

Luther and Erasmus: The Central Confrontation of the Reformation

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Abstract

One of Martin Luther's lasting achievements is his confrontation with Erasmus on the freedom of man's will. After first absorbing the nominalistic semi-Pelagian synthesis consensus, Luther revolted against the intellectual and spiritual mediocrity of that prevailing system of thought by using Ockham's logical razor and recovering biblical realism. *The Bondage of the Will* is the first confessional statement of the Reformation. Two opposing visions of reality emerge: Erasmus's skepticism and semi-Pelagianism versus Luther's realism and the sovereign grace of God in salvation. However, there is a major breach in Luther's magnificent dogmatic achievement: in his doctrine of the two kingdoms the order of creation is abandoned to the initiative of man's thinking apart from the sovereign authority of Scripture.

Introduction

Martin Luther has often been perceived, both from the Protestant point of view and by Roman Catholics, as a biblical theologian, but one whose philosophical underpinnings were resolutely nominalist with an Ockhamist rejection of universals. According to this interpretation Luther stands at

the philosophical source of modern individualism, skeptical subjectivism, and rationalistic empiricism. His confrontation with Desiderius Erasmus on the issue of whether man's will is free to attain salvation shows that this perception of Luther's work is fundamentally incorrect. There is little doubt that Luther in his younger years was a partisan of the mitigated and eclectic nominalism of the late-fifteenth-century philosopher-theologian Gabriel Biel, which was prevalent in the schools and universities of his time.¹ It is also clear that Luther later engaged in a fierce struggle against both the classical Pelagianism of William of Ockham (man must and can satisfy the demands of divine justice through his own freely accomplished works) and the semi-Pelagianism of Biel (man needs, in order to attain perfect justice, the assistance of God's grace to perfect the efforts of free will). For Biel, the first movement of man seeking God comes from the decision of his own free will, an initiative having no need of God's grace.

Such outright Ockhamist Pelagianism led Luther to despair: how could sinful man ever satisfy the perfect justice of a holy God? On the other hand, the spiritual mediocrity of Biel's semi-Pelagianism, with its drastic reduction of God's demands on man, disgusted him because of its negation of the holiness of God. Luther discovered the true nature of justice that Jesus Christ accomplished for us: incarnation on our behalf, perfect active obedience to the law of God, perfect passive submission to God's wrath for our sins on the cross, and the imputation of Christ's benefits to the repentant sinner. This liberated him from the futility of semi-Pelagianism. The justice of Christ, unattainable by human efforts, Luther discovered to be the free gift of the grace of God (*sola gratia*) accessed through belief in Christ (*sola fide*) and by the sovereign free action of the Holy Spirit (*solī Deo gloria*).

This conflict stood at the heart of the war Luther engaged against late medieval scholasticism. The incisive logic of William of Ockham—his famous “razor,” the sharpest of tools—came to good use, so that Luther gradually came to rid himself of the teachings that had obscured the plain teaching of the Bible. Here also, the philological criticism developed in the course of the fifteenth century by humanists such as Lorenzo Valla and, later, by Erasmus himself, came in good stead. Luther labored to remove the crust of erroneous readings of Scripture accumulated over the centuries, whose dogmatic force rendered impossible the submission of repentant sinners to the Word of God (*sola Scriptura*) for salvation.

¹ Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963).

Erasmus did not move beyond the literary philological criticism of the text, but this is not the case with Luther. For Erasmus this discipline led first to philosophical skepticism and later to dogmatic uncertainty, even regarding the teachings of the Roman Magisterium. Luther, on the other hand, went beyond this approach. Once he had freed himself, by a prodigious intellectual and spiritual struggle, from the crust of the false dogmas of late medieval Roman Catholicism, he brought into action a very different epistemological and metaphysical virtue: a remarkable biblical and doctrinal *realism*. Once the pruning knife of Ockhamian logic and humanist philological criticism had done its work, Luther, unlike Erasmus, turned to creative labors: the deduction, from the recovered text and the exact meaning of the Scriptures, of a dogmatic and systematic framework faithful to the biblical *rule of faith*. It is here that we discover the true Luther, a realist thinker of the highest order capable of drawing from the Bible its true meaning. It is this epistemological and metaphysical realism, that of the Bible itself and of the normal use of the intelligence, which renders the modest and humble student capable of discerning the biblical universals that structure the order of creation. Both Protestant and Roman Catholic misconceptions of Luther's achievement proceed from an incapacity to distinguish between the two stages of his work; the first was nominalist, the destruction of erroneous notions imposed on Scripture, the second realist, the constructive, creative rediscovery of the exact theological content of the Bible.

