luther avoids taking the final step to the logical conclusion of his view in order to avoid presenting God has an active participant in sin or the author of sin.

rightly proclaims the inconsistency of the term free will. In Luther's writings, there are three primary considerations to consider in evaluating the characteristics of the human will: (1) the human will is mutable, (2) as a consequence of the Fall, the human will is enslaved to sin and, (3) the human will requires the grace of God, offered through the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ Jesus, to affect any positive change in a person's life.

***The Mutable Human Will***

In the Reformation debate concerning the nature of the human will, all sides assert the mutability of the human will. Unfortunately, Erasmus and Luther still managed to disagree on this point, primarily due to semantic misunderstandings and inconsistencies. As Marty McSorley notes in *Luther: Right or Wrong?*, Luther and Erasmus did not share a common definition of the term contingency. In rejecting contingent events, Luther is rejecting chance and the suggestion that God does not foresee all events infallibly. On this point, however, Erasmus agrees. Indeed, Erasmus freely accepts that nothing is possible except by the grace and will of God. In accepting contingent events then, Erasmus is only stating that a human being can and does make real choices. Furthermore, Erasmus is asserting that neither God's foreknowledge of our choices or that God provides the means by which we make our choices negates human freedom in making those choices. On this point, Luther agrees, though as stated previously he objects to the use of the term contingent because for him it implies chance and randomness outside of God's providence. In BOW, it is apparent that Luther accepts that a human being can choose between various alternatives:

> If we do not want to drop this term altogether—which would really be the safest and most Christian thing to do—we may still in good faith teach people to use it to credit man with 'free will' in respect, not of what is above him, but of what is below him. That is to say, man should realise that in regard to his money and possessions he has a right to use them, to do or to leave undone, according to his own 'free will'—though that very 'free will' is overruled by the free-will of God alone, according to His own pleasure (107; cf. 150-155).
>
> I know that 'free-will' can do some things by nature; it can eat, drink, beget, rule, etc. . . . I say that man without the grace of God nonetheless remains

[11] BOW, 170-171.

> under the general omnipotence of the God who effects, and moves, and impels all things in a necessary, infallible course (265).

So, while accepting Erasmus' basic position insofar as it pertains to temporal choices, Luther asserts even in these verses that a truly free will must be immutable and as such, he rightly objects to Erasmus' terminology. Moreover, for Luther, this ability to choose does not include the freedom to apply oneself to matters pertaining to salvation whereas for Erasmus that choice is included. For both men, however, all choices are subject to God's will and hence, the human will, as Luther asserts, should properly be termed mutable. [12]

***The Enslaved Human Will***

The essential issue under debate then is not whether the human will is immutable or mutable but instead, the issue is whether the mutable human will can apply itself to matters pertaining to salvation. Luther's answer to this question is the essential principle of his work, BOW. Luther argues, contrary to Erasmus, that all of humanity is under the wrath of God and as such, the human will is enslaved to sin; all of humanity is depraved and ignorant of God. Humanity does not seek God nor can the human will turn the person towards God. These two statements differentiate Luther's and Erasmus' theologies. Erasmus affirms that humanity is fallen and that apart from grace, a person can not turn to God. He also argues, as Pelagius before him, that the grace of God that can affect repentance in a human being has been given to all people through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.[13] Furthermore, it is by this prevenient grace of God that man can, through adherence to biblical principles and commandments, live in a manner pleasing to God and so be justified. Luther, on the other hand, argues that these statements are completely erroneous. Indeed, Luther conceives of the human will as a mule upon which either God or Satan

[12] Many scholars would disagree with the assertions I have made in this section. There is an indication in Erasmus' writings that he asserts that a human can apply themselves to things pertaining to salvation unaided by grace. Also, there is an indication in Luther's BOW that all things that happen are at the direction and will of God with no element of human freedom (this being sometimes termed Luther's necessitarian argument). However, on these issues, I chose to side with Marty McSorley, who argues that the extremes of Luther's and Erasmus' views do not follow through in their respective works and are inconsistent with their practice and other writings. See Marty McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong?*, (New York, New York: Newman Press, 1969). Also, see Marius, *Martin Luther*, 442-468, for an interesting discussion of Erasmus' motives in avoiding the use of the term grace in his diatribe.

[13] Incidentally, there is no indication that Erasmus was aware of Pelagian writings. Nonetheless, as Marius notes and even as Martin Luther often suggests, their views are similar.

sits as the rider with the mule unable to choose between riders.[14] There are no works that a person can undertake and complete that will be pleasing to God. Humanity is under a curse. Indeed, by this curse, humanity has become so depraved that it does not even desire goodness, let alone seek after it or turn to it. As Luther states, "He goes on willing and desiring to do evil; and if external pressure forces him to act otherwise, nevertheless his will within remains averse to so doing and chafes under such constraint and opposition."[15] As such, adherence to the law and therefore, the ability to do good works are impossible. Humanity is "following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient" (Eph 2:2; cf. BOW 102-104, 202, 314). Luther asserts that we are captives, bond slaves to Satan and by nature "children of wrath."[16] With the weight of Romans 3:9-20, this passage's Old Testament quotations and the Gospel of John, Luther pronounces his sentence against any notion of human freedom. The state of humanity is fallen and depraved; Satan is its rider and the human will has no power to alter his course.[17] So what of grace? To whom and to what affect is grace given?

