



God in the Center

Excerpts from Martin Luther's
Bondage of the Will

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What and Why of *Bondage of the Will*

Dear Erasmus,

You're probably wondering why it's taken me so long to respond to your Diatribes or Discussion concerning Free Choice. Well, let me explain...

What is *Bondage of the Will*?

- It is a treatise written by Martin Luther in 1525 in response to *Diatribes or Discussion concerning Free Choice* by Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (commonly "Erasmus")
- A little about Erasmus
 - regarded as one of the top intellects in Europe in his day, an expert in classical languages (Greek, Latin)
 - a celebrity member of the Roman Catholic Church, but...
 - also a humanist, who believed that by recovering classical knowledge people could reverse societal decline; therefore he is interested in reform
 - an outsider, raised by the Brethren of the Common Life, a lay-monastic group who promoted simple, devout Christian behavior

- Erasmus was urged to knock down Luther, whose growing popularity, even after his expulsion from the Roman Church, was continuing to bother Catholic authorities, but...
- Erasmus wanted to put Luther in his place without doing serious damage to the cause of reform that Luther was leading
- So Erasmus wrote his *Diatribes* to correct Luther on what Erasmus believed was a point of doctrine on which there could be legitimate disagreement
- Luther saw it differently: “You have gone for the jugular”, he wrote to Erasmus. The title of Erasmus’ work: *De Libero Arbitrio* (Concerning Free Choice); the title of Luther’s response: *De Servo Arbitrio* (Concerning Enslaved Choice)
- For Luther, this was a question related to all thought and preaching about life and salvation: **Is God in the center, or are humans?** *Bondage of the Will* states Luther’s answer.

Why study *Bondage of the Will*? (i.e., Who cares?)

- To understand Luther and confessional Lutheranism – Luther viewed *Bondage of the Will* as one of his writings he found most valuable; it reflects Biblical teaching at the foundation of confessional Lutheranism
- To understand (non-Lutheran) Protestants today – Many Protestant Christians begin with the assumption of Erasmus: that people have some free will in spiritual matters
- To keep God’s action in the center of our faith, teaching, and preaching – Luther begins with the only truth that can set sinners free: God’s redeeming work in Christ. **Only when God’s work is at the center do sinners have certain peace and life.**

Reading and Discussing Excerpts from *Bondage of the Will*

A Luther explains his delay in responding to Erasmus

As you listen, think of one word that summarizes Luther’s attitude toward Erasmus.

That I have taken so long to reply to your *Diatribes Concerning Free Choice*, venerable Erasmus, has been contrary to everyone’s expectation and to my own custom; for hitherto I have seemed not only willing to accept, but eager to seek out, opportunities of this kind for writing. There will perhaps be some surprise at this new and unwonted forbearance—or fear!—in Luther, who has not been roused even by all the speeches and letters his adversaries have flung about, congratulating Erasmus on his victory and chanting in triumph, “Ho, ho! Has that Maccabee, that most obstinate Assertor, at last met his match, and dares not open his

mouth against him?” Yet not only do I not blame them, but of myself I yield you a palm such as I have never yielded to anyone before; for I confess not only that you are far superior to me in powers of eloquence and native genius (which we all must admit, all the more as I am an uncultivated fellow who has always moved in uncultivated circles), but that you have quite damped my spirit and eagerness, and left me exhausted before I could strike a blow.

There are two reasons for this: first, your cleverness in treating the subject with such remarkable and consistent moderation as to make it impossible for me to be angry with you; and secondly, the luck or chance or fate by which you say nothing on this important subject that has not been said before. Indeed, you say so much less, and attribute so much more to free choice than the Sophists have hitherto done (a point on which I shall have more to say later) that it really seemed superfluous to answer the arguments you use. They have been refuted already so often by me, and beaten down and completely pulverized in Philip Melanchthon’s *Commonplaces*—an unanswerable little book which in my judgment deserves not only to be immortalized but even canonized. Compared with it, your book struck me as so cheap and paltry that I felt profoundly sorry for you, defiling as you were your very elegant and ingenious style with such trash, and quite disgusted at the utterly unworthy matter that was being conveyed in such rich ornaments of eloquence, like refuse or ordure being carried in gold and silver vases.