Luther was thus not the adversary of right reason but of its sophistic misuse. In *The Bondage of the Will* he pushes sound logic to its limits and carefully shows to what extent Erasmus's reasonings are incoherent, both in themselves and with regard to the plain grammatical and logical sense of Scripture.² Luther proves to be the father of the spiritual realism of our confessionally Reformed heritage, sounding the trumpet that for two centuries gave a faithful note to the orthodox, catholic, and apostolic Christian faith. In this respect we may learn from another spiritual giant, Pierre Courthial, who clearly perceived the confessional character of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries:

Neither the first ecumenical councils, with their Trinitarian and Christological declarations, nor the confessions of the Reformation with their soteric and Scriptural affirmations, invented new doctrines supplanting the words of Holy Scripture. They only preserved, in giving them greater precision, the *Fides catholica e Scriptura fluens* (the Catholic Faith proceeding from Scripture), this in contradiction to the

² Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1973) includes an important introduction.

innumerable and ever renascent heresies which threaten the Christian faith, preserving thereby *solī Deo gloria* (To God alone all Glory!), that indeed,

God alone is Lord and Savior,
There is none other but him.³

1. *With What Did Luther Reproach Erasmus?*

We shall now turn, after a few introductory remarks, to Luther's biblical and theological polemic against Erasmus's *Diatribē with Regard to the Freedom of the Will*.⁴ There had been, for a number of years, an uneasy alliance between Erasmus of Rotterdam, the universally admired humanist, and Luther, the theologian-preacher of the University of Wittenberg, Erasmus had, however, become anxious at Luther's growing polemic with the Church of Rome. Erasmus had long campaigned for a return to the "simplicity of the gospel" and for a radical internal correction of the structure of the Roman Church and its sacraments, but he gradually found Luther's stringent demands more than disturbing. Erasmus was caught between his desire for a limited renewal of the church, for which he had found an ally in Luther, and the growing demand of the papal hierarchy that he take a clear stand against the Wittenberg firebrand.⁵

On his side Luther was increasingly dissatisfied by Erasmus's all-too-human conception of the Christian faith. In a letter dated March 1, 1517—the year of the Ninety-Five Theses—Luther wrote to a friend, "I am reading our Erasmus and I like him less and less."⁶ And on May 28, 1522, Luther, thinking of Erasmus, wrote again, "Truth is stronger than eloquence, inspiration is worth more than brilliance, faith is superior to erudition."⁷ He had well perceived the humanist's love for peace at all costs. On October 19, 1521, Erasmus wrote to a friend, "If the church had adopted Arianism or Pelagianism, I would also have adopted them."⁸ As Erasmus himself confessed: "I do not have the mettle for martyrdom." But the call for Erasmus to take

³ Pierre Courthial, *Le jour des petits recommencements* (Lausanne: L'Âge d'Homme, 1996), 176–77. Our translation. The English version of this masterpiece should shortly be published by Zurich Publishing as *A New Day of Small Beginnings* (Tallahassee, FL: Zurich Publishing, forthcoming), <http://www.zurichpublishing.org/#!a-new-day-of-small-beginnings/irk81>.

⁴ Érasme de Rotterdam, *Essai sur le libre arbitre*, ed. Pierre Mesnard (Alger: Robert & René Chaix, 1945). "Erasmus, A Discussion or Discourse concerning Free Will (1524)," in Clarence H. Miller et al, *Erasmus and Luther: The Battle over Free Will* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2012), 1–31.

⁵ On this Erasmian dilemma, see Marie Barral-Baron, *L'enfer d'Érasme: L'humaniste chrétien face à l'histoire* (Geneva: Droz, 2014).

⁶ Mesnard, *Essai sur le libre arbitre*, 39.

⁷ Ibid., 43.

⁸ Ibid., 44.

a stand publicly and choose the side he stood for became more and more insistent. In 1524 Luther offered not to write against him, asking of Erasmus that he take a neutral position. But the pressure from Rome became too strong, and in September 1524 Erasmus published his diatribe *De libero arbitrio diatribe sive collatio* (*Discourse Concerning Free Will*). It was a clear declaration of hostilities. Luther's reply, the *De servo arbitrio* (*Bondage of the Will*), was published over a year later, in December 1525. Between Luther and Erasmus there could now be no conciliation!

