

FREE WILL AND THE REFORMATION

Martin Luther regarded the book that he wrote against Erasmus' book, *On the Freedom of the Will* as one of his most important. He called his book *On the Bondage of the Will*. The debate covered a great deal of old ground. The early church reacted against determinism in Gnosticism by stressing human free will. One of the chief examples is the fourth book of Origen's *On First Principles*. Origen held that rational creatures who fell away from God could by the exercise of their free wills return to God. Theology in the East continued to emphasise free will heavily, in spite of much that was correct about the Trinity and the two natures in Christ. For example, the writings of Maximus the Confessor are heavily laden with free will. In the West, one of the great issues that Augustine took up was his controversy with Pelagius over human nature and God's grace. Augustine's doctrine about original sin and God's grace was closer to the teaching of the apostle Paul than many other writers in the early church. Many understood God's grace to be little more than His help to co-operating man.

Many monks in particular prided themselves on their holy lives, and in southern France writers like John Cassian, Vincent of Lerins, and Faustus of Rhegium opposed the writings of Augustine. They supported human co-operation with God's grace. Their doctrine is often called "Semi-Pelagian." On the other side, the second council of Orange (AD 529), under the leadership of Caesarius of Aries, accepted most of Augustine's teaching about God's grace, largely in Augustine's own words. It condemned predestination to damnation, which Augustine did not actually teach, but which seemed implicit in much of his writing, and which many of his followers emphasised.

The chief heresies with which the supporters of Pelagius were charged were that Adam would have died even if he had not sinned, that the sin of Adam injured himself alone and not his descendants, that new-born children are in the same condition as Adam was before he fell into sin, that the whole human race does not die because of Adam's death or sin, nor will it rise again because of Christ's resurrection, that the Law as well as the Gospel offers entrance to heaven, and that even before the coming of Christ there were men who were completely without sin. Pelagius did not oppose infant baptism, though he had no rationale for it. He said that it opened the door of heaven for them.

Many stock themes were discussed again and again, among them God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Strictly, in the first encounters between Moses and Pharaoh, we have statements that Pharaoh hardened his heart, and only after the later plagues are we told that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. So that he would not let the Israelites go. There is a useful adage that God hardens only those who first harden themselves.

In Carolingian France, one of Augustine's staunchest supporters, Gottschalk, a Saxon monk at Fulda, went further than Augustine had done. Various writers supported or opposed Augustine on questions of predestination to damnation, Christ's atonement allegedly limited to the elect, and human free will. Gottschalk was condemned by a succession of synods, misrepresented, imprisoned, and harshly treated. He was refused Communion, and not buried on consecrated ground. After many debates, the whole subject remained as unclear as it had been before the controversy. Semi-Pelagian teaching continued to be the chief teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, and the opposite extreme can be seen in the writings of John Calvin at the time of the Reformation.

Erasmus was one of the most learned men of the age. When Luther translated the New Testament into German, he used the work that Erasmus had done on Greek manuscripts. When the Reformation began, Erasmus was sympathetic with many points in Luther's writings, but he was strongly settled in his dilatory methods of writing and acting. His ideas of reforming the church followed humanistic lines. Luther expressed his admiration for much that Erasmus had done in the cause of a purer, moral Christianity. However, when Erasmus refused to commit himself, because he dreaded any change in the current doctrinal position of the Catholic Church, and because his treatise *On Free Will* used double-talk and expressed false theology, Luther wrote his book about the enslaved will against Erasmus in AD 1526.

One of the groundbreaking Reformation writings of Luther in 1521 had been about the freedom of the Christian man. The book rested on two theses: that the Christian man is lord over all things, and subject to no one, and that the Christian man is a bond slave of all, and subject to everyone. He is free from all authority other than God's authority, but he is absolutely obliged to serve all people under the lordship of Christ. However, the freedom of the Christian should not be construed to mean that man is free in his relationship to God. Man is not the directing agent in the relationship between God and man. Man does not choose. God is the directing agent. Man is chosen. Luther did not write this book as a piece of abstract philosophy. His concern related to man's salvation. Under God's foreknowledge and government of the world, human beings choose to act or not act in certain ways in

external matters. However, from a spiritual point of view, natural man is like a donkey ridden by the devil, which can only go the devil's way.

Indeed, the biblical teaching about human nature after the fall and original sin on the one hand, and God's universal and undeserved, unconditional grace in Christ on the other are beyond rational comprehension. It is unthinkable to human reason that a pendulum of a clock could swing on only one side of its arc. Reason would conclude that it could not then swing at all. Reason concludes that if man can reject God's grace, he can also decide for it. Many people have the feeling that if they cannot have the opportunity to make decisions about God, and play a role in their own salvation, salvation is not their own. They are not interested in salvation if they cannot play their own part in it.

The crucial issue in Luther's book is his denial of free choice. Man as he is by nature cannot know and decide \n spiritual matters. Salvation is due entirely to God's grace in Jesus Christ. Luther insists that this truth about God's grace and the enslaved will should not be kept from the common people. He also discusses the importance of assertions for Christians, the external clarity of Scripture. The discussion about God's foreknowledge, human contingency, and divine necessity is also profound. Against arguments for tradition in the church, Luther makes the important point that the true church, which does not err, is hidden from men's sight. The hiddenness of the church and its unity is crucial today too.

Luther's work, *The Bondage of the Will*, is available in several translations. One, by Philip Watson, is in the American edition of Luther's works, volume 33 (1972). Near the end of this important book, Luther wrote:

"Moreover, I praise and commend you highly for this also, 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 like trifles (for trifles they are rather than basic issues), with which almost everyone hitherto has gone hunting for me without success. You and you alone have seen the question on which everything hinges, and have aimed at the vital spot; for which I sincerely thank you, since I am only too glad to give as much attention to this subject as time and leisure permit. If those who have attacked me hitherto had done the same, and if those who now boast of new spirits and new revelations would still do it, we should have less of sedition and sects and more of peace and concord. But God has in this way through Satan punished our ingratitude."