One word that summarizes Luther’s attitude toward Erasmus?

B Why this topic is important

After this section be able to complete this sentence: “Being clear on the topic of free will is important because...”

Therefore, it is not irreverent, inquisitive, or superfluous, but essentially salutary and necessary for a Christian, to find out whether the will does anything or nothing in matters pertaining to eternal salvation. Indeed, as you should know, this is the cardinal issue between us, the point on which everything in this controversy turns. For what we are doing is to inquire what free choice can do, what it has done to it, and what is its relation to the grace of God. If we do not know these things, we shall know nothing at all of things Christian, and shall be worse than any heathen. Let anyone who does not feel this confess that he is no Christian, while anyone who disparages or scorns it should know that he is the greatest enemy of Christians. For if I am ignorant of what, how far, and how much I can and may do in relation to God, it will be equally uncertain and unknown to me, what, how far, and how much God can and may do in me, although it is God who works everything in everyone [I Cor. 12:6]. But

when the works and power of God are unknown, I do not know God himself, and when God is unknown, I cannot worship, praise, thank, and serve God, since I do not know how much I ought to attribute to myself and how much to God. It therefore behooves us to be very certain about the distinction between God's power and our own, God's work and our own, if we want to live a godly life.

Complete this sentence: "Being clear on the topic of free will is important because..."

C St. Paul nullifies free choice

Explain how Paul's words in Romans 3, the section Luther is referring to here, demolish any possibility that free will can do good things without God.

So you see that free choice is completely abolished by this passage, and nothing good or virtuous is left in man, since he is flatly stated to be unrighteous, ignorant of God, a despiser of God, turned aside from him, and worthless in the sight of God. ... In short, the reign of Satan in men could not have been described in fewer or more expressive terms than by his saying that they are ignorant of God and despisers of God. That betokens unbelief, it betokens disobedience, sacrilege, and blasphemy toward God; it betokens cruelty and lack of mercy toward our neighbor; it betokens love of self in all the things of God and men. There you have a picture of the glory and power of free choice! ...

These words of Paul: "All have turned aside, the whole world is guilty, there is none righteous," are mighty rolls of thunder and piercing lightning flashes, and in truth the very "hammer that breaks the rocks in pieces," as Jeremiah calls it [Jer. 23:29], by which everything that exists is shattered, not only in one man or some men or some part of them, but in the whole world and all men without a single exception, so that at these words the whole world ought to tremble, fear, and take to flight. What stronger or graver terms could have been used than that the whole world is guilty, all the children of men are turned aside and worthless, no one fears God, no one is not wicked, no one understands, no one seeks for God? Nevertheless, such was and is the hardness and insensate obstinacy of our hearts that we have neither heard nor felt these thunderings and lightnings, but have set up and extolled free choice and its powers in spite of them all, so that we have truly fulfilled the saying in Malachi 1[:4]: "They build, but I will tear down."

Explain how Paul's words in Romans 3, the section Luther is referring to here, demolish any possibility that free will can do good things without God.

D Doesn't "Do this!" mean "You *can* do this!"?

Erasmus maintained that when God commands people do something, that implies that people have the free will to do it. Luther contends that God's commands have a different purpose, which is...

The same may be said with regard to the words: "If you would be perfect" [Matt. 19:21]; "If any man would come after me"; "Whoever would save his life" [Luke 9:23 f.]; "If you love me"; "If you abide" [John 14:15; 15:7]. In short, let all the conjunctive "ifs" and the imperative verbs be collected up, as I have said, so that we may assist Diatribe at least by the quantity of words at her disposal. "All these precepts," she says, "are pointless if nothing is attributed to the human will ... How inapposite the conjunction 'if' when all was necessity!"