Let us now turn briefly to the philosophical, biblical, and theological polemic in which Luther engaged with regard to Erasmus's *Discourse Concerning Free Will*. Luther starts by placing the debate squarely on the necessity for an affirmative intellectual attitude so that certainty of knowledge in the practice of theology be attained. We must, affirms Luther, reject Erasmus's nominalist and empirical skepticism so that we can reach certainty as to the doctrine we deduce from Scripture. We must tend to a confessional faith—to a dogmatic certitude, in other words—one that manifests and confesses verbally the eternal and immutable doctrine of revealed truth. Luther's first attack is thus directed against Erasmian skepticism.

Luther understands full well that Erasmus seeks to defend theological agnosticism—we would today speak of a “nondoctrinal position”—in order to promote ecclesiastical and social peace. But what kind of peace does this imply, and what would be the cost? Luther replies, “To take no pleasure in assertions is not the mark of a Christian heart; indeed, one must delight in assertions to be a Christian at all.” To make his meaning absolutely clear, he adds, “Now, lest we be misled by words, let me say here that by ‘assertions’ I mean staunchly holding your ground, stating your position, confessing it, defending it and persevering in it unvanquished.”⁹ Luther sets aside Erasmus's recommendation not to engage in futile discussions. He addresses himself directly to Erasmus:

What Christian can endure the idea that we should deprecate assertions? That would be denying all religion and piety in one breath—asserting that religion and piety and all dogmas are just nothing at all. Why then do you—you! assert that you find no satisfaction in assertions and that you prefer an undogmatic temper to any other?¹⁰

In fact, for Erasmus the question of the capacity or incapacity of man to save himself, whether his will is free or enslaved, stood among what he calls “pointless, unnecessary questions” that one could agree to ignore, to set

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

aside as of indifferent interest. But for Luther this was a matter of eternal life or death. For him it was of capital importance to know if God's prescience is contingent—that is, dependent on future variable and unpredictable events—or if God's prescience is absolute, necessary, and immutable. Luther pursues his demolition of Erasmus's sophistry:

Here you are, a theologian, a teacher of Christians, now about to write for their guidance an outline of Christianity, and not merely do you vacillate, in your skeptical way, as to what is profitable and necessary for them, you go back on yourself, defy your own principles and make an *assertion*—an unheard-of assertion—that here is something non-essential.¹¹

Luther adds that if it is not essential to know what would be useful or not useful for the Christian's salvation, "then there is neither God, Christ, the gospel, faith nor anything else even in Judaism, let alone Christianity, [that] is left!" This is where Erasmus's nondoctrinal Christianity—and the present rejection of doctrinal norms—ends up. Luther now develops his demonstration of the fatal consequences of Erasmian skepticism. He starts with his Pelagianism:

The outline of Christianity which you have drawn up contains, among other things, this: "We should strive with all our might, resort to the healing balm of penitence, and try by all means to compass the mercy of God, without which man's will and endeavour is ineffective."

Luther comments,

The Christ-less, Spirit-less words of yours are chillier than very ice. ... This is what your words assert: that there is a strength within us; there is such a thing as striving with all one's strength; there is a mercy in God; there are ways of compassing that mercy; there is a God who is by nature just; and so on. But if one does not know what this strength is—what men can do and what is done to them—what this "striving" is, and what is the extent and limit of its effectiveness—then what should he do? What will you tell him to do?¹²

In these passages Luther attacks his adversary's skepticism. Erasmus, who declares that "it is irreligious, idle, and superfluous to want to know whether our will effects anything in matters pertaining to eternal salvation," nonetheless asserts, according to his Pelagian *credo*, just the contrary.¹³

¹¹ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 75.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 76.

