**Lutheran Identity as Bondage**

**(of the will)**

by

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**Introduction**

“Bondage” as a label of identity seems harsh and unattractive. In *On The Bondage of The Will* (1525), Luther’s greatest work[[1]](#footnote-1), the doctrine is indeed unattractive and unacceptable to many. It is very much like the turning point in Jesus’ ministry where He turned to His disciples and said, “Do you also want to leave me?” (John 6:67). Heinz Schilling writes: “With an eye to how Luther can be put to work today, church leaders may be tempted to temper the uncompromising character of the reformer’s thought precisely on this issue, or to pass it off as historically contingent.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

In the humanistic trend of his time, Luther adopted for himself the Greek word for “freedom” as his name: Eleutherios. From November, 1517 through the whole year of 1518 he signed his personal letters with this word, which after writing the 95 Theses conveyed the idea that he is a free man.[[3]](#footnote-3) So why this strong emphasis on bondage of the will in 1525? The answer can be found in Luther’s insight that the greatest truths are hidden under what appears opposite. As Gerhard Forde observes: “Only preaching that assumes the bondage of the will for its hearers truly comes to free.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

In today’s Chinese world, this truth and identity is as vitally important as it was in Luther’s day as he was facing and toppling the great Babel Tower of Western philosophic pride and Medieval semi-Pelagian theology. Very much like the Western cultural giants, Plato and Aristotle, the East is deeply steeped in the moral philosophy of Confucius and Mencius. A millennia before Christ, the very cruel final king of the Shang dynasty told the Chinese people that Heaven’s order put him in charge, so regardless of what they do good or bad, he would still abuse them. This fed the feeling of fatalism. The Zhou dynasty overthrew him and established this longest reigning Chinese dynasty (and Chinese culture) upon the moral Law that Heaven is just and will indeed reward the good and punish the bad. Therefore, in contrast to fatalism, what they do does make a difference. Confucius and Mencius expanded and projected this principle of respect for morality into the cultural foundation that Chinese receive by osmosis.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Buddhist thought has also left a very deep imprint upon Chinese thought and culture. One of the things the swastika in Buddhism represents is Samsara, which is the suffering cycle of death and reincarnation driven by the impersonal Law of Karma. Karma means, “to do”, so our actions destine us to our future pain or pleasure.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Confucian and Buddhist thought easily join in the same chorus with Erasmus, who represents 1,000 years of semi-Pelagian Medieval theology, which was strongly influenced by Plato and Aristotle. It’s a unified, moralistic confidence in human free will to perform what is necessary to bring salvation. There is definitely reason for concern that the Chinese church will repeat that Western Medieval history. That is the mountain Luther toppled with his opus magnum, *On The Bondage of The Will*. Luther’s message is hard for the pride of man to accept: we are bound to the devil or God: “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,…If Satan rides it, it wills and goes where Satan wills…”[[7]](#footnote-7) It seems that an American poet was able to grasp this for a short time: Bob Dylan with his 1979 song, “Gotta Serve Somebody.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Background**

The background of Luther’s *On the Bondage of the Will* (1525) can be introduced with a quote from it’s conclusion:

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.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Of interest in this quote is that Luther regards as trifles the issues that originally sparked and fanned the Reformation fires. The trifles are really symptoms, superficial results of the root problem, which Luther identifies as the semi-Pelagian Medieval theology. *Bondage* topples 1,000 years of such corrupted theology. And the same overboard curiosity and unenlightened pronouncements continue to our day. As Steven Ozment observes about this discussion, “Nothing is so new as what is old.”[[10]](#footnote-10) The problems all start with the question: “Why are some saved and not others?” It then continues with a very “reasonable” answer: “The answer lies in the saved or condemned person.” Isn’t it reasonable to think that when one hears the Gospel and believes, that such a person must have done something different than another person who equally heard and yet did not believe? Wasn’t the believer at least more open, unwilling to persist in rejecting, able to make a decision to receive and believe the Gospel, of a slightly more honorable heart, sincere, humble, willing to do whatever he or she could, etc.? This is exactly the way the grappling has gone throughout Christian history.