We reply: If they are pointless, that is your fault; you make them pointless, and indeed senseless, by asserting on the one hand that nothing is to be attributed to the human will, since you make free choice unable to will any good, and then on the other hand making it able to will all good—unless with you the same words blow hot and cold at the same time, inasmuch as they assert and deny everything at once. I am astonished that an author should have taken such pleasure in repeating the same things so often, and continually forgetting his own stated purpose—unless perhaps having no real confidence in his case he wanted to gain his point by the mere size of his book or to wear out his opponent with the toil and tedium of reading it. By what sort of logic, I ask you, does it follow that the will and the ability must be present as soon as it is said, "If you will, if any man will, if you are willing"? Do we not very often use such expressions to signify instead impotence and impossibility? For instance: "If you wish to equal Virgil in singing, my dear Maevius, you must sing other songs!"; "If you, Scotus, want to surpass Cicero, you will have to replace your sophistries with consummate eloquence"; "If you wish to be compared with David, you must write psalms like his." Here it is obvious that the things mentioned are impossible as far as our own powers are concerned, though they could all be done by divine power. That is how it is in the Scriptures too; there also expressions like these are used in order to show what can be done in us by the power of God, and what we cannot do ourselves.

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E The law and the gospel speak against free will

*Luther writes that both the law and the gospel speak against any supposed power of free choice. We've just heard about the law; **now identify how gospel promises rule out any power of free choice.***

In these passages our Diatribe makes no distinction whatever between expressions of the law and of the gospel; for she is so blind and ignorant that she does not know what law and gospel are. For out of the whole of Isaiah, apart from that one verse, "If you are willing," she quotes not a single word of the law, all the rest being Gospel passages, in which the brokenhearted and afflicted are called to take comfort from a word of proffered grace. But Diatribe turns them into words of law. Now, I ask you, what good will anyone do in a matter of theology or Holy Writ, who has not yet got as far as knowing what the law and what the gospel is, or if he knows, disdains to observe the distinction between them? Such a person is bound to confound everything—heaven and hell, life and death—and he will take no pains to know anything at all about Christ. On this subject I will admonish dear Diatribe more fully below. ...

Whatever, therefore, can be said against the use of the expression "Love God!" as an argument for free choice, the same can be said against the use of all other verbs of command or demand as arguments for free choice. And what can be said is that by the command to love we are shown the essential meaning of the law and what we ought to do, but not the power of the will or what we are able to do, but rather what we are not able to do; and the same is shown by all other expressions of demand. For it is well known that even the Schoolmen, with the exception of the Scotists and the Moderns, affirm that man cannot love God with all his heart; and in that case, neither can he fulfill any of the other commandments, since all of them depend on this one, as Christ testifies [Matt. 22:40]. So the fact remains, even on the testimony of the Scholastic doctors, that the words of the law are no evidence for the power of free choice, but show what we ought to do and cannot do. ...

Hence nothing could have been more inappropriately quoted in support of free choice than this passage of Ezekiel ["I desire not the death of a sinner"], which actually stands in the strongest opposition to free choice. For here we are shown what free choice is like, and what it can do about sin when sin is recognized, or about its own conversion to God; that is to say, nothing but fall into a worse state and add despair and impenitence to its sins, if God did not quickly come to its aid and call it back and raise it up by a word of promise. For God's solicitude in promising grace to recall and restore the sinner is a sufficiently strong and reliable argument that free choice by itself cannot but go from bad to worse and (as Scripture says) fall down into hell, unless you credit God with such levity as to pour out words of promise in profusion for the mere pleasure of talking, and not because they are in any way necessary for

our salvation. So you can see that not only all the words of the law stand against free choice, but also all the words of promise utterly refute it; which means that Scripture in its entirety stands opposed to it.