Luther thus affirms the Christian doctrine of divine foreknowledge, of the total foresight of God for every event in time and space, from Erasmus's own words, from popular wisdom and, finally, from the Bible itself. Luther thus affirms this vital doctrine:

It is, then, fundamentally necessary and wholesome for Christians to know that God foreknows nothing contingently, but that he foresees, purposes, and does all things according to His own immutable, eternal and infallible will. This bombshell knocks "free-will" flat, and utterly shatters it; so that those who want to assert it must either deny my bombshell, or pretend not to notice it, or find some other way of dodging it.¹⁴

After having shown by Erasmus's own words, by the futile character of certain distinctions, and by popular wisdom, the existence and the necessity of divine providence, Luther shows Erasmus the consequences of his skepticism:

If then, we are taught and believe that we ought to be ignorant of the necessary foreknowledge of God and the necessity of events, Christian faith is utterly destroyed, and the promises of God and the whole gospel fall to the ground completely; for 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.

Luther then addresses his adversary directly:

Observe now, my good Erasmus, where that cautious, peace-loving theology of yours leads us! You call us back, and prohibit our endeavours to learn about God's foreknowledge and the necessity which lies on men and things, and advise us to leave behind, and avoid, and look down on such inquiries; and in so doing you teach us your own ill-advised principles—that we should seek after ignorance of God (which comes to us without seeking, and indeed is born in us), and so should spurn faith, abandon God's promises, and discount all the consolations of the Spirit and convictions of our conscience. Epicurus himself would hardly give such advice!¹⁵

Luther closes this section of his book by calling Erasmus to repentance and to a return to God:

It is no game and no joke to teach the holy Scriptures and godliness, for it is so very easy to fall here in the way that James described: "He that offends at one point becomes guilty of all" (2:10). For when we show ourselves disposed to trifle even a little and cease to hold the sacred Scriptures in sufficient reverence, we are soon involved in impieties and overwhelmed with blasphemies—as you are here, Erasmus. May the Lord pardon and have mercy on you.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., 80.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 85.

II. The True Nature of the Conflict between Luther and Erasmus

The French historian of the Reformation Jean Boisset, in his study on the conflict between Luther and Erasmus on free will, seeks to show the contrast between the two great figures of the religious and political history of the early sixteenth century. He describes the “two ways”—which structure the whole of the history of God’s covenantal dealings with mankind—as they impinge on the lives of these two central figures:

But there were two ways. The guides on this journey were Erasmus and Luther, both witnesses of their time; the one animated by the euphoric anxiety attached to the erudite study of human reality, Erasmus; the other, Luther, filled with that tragic anguish of man who seeks to accomplish the will of God.¹⁷

We have seen that Luther’s *Bondage of the Will* manifests a newly rediscovered *confessional faith*, faith brought to light by the unwearied realist battle against error. It is thus that the heralds of the faith of the Reformation showed themselves, by their unchangeable confessional standards, to be the rightful and worthy inheritors of the fathers who formulated the creeds of the fourth and fifth centuries. On the other hand, to echo the title of another work, we could say that Erasmus’s *Diatribes* represents the “critical Christianity” of modern times.¹⁸ The great Erasmian scholar Augustin Renaudet aptly titles an important chapter of his *Erasmian Studies* “Le modernisme érasmien.”¹⁹ Where Luther submits his reason to the divine authority of holy Scripture, Erasmus for his part, submits the holy books to the liberty of the critical reason.

Luther was scrupulous to the extreme in his disciplined life as a monk. He entered his vocation under the constraint of a binding vow, abandoning himself passionately to the limits of physical and moral exhaustion to the obedience demanded by the monastic rule. It was thus that he hoped to find peace with a God justly angered by his sins. It was during his time as a monk that Luther—in contradiction to what has so often erroneously been written of him—became the accomplished philosopher to which his *Bondage of the Will* so eloquently witnesses. Boisset excellently describes his period in his life:

¹⁷ Jean Boisset, *Érasme et Luther: Libre ou serf arbitre* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962), 6.

¹⁸ Pierre Mesnard, *Érasme ou le christianisme critique* (Paris: Seghers, 1969).

¹⁹ Augustin Renaudet, “Le modernisme érasmien,” in *Études érasmiennes (1521–1529)* (Geneva: Droz, 1939), 122–89.