Augustine struggled with Pelagius, who believed people have the spiritual power within them to do what is necessary to obtain salvation by their own efforts, which efforts needed to be quite strenuous and include much personal righteousness. Pelagius and all throughout the middle ages held that people are saved by grace, but it was a grace that resided within and had to bring forth human effort to save one or contribute to one’s salvation. Augustine’s view eventually triumphed so that theologians of the middle ages avoided the heretical label of Pelagianism. However, Augustine’s sanative justification caused problems in also focusing upon the grace at work in a person to gradually heal and transform the person through growth in grace into one who could be eventually pronounced righteous. Erasmus was faithful to the Medieval semi-Pelagian theology in suggesting that people contribute to their salvation in putting forth at least a small spiritual effort towards their salvation. In order to avoid Pelagianism, the Medieval theologians made various pronouncements indicating that people need to do a small amount of “what lies within them” towards their salvation. Luther called out this tower of Babel, sharply and clearly criticizing Erasmus and Medieval Scholastic theology by saying very truly that semi-Pelagians look down on God’s salvation far more than Pelagians since they simply require a small effort of righteousness whereas the Pelagians require extensive and strenuous righteousness.

An example close to home was that of the via moderna scholastic theology of the German theologian, Gabriel Biel. His doctrinal textbook was a staple when Luther began studying theology, so Luther was entrenched in and taught the via moderna theology as Luther began to lecture on the Psalms in the University of Wittenberg in 1513.[[11]](#footnote-11) The foundational principle was that God will not deny grace to the one who does what is within himself. Biel himself recognized the uncertainty in this: “The individual cannot know for certain whether he has done *quod in se est*. In this, Biel faithfully reproduces the medieval theological tradition, which was unanimous concerning this point: man simply cannot know with certainty whether he is worthy of hate or love by God…he cannot know whether God will justify or condemn him…the cause of much *Anfechtungen*!”[[12]](#footnote-12)

However, as Luther studied and taught *Romans* and *Galatians* in 1515-1517, he discovered that salvation comes entirely from outside of us and we are corrupted by sin to the point that when we do what is within us we sin. Luther brought this understanding out into the open in his 97 theses against scholastic theology in September, 1517 (a month before the 95 theses). He deals with this issue of the corrupted will in a variety of theses (7, 17, 21, 30, 33). For example, in thesis 7, he says: “Without the grace of God the will produces an act that is perverse and evil.”[[13]](#footnote-13) As he moved onto the Heidelberg Disputation in 1518, Luther continued to deal with the will (theses 3, 13, 16), especially thesis 13: “Free will, after the fall, exists in name only, and as long as it does what it is able to do, it commits a mortal sin.”[[14]](#footnote-14) And in a major blow to scholastic theology, thesis 16: “The person who believes that he can obtain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he becomes doubly guilty.”[[15]](#footnote-15) This theme of Luther was one of the articles condemned in the papal bull of 1520, which Luther reasserted in his response to the bull, *Defense And Explanation of All The Articles* (1521). Luther’s article 36 asserts: “Since the fall of Adam, or after actual sin, free will exists only in name, and when it does what it can it commits sin.”[[16]](#footnote-16) This thesis topples and turns the foundation of Medieval scholastic theology on its head. Not only does a person fail to do anything to prepare for, take a step toward or draw God’s grace when one does “what is within oneself.” Rather one acts against God and goes in the opposite direction of His grace. What a revolutionary and surprising thought in that context of hundreds of years of ingrained semi-Pelagian theology. It was too much for those entrenched in the Medieval theology, so it became one of the articles by which Luther was accused of heresy, excommunicated by the pope and put under the emperor’s ban. Thus attacked and rejected by the highest religious leader and the emperor, Erasmus, the most famous scholar of the day, takes up this very article to attack Luther.

Erasmus had been one of the greatest proponents of reform, railing against empty ritual, the lack of good ethics and the boring scholastic theological method. He pushed for reform in these areas and good scholarship which returned to the sources. He advocated a fair hearing for Luther and his Greek New Testament was a key resource for Luther and all the reformers. However, when Luther was condemned as a heretic, excommunicated and outlawed, this way of the cross was too much for Erasmus to stomach.[[17]](#footnote-17) In 1524, Erasmus came out in open disagreement with Luther and criticized Luther for his teaching about free will with the writing entitled *On the Freedom of the Will, A Diatribe or Discussion*. Luther’s work is a tit for tat response, rather than an effort to sit down and lay out a systematic and thorough account of the Lutheran Reformation theology. However, “It is widely regarded as Luther’s magnum opus, and Luther too came to see it that way.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