Identify how the gospel promises rule out any power of free choice.

F Nothing escapes God's omnipotence, but that does not mean he produces evil

*God is omnipotent, and so everything happens under his control, "of necessity." Yet God is not responsible when people do evil. **Highlight one of Luther's illustrations—one you think explains well Luther's argument that God is not responsible for evil.***

It may perhaps be asked how God can be said to work evils in us, such as hardening, giving men up to their lusts [Rom. 1:24], leading them astray, and so forth. We ought, of course, to be content with the words of God, and believe quite simply what they say, since the works of God are entirely beyond description. Yet in order to humor Reason, which is to say human stupidity, I am willing to be a silly stupid and see whether with a bit of babbling we can in any way move her.

To begin with, even Reason and Diatribe admit that God works all in all [I Cor. 12:6] and that without him nothing is effected or effective; for he is omnipotent, and this belongs to his omnipotence, as Paul says to the Ephesians. Now, Satan and man, having fallen from God and been deserted by God, cannot will good, that is, things which please God or which God wills; but instead they are continually turned in the direction of their own desires, so that they are unable not to seek the things of self. This will and nature of theirs, therefore, which is thus averse from God, is not something nonexistent. For Satan and ungodly man are not nonexistent or possessed of no nature or will, although their nature is corrupt and averse from God. That remnant of nature, therefore, as we call it, in the ungodly man and Satan, as being the creature and work of God, is no less subject to divine omnipotence and activity than all other creatures and works of God.

Since, then, God moves and actuates all in all, he necessarily moves and acts also in Satan and ungodly man. But he acts in them as they are and as he finds them; that is to say, since they are averse and evil, and caught up in the movement of this divine omnipotence, they do nothing but averse and evil things. It is like a horseman riding a horse that is lame in one or two of its feet; his riding corresponds to the condition of the horse, that is to say, the horse goes

badly. But what is the horseman to do? If he rides such a horse alongside horses that are not lame, this will go badly while they go well, and it cannot be otherwise unless the horse is cured. Here you see that when God works in and through evil men, evil things are done, and yet God cannot act evilly although he does evil through evil men, because one who is himself good cannot act evilly; yet he uses evil instruments that cannot escape the sway and motion of his omnipotence.

It is the fault, therefore, of the instruments, which God does not allow to be idle, that evil things are done, with God himself setting them in motion. It is just as if a carpenter were cutting badly with a chipped and jagged ax. Hence it comes about that the ungodly man cannot but continually err and sin, because he is caught up in the movement of divine power and not allowed to be idle, but wills, desires, and acts according to the kind of person he himself is.

Highlight one of Luther's illustrations—one you think explains well Luther's argument that God is not responsible for evil.

G The comfort of God's omnipotent rule

God's will is certainly done. What comfort does this give us?

I go farther and say, not only how true these things are—as will be shown more fully below from the Scriptures—but also how religious, devout, and necessary a thing it is to know them. For if these things are not known, there can be neither faith nor any worship of God. For that would indeed be ignorance of God, and where there is such ignorance there cannot be salvation, as we know. For if you doubt or disdain to know that God foreknows all things, not contingently, but necessarily and immutably, how can you believe his promises and place a sure trust and reliance on them? For when he promises anything, you ought to be certain that he knows and is able and willing to perform what he promises; otherwise, you will regard him as neither truthful nor faithful, and that is impiety and a denial of the Most High God. But how will you be certain and sure unless you know that he knows and wills and will do what he promises, certainly, infallibly, immutably, and necessarily? And we ought not only to be certain that God wills and will act necessarily and immutably, but also to glory in this fact; as Paul says in Romans 3[:4]: “Let God be true though every man be false,” and again [Rom. 9:6]: “Not as though the word of God had failed,” and elsewhere: “But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are his’” [II Tim. 2:19]. And in Titus 1[:2] he says: “Which God, who never lies, promised ages ago,” and in Hebrews 11[:6]:

“Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who hope in him.”