He entered the convent seeking to find appeasement to the inner torment which burned his soul. Deeply troubled by the teaching he had received, he could find no way to balance the sovereign holiness of God with the unbearable weight of his own sin. "In such moments, he writes, God appears frightfully angered and the whole creation takes on this hostile appearance." Luther knew within himself a crucifying anguish, and it was to appease this torture that he chose to become a monk.²⁰

Léon Chestov also describes Luther's attitude at this time very accurately:

Whatever Protestants may say, Luther took this fateful resolution [of entering the monastery] because he believed in the exclusive perfection of the monastic life and that, by conforming himself to such a model of perfection, he would come to please God and to merit both forgiveness and eternal life.²¹

For Erasmus, things went otherwise, indicates Boisset:

Erasmus in Steyn had a very different experience. ... No doubt at Steyn, as in Erfurt, one read the Bible, the fathers and the mystics. Only, whilst the Augustinian monk in Erfurt was abandoned to his search of salvation, aiming more for holiness rather than for wisdom, Erasmus, the Augustinian in Steyn, sought after secular wisdom rather than for holiness.²²

Boisset adds, "Thus it is no surprise not to find in all his correspondence in Steyn a single mention of Jesus Christ."²³ He compares the two monastic experiences:

For Erasmus the time in the Augustinian monastery of Steyn was a period of study where he diagnosed the miseries of the present and the glories of ancient times; where he acquired a culture which the years to come would allow him to exploit; where he emerged unchanged in his convictions and confirmed in the orientation of his life. For Luther his time in Erfurt was a battle of three years where he diagnosed man's eternal misery; where he went through a spiritual experience which, in the years to come, would spread like wildfire throughout Europe; wherefrom he would emerge "altogether changed" and ready to "*Gott Leiden*," to "suffer God."²⁴

Both Luther and Erasmus were attached to the principle of a return to the sources, *ad fontes*, the search for the foundational texts; both were part of the drive for renewal; both were precise grammarians and, as we shall shortly discover, Luther far surpassed Erasmus. But if for Erasmus the aim

²⁰ Boisset, *Érasme et Luther*, 12.

²¹ Léon Chestov, *Sola fide: Luther et l'Église* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957), 81.

²² Boisset, *Érasme et Luther*, 14–15.

²³ *Ibid.*, 15–16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

was the renewal of the study of literature; for Luther it was to rediscover the saving truth of God in Jesus Christ, in the witness of Holy Scripture. How then did Erasmus and Luther read the biblical text? Let us start with Luther.

After a careful examination of Erasmus's arguments, Luther brings to our attention their logical and grammatical shortcomings. He then turns to the study of scriptural justification, which the great humanist put forward to defend his thesis of man's exercise of "free-will" in the acquisition of salvation. Boisset indicates Luther's basic question: "What do the biblical passages brought forward by Erasmus really signify? In fact the very opposite of what he affirms! Erasmus has clearly not understood the meaning of the passage he quotes." For Luther, writes Boisset, "Erasmus has not understood what the words 'wage' and 'reward' mean in the Bible: there is a recognition, a due, in favor of good will. However, if the Bible 'shows that the wage is necessary,' it does not show 'that we merit it by our dignity.'" ²⁵ Luther explains his position:

Wherefore, as the words of the law serve their own turn by instruction and illumination, to teach us what we ought to do and what we cannot do, so the words of reward, signifying what is to be, serve their turn by exhorting and threatening, and animate, comfort and uphold the godly to press on, persevere and triumph in doing good and enduring evil, lest they be wearied, or their spirit broken. ²⁶

In conclusion, Boisset writes,

But Erasmus does not know how to read the Word of God. He can neither read it according to the Spirit nor according to its grammar [the letter]. And Luther then undertakes to give the humanist a lesson in exegesis in order to obtain a correct version of a fragment of Romans 9:18: "Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy and whom he will he hardeneth." ²⁷

Here is Luther's exegetical aim:

We are not enquiring whether one *could* employ it [in a figurative sense] to explain this passage in Paul; our question is, whether we may with safety and certainty suppose that we are correct in invoking it to explain this passage, and whether Paul meant to use it here. ²⁸

²⁵ Ibid., 66.

²⁶ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 183.

²⁷ Boisset, *Érasme et Luther*, 67.

²⁸ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 193.