***Irresistible Grace: The Means by which Man is Saved***

Having proven humanity is in its nature evil; Luther still did not completely defeat Erasmus' conception of the freedom of the human will. The questions of how a person can be saved, if he cannot earn it and to whom and to what affect grace is given must still be answered. For as noted previously, Erasmus asserts that grace has been given to all humanity and that it is by this grace that a person can overcome the state of his condition and turn to God. Luther, however, rejects Erasmus' notion of a universal, prevenient grace given to all humanity. He asserts, though not at any length, that the grace of God is a gift given only to the elect, to those whom God by his foreknowledge has predestined to become his children. The doctrine of irresistible grace is never explicitly declared in BOW, except perhaps in Luther's discussion of John

[14] BOW, 103-104.
[15] BOW, 102.
[16] BOW 202, 314, cf. Eph 2:3, BOW 102-104.
[17] This latter concept Luther called the *necessity of immutability*. That is, voluntarily and spontaneously, the human being is bound to their evil state. See BOW, 102-103, 204-205.

1:5, 10-13 and 16, "So utterly does grace refuse to allow any particle or power of 'free-will' to stand beside it!" (305) and at the conclusion of his work where he declares:

> So, if we believe that Satan is the prince of this world, ever ensnaring and opposing the kingdom of Christ with all his strength, and that he does not let his prisoners go unless driven out by the power of the Divine Spirit, it is again apparent that there can be no 'free-will' (317).

The lack of a discussion on the nature of grace is perhaps one of the greatest weaknesses of Luther's treatise. As Phillip Watson points out in his introduction to the *Luther's Works* edition of BOW, Luther's "argumentation is so shaped by his opponent's point of view that his own position hardly emerges with the clarity or the balance that would have been desirable."[18] Nevertheless, Luther's case for irresistible grace is implicitly made by appealing to God's sovereign right to choose whom he wills. This sovereign right Luther affirms throughout the treatise though it is particularly evident in Luther's discussion of Cain and Abel as well as Jacob and Esau. Further evidence for the doctrine of irresistible grace in BOW is that Luther never mentions the grace of God in relation to a person apart from God's saving work. As such, it is clear that Luther believes that grace is the irresistible means by which God affects faith and belief in those whom he has chosen and as such, any lesser manifestation of grace has no affect upon a person in bondage. The grace that frees the will is the grace that redeems and saves the will.

## Conclusion

Luther's position on the Divine and human wills was not a small matter to him. In *Table-Talk*, Luther once stated in regards to his position that "I know it to be the truth, though all the world should be against it; yea, the decree of Divine Majesty must stand fast against the gates of hell."[19] The belief that humanity is enslaved to sin and that it is only by sovereign election that God saves a person formed the basis for Luther's conviction of justification by grace through faith. Grace is one the most important principles of biblical interpretation to Luther and no where is divine grace more evident than in the doctrine of election. And, it is this *sola gratia* principle of

[18] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Volume 33: Career of the Reformer III*, ed. Philip S. Watson, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1972), 10.

[19] Martin Luther, "Table-Talk," *A Compend of Luther's Theology*, ed. Hugh Thomson Kerr, Jr., (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, 1943), 90-91.

Luther's faith that preserves the eternal significance of Christ's death and resurrection. It is by his sacrifice, not by our own works, that God graciously extends salvation to the elect. As Luther often remarked, to assert the freedom of the will is to deny the necessity of Christ's atoning work.

## Bibliography

Althaus, Paul. *The Theology of Martin Luther*. Translation of 2nd edition by Robert C. Schultz. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1966.

Ebeling, Gerhard. *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*. trans. R. A. Wilson. London, England: Wm Collins Sons & Co., Ltd., 1970.

Klug, Eugene. "Word and Scripture in Luther Studies Since World War II." *Trinity Journal* (5:1984), 3-46.

Luther, Martin. *A Compend of Luther's Theology*. ed. Hugh Thomson Kerr, Jr. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, 1943.

——. *Luther's Works, Volume 31: Career of the Reformer I*. ed. Philip S. Watson. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1957.

——. *Luther's Works, Volume 33: Career of the Reformer III*. ed. Philip S. Watson. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1972.

——. *The Bondage of the Will*. trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Fleming H. Revell, 1957.

Marius, Richard. *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.

McSorley, Marty. *Luther: Right or Wrong?* New York, New York: Newman Press, 1969.

Shofner, Robert D. "Luther on 'The Bondage of the Will': An Analytical-Critical Essay." *Scottish Journal of Theology* (26: 1973), 24-39.

*The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New Revised Standard Version).