Therefore, Christian faith is entirely extinguished, the promises of God and the whole gospel are completely destroyed, if we teach and believe that it is not for us to know the necessary foreknowledge of God and the necessity of the things that are to come to pass. For this is the one supreme consolation of Christians in all adversities, to know that God does not lie, but does all things immutably, and that his will can neither be resisted nor changed nor hindered.

God's will is certainly done. What comfort does this give us?

H Human will is like a beast of burden

Human will is changeable and turnable, but it must be changed and turned by God; it cannot change or turn itself. What's your reaction to Luther's illustration of the beast of burden? Before you answer, read the Bible verses after the quote.

By contrast, if God works in us, the will is changed, and being gently breathed upon by the Spirit of God, it again wills and acts from pure willingness and inclination and of its own accord, not from compulsion, so that it cannot be turned another way by any opposition, nor be overcome or compelled even by the gates of hell, but it goes on willing and delighting in and loving the good, just as before it willed and delighted in and loved evil. This again is proved by experience, which shows how invincible and steadfast holy men are, who when force is used to compel them to other things are thereby all the more spurred on to will the good, just as fire is fanned into flames rather than extinguished by the wind. So not even here is there any free choice, or freedom to turn oneself in another direction or will something different, so long as the Spirit and grace of God remain in a man.

In short, if we are under the god of this world, away from the work and Spirit of the true God, we are held captive to his will, as Paul says to Timothy [II Tim. 2:26], so that we cannot will anything but what he wills. For he is that strong man armed, who guards his own palace in such a way that those whom he possesses are in peace [Luke 11:21], so as to prevent them from stirring up any thought or feeling against him; otherwise, the kingdom of Satan being divided against itself would not stand [Luke 11:18], whereas Christ affirms that it does stand. And this we do readily and willingly, according to the nature of the will, which would not be a will if it were compelled; for compulsion is rather (so to say) “unwill.” But if a Stronger One comes

who overcomes him and takes us as His spoil, then through his Spirit we are again slaves and captives—though this is royal freedom—so that we readily will and do what he wills. Thus the human will is placed between the two 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 thee] and I am always with thee” [Ps. 73:22 f.]. If Satan rides it, it wills and goes where Satan wills; nor can it choose to run to either of the two riders or to seek him out, but the riders themselves contend for the possession and control of it.

What’s your reaction to Luther’s illustration of the beast of burden? Fitting? Confusing? Before you answer, read this:

When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. (Romans 6:20-22)

I Righteous either by works or by faith

In Paul’s writings, there is no room for free choice to get any credit—why not?

The other kind of righteousness is the righteousness of faith, which does not depend on any works, but on God’s favorable regard and his “reckoning” on the basis of grace. Notice how Paul dwells on the word “reckoned,” how he stresses, repeats, and insists on it. “To one who works,” he says, “his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due. And to one who does not work but has faith in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness, according to the plan of God’s grace” [Rom. 4:4 f.]. Then he quotes David as saying the same about the “reckoning” of grace: “Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin,” etc. [Rom. 4:6 ff.]. He repeats the word “reckon” nearly ten times in this chapter. In short, Paul sets the one who works and the one who does not work alongside each other, leaving no room for anyone between them; and he asserts that righteousness is not reckoned to the former, but that it is reckoned to the latter provided he has faith. There is no way of escape for free choice here, no chance for it to get away with its endeavoring and striving. It must be classed either with the one who works or with the one who does not work. If it is classed with the former, so you are told here, it does not have any righteousness reckoned to it, whereas if it is classed with the latter—the one who does not work but has faith in God—then it does have righteousness reckoned to it. But in that case it will no longer be a case of free choice at work, but of a being created anew through faith.

In Paul’s writings, there is no room for free choice to get any credit—why not?