Boisset goes on to add, “We must thus respect the literal meaning of the text and express precisely what it says and not what it intends or what it could say.”²⁹

In the spirit of grammatical and exegetical realism, for Luther the words of the biblical text truly refer to the reality named:

Everywhere we should stick to just the simple, natural meaning of the words, as yielded by the rules of grammar and the habits of speech that God has created among men; for if anyone may devise “implications” and “figures” in Scripture at his own pleasure, what will all Scripture be but a reed shaken by the wind, and a sort of chameleon?³⁰

Luther adds,

There would then be no article of faith about which anything could be settled and proved for certain, without your being able to raise objections by means of some “figure.” All “figures” should rather be avoided, as being the quickest poison, when Scripture itself does not absolutely require them.³¹

What would Luther say today about the irrational and ungrammatical critical and hermeneutical hawks who prey on the text and meaning of Scripture? He continues:

I have noticed that all heresies and errors in handling the Scriptures have come, not from the simplicity of the words, (as almost all the world tells us), but from not regarding the simplicity of the words, and from hankering after figures and implications that come out of men’s own heads.³²

Luther then explains how Erasmus, in his interpretation of the biblical text, abuses the elementary rules of grammar:

And when these “explanations,” which no grammarian could tolerate, occur in theologians, they may not be called violent and arbitrary; they are “*the views of the most respectable and time-honoured doctors.*” The *Diatribes* is easily able to sanction and pursue figures at this point, for it is indifferent as to whether what is said is sure or unsure. Indeed, it aims to have all things unsure, for it advises that the doctrines concerning “free-will” should be left alone and not investigated. Hence it would be satisfied with any way of warding off of statements by which it felt itself embarrassed.³³

²⁹ Boisset, *Érasme et Luther*, 67.

³⁰ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 192. Boisset, *Érasme et Luther*, 67.

³¹ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 192.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 193.

How prophetic is Luther! This is exactly what critical exegesis (Arminian, antinomian, theistic evolutionist, dispensational, fundamentalist, Pentecostal, or Roman Catholic) has, at different times, been doing to Scripture for the past four hundred years, without always finding a reply from Christian theologians comparable to this indignant, and extraordinarily accurate, apologetic satire, which is an amazing example of a true defense of the faith! Luther's conclusion we make our own: "But for me what is in hand is a serious matter; I want to be as sure of the truth as I can, in order to settle men's consciences; and I must act far differently."³⁴ And he adds,

On what authority, and to what purpose, and by what need, is the natural meaning of the passage thus distorted? What if the reader is astray in his explanation? How is it proved that his distortion of the words in this passage is correct? It is both dangerous and impious to wrest the Word of God without authority and without need.³⁵

III. *Luther and Nominalism*

Luther made generous use of his nominalist heritage in demolishing the eclectic, skeptical theological system that marked his thinking as a student. But here we must add some qualifications. The citations from *The Bondage of the Will* reveal the extraordinary grammatical and semantic biblical realism that characterized Luther's exegesis. For him Christian doctrine—the dogmas of the faith—must at all times correspond with the greatest exactitude to the conceptual and spiritual content of Scripture. Nevertheless, in his refutation of Erasmus's pseudo-biblical (and pseudo-grammatical!) arguments, Luther used certain Ockhamian concepts, in particular concerning the "two kingdoms" and the distinction between the hiddenness of God and God's accessible revelation (Deut 29:28). The latter was charged with Ockhamian overtones, opposing speculatively the absolute power of the divinity, as above the law, and God's ordained justice, as finding its expression in the revealed law.³⁶

The distinction between the absolute power of God (*potestas absoluta*), only limited by the principle of noncontradiction, and his ordained power (*potestas ordinata*), as manifest in the revealed Word of God and the order of creation, was understood by Luther in submission to the teachings of the Bible. He categorically refused to follow the abstract speculative path

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 194.

³⁶ David Steinmetz, "Luther and the Hidden God," and "Luther and the Two Kingdoms," in *Luther in Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 23–31 and 112–25. André de Muralt, *L'unité de la philosophie politique de Scot, Occam, Suarez au libéralisme contemporain* (Paris: Vrin, 2002).

opened by Ockham to justify the idea of an absolute divine power considered as unrelated to his other attributes.

However, Luther was not as biblically clear in his dualistic nominalist distinction between the “two kingdoms.” His distinction concerns what in his view is under God’s realist direct authority and what God seems to leave to the subjective autonomous empirical authority of man. Careful study of the Augustinian tradition shows that this dualism draws its source in a remnant of Manichaeism and Plotinian influence in Augustine’s thinking. To better understand both Luther’s thought and what he reproached Erasmus with, a text from *Ecclesiasticus* he discusses is interesting: “So we learn from *Ecclesiasticus* that ‘man falls under two kingdoms.’ In the one, he is led by his own will and counsel, not by any precepts and commandments of God; that is, in the realm of things below him.”³⁷ So the order of the world is divided into two kingdoms: one of grace, governed directly by God, and the other of nature, governed by man, the latter being however under a certain control exercised by God. Luther, yielding here to Ockham, recognizes two kingdoms; the one contains “those things below him”: matter, vegetable, and animal life, and also, to some degree, politics. This kingdom remains, to a certain extent, autonomous from God. Man can himself, by the exercise of his will, choose between good and evil, establish moral distinctions and those founding the metaphysical principles of the material universe (Gen 2:2–3).