J From Luther's conclusion

To sum up: If we believe that Christ has redeemed men by his blood, we are bound to confess that the whole man was lost; otherwise, we should make Christ either superfluous or the redeemer of only the lowest part of man, which would be blasphemy and sacrilege.

Where does Luther begin his thinking about life and salvation—with human power or with Christ's work? In other words, who is in the center—human beings or God?

Notice the contrast:

The starting point for Erasmus is the assumption that human beings retain, in some form, some capacity for free choice in spiritual matters. His conclusions flow from this assumption.

Luther's starting point for the discussion of free will is that God saves sinners purely by his grace through the work of Christ. It is not some combination of God's work and ours that saves us. His conclusion flow from this truth.

K Luther's attitude, revisited

Erasmus ended his *Diatribes on Free Choice* with these words: "I have completed my discourse; now let others pass judgment."

Luther, however, closed *Bondage of the Will* with these words: "I for my part in this book have not discoursed, but have asserted and do assert, and I am unwilling to submit the matter to anyone's judgment, but advise everyone to yield assent."

A historical and theological note

After Luther's death in 1545, the teachings of John Calvin gained popularity. One such teaching was "double predestination," the teaching that God predestined some for heaven and others for hell. Another was "irresistible grace," the teaching that God's grace could not be rejected. Both of these teachings emphasize the sovereignty and omnipotence of God—things that Luther emphasized in *Bondage of the Will*—but they go beyond or against Scripture.

A historical and theological note (continued)

Calvinists have found much to like in *Bondage of the Will*, even at times citing Luther as an ally. But had Luther known about these false teachings, he likely would have expressed certain parts of *Bondage of the Will* differently and more clearly to avoid misunderstanding.

Why Our View of Free Choice Matters

Our view of free choice determines...

...who is at the center of our preaching and teaching

- If we begin by assuming people have some power to make godly spiritual choices, human beings nudge their way to the central place in our preaching and teaching. This will ultimately result either in uncertainty (“Has my will done enough?”) or self-centered pride (“My will has done enough!”).
- If we begin by assuming people are bound in sin, then we can put God and his redeeming work in Christ in the center of our preaching and teaching. This will bring certainty and peace: “My will has not done enough, but my Savior has!”

...the direction of our preaching and teaching

- If we begin by assuming people have some power to make godly spiritual choices, we function with a law orientation: “Do this... Don’t do that... Choose wisely!”
- If we begin by assuming people are bound in sin, then we can maintain a gospel orientation: our goal is to speak the Word that sets the sinner free.

“This gouty foot laughs at your doctoring hands.”

- Erasmus seeks to explain some things to common people and to hide others from them. He seems to think, “If only we can present things like free choice and God’s omnipotence in a favorable way, then people will lead content and spiritually productive lives.”
- “You will never succeed!” objects Luther. People will struggle with the problem of God’s omnipotence and the existence of evil, no matter how we attempt to explain it away. Erasmus can’t take away the pain: “This gouty foot laughs at your doctoring hands.”

• So what can we do? Proclaim Christ! Put God—his grace, his action to save, his freely given forgiveness—in the center of preaching, teaching, and life. Proclaim Christ! He gives us his gifts through the Spirit via his Scriptures and Sacraments. Keep him in the center!

Acknowledgements

All quotations are taken from *Luther's Works: American Edition, vol. 33: Luther's works: Career of the Reformer III* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). ©1972 Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

The translation is by Philip S. Watson and Benjamin Drewery. The page references for each section:

A: 15,16 B: 35 C: 255-257 passim D: 147,148 E: 132-138 passim F: 175-176 G: 42-43
H: 65,66 I: 270,271 J: 293 K: 295 “Gouty foot”: 53 1: 242,243 2: 64,65

The cover artwork is from a 1526 translation of *Bondage of the Will* from Latin into German by Luther's colleague Justus Jonas. The title, instead of a literal translation of *De Servo Arbitrio* (*Concerning Free Choice*) is German for *That Free Will Is Nothing*.