In this distinction lies the seed for openness in favor of the future autonomous development of the new sciences of nature. Thus for Luther there is no question—this in opposition to the whole Christian tradition prior to Ockham—of seeking to bring every thought of man captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor 10:5). If Luther is indeed fully *apostolic* in his understanding of the biblical doctrines concerning salvation, he is, on the other hand, insufficiently *catholic* in his Christian thinking concerning the natural world. For, according to him, there exists a domain in the natural world, “of things below him,” which man “governs according to his own counsel.” In fact, for Luther this is the counsel of man and no longer that of God.

Here is a spectacular return in Luther’s thinking of Erasmus’s free will and, with it, a way opened for the secularization—without God’s norms—of the whole temporal domain; the *liberal* freeing of man from necessary submission to the obligatory authority of divine laws over that order of nature God created and ordained. We see firsthand Luther’s lack of understanding,

³⁷ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 150. It is interesting that Luther draws his argument from an apocryphal text.

both of the creational order as fully belonging to God and of the revealed laws established by the Creator for his creation by which he set limits for man's exercise of the creation mandate.

Luther thus affirms that the gospel leaves us free to use, or not to use, external matters such as food, drink, and so forth as we see fit. However, even in such apparently external matters, God has established a framework with regard to what we drink and what we eat, limiting the absolute freedom of our appetites and passions by certain biblical alimentary and other rules; for example, he restrains (but does not forbid) our consumption of alcoholic beverages and limits our free technocratic use and abuse of the natural realm.

Luther now turns to the domain of "theology," that is, to the "spiritual kingdom," the realm precisely ordered by God, through his *potestas ordinata*. This he does in the most realist of manners, explaining with remarkable attention the conceptual content of the biblical text, the infallible authority of the Word of God. However, are the material, the vegetable, and the animal domains of creation not also, each in its proper sphere, fully part of the "kingdom of God"? Luther writes as if, in the "temporal" or "secular" spheres, man could, of himself, "as god" determine good and evil as well as the first principles of creation!³⁸

It is in this specific "realm of God," that of the "gospel," and not in that of the "law," in the domain of *ultimate realities*, of heavenly things and not in that of *penultimate*, earthly *realities*, that Luther shows a remarkable gift for biblical and spiritual realism. It is here we can see a real continuity between that wonderful confessional text, *The Bondage of the Will*, and the Reformed confessions and catechisms of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, culminating, on the one hand with the Canons of Dort, and, on the other, with the documents of Westminster, in direct biblical continuity with the creeds of the faith of the ancient church.

A concluding passage of our text witnesses even more clearly to Luther's persistence, in an important part of his writings, in his attachment to the nominalist dualism of his earlier years. "As in his own kingdom he is led by his own will, and not by the precept of another, so in the kingdom of God he is led by the precept of another, and not by his own will."³⁹ That is, man is led by his own choice without *exterior* divine direction, either of the law of God, that of the created order, or the external human authority of the Roman Church. It is this *purely subjective human choice* that Luther here wrongly opposes to the *external objective choice of God*, which concerns

³⁸ Jean-Marc Berthoud, *Création, Bible et science* (Lausanne: L'Âge d'Homme, 2008).

³⁹ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 151.

man's salvation, as expressed in the Gospel and, in particular, in the New Testament itself.

Conclusion: The Heart of the Reformation, the Confessions of Faith

There can be little doubt that the religious and educational revival associated with the lay movement of the Brethren of the Common Life played a capital role in the preparation of the Reformation. But for the Reformation to develop into a lasting ecclesiastical form it was essential to return to the ancient dogmatic expression of the faith. Only a normative doctrinal confession could give a permanent biblical structure to the nascent communities in a phase of inchoate revival. The first step in this direction was the publication of Luther's masterly refutation of Erasmus's *Diatribes*. *The Bondage of the Will* was the first and, perhaps, the most important confessional document of the Reformation.

From a philosophical point of view, it represented the defeat—in principle, even if only partial and temporary—of the eclectic nominalism that had dominated European thought and religion during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Against Erasmus, universals were re-established by Luther in the form of a dogmatic confessional and polemical statement, articulated in realist conformity to the content of the Scriptures that can be expressed conceptually. In contrast to Luther, as a precursor of modern liberal thinking, Erasmus remained, to a large degree, faithful to the essentially nondoctrinal—moral, voluntarist, and intellectual—renewal of the late Middle Ages so characteristic of the Brethren of the Common Life. He did not break with the semi-Pelagian vision of Biel.

For the Reformation to flourish and take root this multiform nondoctrinal renewal of piety had to be canalized in specific doctrinal directions, either that of a biblical and ecclesiastically faithful doctrinal tradition represented by Luther and the Calvinist movement on the one hand, or on the other by the later hyper-Romanist Jesuit order founded by Ignatius of Loyola. It is here that Luther's *Bondage of the Will* played such a decisive role, sounding with the greatest clarity and force the trumpet of the true and full-blooded gospel. One of the most remarkable fruits of Luther's work of doctrinal formulation of the "faith delivered once and for all to the saints" (Jude 3) was the astonishing blossoming throughout Europe of innumerable, and largely unanimous, Reformed confessional statements and catechisms. A tremendous intellectual and spiritual effort—comparable to the Symbolic Confessions of the fourth and fifth centuries—recovered the doctrinal

content in a revival of what Heinrich Bullinger called the “Old Faith,” in strict conformity with the intellectual content of the Scriptures.⁴⁰

In seeking to destroy philosophically the reality of universal categories, Ockham made doctrinal and dogmatic reading of Scripture impossible for those in the nominalist and empirical tradition, so destroying intellectual access to the substance of Scripture. He opened the way for the subjectivist atomization of the biblical text into a medley of innumerable isolated pericopes without any structural relation one to another. In this sense Ockham, like Erasmus some two centuries later, was a precursor of the historico-critical method of modernism, which destroys the coherence (the unity of divine authorship and truth) of the written and infallible Word of God.⁴¹ In this way the unity of meaning of the Bible—its truth, a systematic coherence within the ultimate transcendent reference of meaning—was broken.

Thus the prodigiously intelligent, complex—open to transcendence and coherent—structure of the Bible, both in its meaning and in the light it sheds on God’s creation and on providential history, was destroyed. In its place was established the stunted intelligence of the solitary critical biblical scholar. This biblical critic—of whom Erasmus became the model⁴²—substituted for the unity of the revealed creational and redemptive design of the only true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the infinitely subjective and irrational fantasies of the critical scholar. However, God-given and God-restored intelligence is capable, by the illumination and sanctification of the Holy Spirit, of modestly comprehending, within those creaturely limits, the divinely accommodated meaning both of the Scriptures and (through the Scriptures) of God’s created and providential reality. For the Trinity, the almighty, just, and loving God is the author, not only of the Scriptures but also of creation and history! With his infallibly inspired and fully human instrument—the sixty-six books of the Bible—God has given his church the canonical Scriptures, which contain the whole divine Word (*tota Scriptura*) necessary for the upbuilding and obedience of the church and for the salvation of the world, the re-creation of the elect and, through them, that of the created and fallen *cosmos*.

It was Luther’s great achievement with that prophetic trumpet call, *The Bondage of the Will*, to restore to the Christian church the heritage of its

⁴⁰ See the forthcoming article by Joe Mock, “Bullinger’s *The Old Faith* (1537) as a Theological Tract,” *Unio cum Christo* 3.2 (October 2017).

⁴¹ To a lesser degree, such strictures may also be applied to the literalistic, univocal, and binary fragmented reading of Scripture that we find in fundamentalist dispensationalism.

⁴² On the tradition of Erasmian studies, see Bruce Mansfield’s trilogy, *Interpretations of Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979–2003).

ancient intelligence of God's Holy Word. This orthodox, catholic, and apostolic approach to the Bible can, and will, restore to those who both fear and love God, the life-giving and true meaning of the Bible. May God—as he was with Martin Luther in the sixteenth century—continue to be glorified in his church today by the fruits of this majestic achievement.