Bonus Tracks *(To read either on your own or together if there's extra time)*

1 Our will before and after the Holy Spirit's work

When Luther attacks free will, is he going against Scripture—all the places where we, as people given life by the Holy Spirit, are encouraged and commanded to live for God? No.

We are not discussing what we can do through God's working, but what we can do of ourselves; that is to say, whether, created as we are out of nothing, we do or attempt to do anything under the general motion of omnipotence to prepare ourselves for the new creation of the Spirit. Here an answer should have been given, instead of changing the subject. For the answer we give is this: [1] Before man is created and is a man, he neither does nor attempts to do anything toward becoming a creature, and after he is created he neither does nor attempts to do anything toward remaining a creature, but both of these things are done by the sole will of the omnipotent power and goodness of God, who creates and preserves us without our help; but he does not work in us without us, because it is for this he has created and preserved us, that he might work in us and we might cooperate with him, whether outside his Kingdom through his general omnipotence, or inside his Kingdom by the special virtue of his Spirit. [2] In just the same way (our answer continues), before man is changed into a new creature of the Kingdom of the Spirit, he does nothing and attempts nothing to prepare himself for this renewal and this Kingdom, and when he has been recreated he does nothing and attempts nothing toward remaining in this Kingdom, but the Spirit alone does both of these things in us, recreating us without us and preserving us without our help in our recreated state, as also James says: “Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of his power, that we might be a beginning of his creature” [James 1:18]—speaking of the renewed

creature. But he does not work without us, because it is for this very thing he has recreated and preserves us, that he might work in us and we might cooperate with him. Thus it is through us he preaches, shows mercy to the poor, comforts the afflicted. But what is attributed to free choice in all this? Or rather, what is there left for it but nothing? And really nothing!

2 God rules by necessity, but not by compulsion

As for the second paradox, that whatever is done by us is done not by free choice but of sheer necessity, let us look briefly at this and not permit it to be labeled most pernicious. What I say here is this: When it has been proved that salvation is beyond our own powers and devices, and depends on the work of God alone (as I hope to prove conclusively below in the main body of this disputation), does it not follow that when God is not present and at work in us everything we do is evil and we necessarily do what is of no avail for salvation? For if it is not we, but only God, who works salvation in us, then before he works we can do nothing of saving significance, whether we wish to or not.

Now, by “necessarily” I do not mean “compulsorily,” but by the necessity of immutability (as they say) and not of compulsion. That is to say, when a man is without the Spirit of God he does not do evil against his will, as if he were taken by the scruff of the neck and forced to it, like a thief or robber carried off against his will to punishment, but he does it of his own accord and with a ready will. And this readiness or will to act he cannot by his own powers omit, restrain, or change, but he keeps on willing and being ready; and even if he is compelled by external force to do something different, yet the will within him remains averse and he is resentful at whatever compels or resists it. He would not be resentful, however, if it were changed and he willingly submitted to the compulsion. This is what we call the necessity of immutability: It means that the will cannot change itself and turn in a different direction, but is rather the more provoked into willing by being resisted, as its resentment shows. This would not happen if it were free or had free choice. Ask experience how impossible it is to persuade people who have set their heart on anything. If they yield, they yield to force or to the greater attraction of something else; they never yield freely. On the other hand, if they are not set on anything, they simply let things take their course.

By contrast, if God works in us, the will is changed, and being gently breathed upon by the Spirit of God, it again wills and acts from pure willingness and inclination and of its own accord, not from compulsion, so that it cannot be turned another way by any opposition, nor be overcome or compelled even by the gates of hell, but it goes on willing and delighting in and loving the good, just as before it willed and delighted in and loved evil. This again is proved by experience, which shows how invincible and steadfast holy men are, who when force is used to compel them to other things are thereby all the more spurred on to will the good, just as fire is fanned into flames rather than extinguished by the wind.