While Erasmus’ title suggests a discussion or debate, it is in reality a strong attack and challenge. He starts by saying that Luther and his followers shouldn’t take offense at him disagreeing with one of Luther’s articles since Luther disagreed with so much of the status quo theology, and Erasmus wants to confine the discussion to this one issue without making it gladiatorial battle.[[19]](#footnote-19) Erasmus writes that he wants to play “the inquirer, not the dogmatist”[[20]](#footnote-20), yet he himself ends up taking “a firm stand against taking a firm stand,”[[21]](#footnote-21) and harshly attacks key points of Luther’s theology on a wide variety of issues, using phrases like “the dangers inherent in Luther’s teachings.”[[22]](#footnote-22) This passive-aggressive style provoked Luther into a robust response.

**Content**

It took Luther a year to respond, mainly because he was disappointed in Erasmus’ work (especially since he apparently had nothing new to add to the discussion, but repeated old worn out arguments), but also because 1525 was a very challenging year for Luther with the Peasants’ War and his marriage. When *Bondage* was finally published on the last day of 1525, “The result was a crushing, comprehensive restatement of Reformation doctrine.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

Luther does outstanding theological work on key topics: Law and Gospel, scholastic theology, exegesis, the foundation of theological knowledge, the doctrine of scripture, the hidden and revealed God, the revelation and comfort of the Gospel, speculation and reason’s limitations, linguistics, pastoral theology, homiletics, the theology of the cross, the means of grace, and other important topics. However, the main point Luther makes through the exegesis of many scripture passages is that after the fall and before grace, man’s will is in bondage to sin and the devil. Luther makes the point that people have free will in regard to the things under them, but not in the things over them, the things of God: “Free choice is allowed to man only with respect to what is beneath him and not what is above him…in relation to God, or in matters pertaining to salvation or damnation, a man has no free choice, but is a captive, subject and slave either of the will of God or the will of Satan.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Man is dead in his sin and must be turned by God in order to believe and be saved (Ephesians 2:1-9). Once turned by the Holy Spirit, the believer is bound to God as God’s own. Most of the discussion centers around the bondage to sin and Satan since that is originally the main point of discussion, but the joyful life of being bound to Christ shows itself in various ways throughout the work.

Erasmus expressed his view that the Bible is clear on ethics (Law), but not so on the doctrines connected to the Gospel.[[25]](#footnote-25) His feeling is that the Bible is obscure and these things should not be discussed among all but only debated and discussed among an elite few. Luther strongly disagrees, noting that each person should know what was revealed for all to know: what can/cannot each person do toward their salvation, and what God does for our salvation. As Lyndal Roper perceptively observed, “Luther’s psychological insight was acute. If Christians had even a small remnant of free will, they would be plunged into radical uncertainty about salvation because it would not be clear how much this remnant contributed to it.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Furthermore, Luther discerns that Erasmus “makes no distinction whatever between expressions of the law and of the gospel…”[[27]](#footnote-27) The main argument Erasmus puts forward is that the presence of the commands in the Bible indicates that people have the ability and free will to fulfill their imperatives. This worn out argument meets with Luther’s continual rebuttal that imperatives are not indicatives. In other words, the commands show us what we ought to do, but do not affirm that we have the ability or free will to fulfill them. In fact, the main purpose of God’s Law is to give us the knowledge that we are sinners in preparation for the good news of the Gospel, by which we are saved through Jesus Christ alone.

Luther explains two reasons that the bondage of the will must be taught openly to all: “The first is the humbling of our pride, and the knowledge of the grace of God; and the second is the nature of Christian faith itself.”[[28]](#footnote-28) He affirms that “no man can be thoroughly humbled until he knows that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, devices, endeavors, will, and works, and depends entirely on…God alone.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Regarding the second reason, he writes:

The second reason is that faith has to do with things not seen. Hence in order that there may be room for faith, it is necessary that everything which is believed should be hidden. It cannot, however, be more deeply hidden than under an object, perception, or experience which is contrary to it. Thus when God makes alive he does it by killing…Thus God hides his eternal goodness and mercy under eternal wrath, his righteousness under iniquity. This is the highest degree of faith, to believe him merciful when he saves so few and damns so many…[[30]](#footnote-30)

These topics of sin, grace, scriptural revelation, and faith are the main substance of *Bondage*. They are the most important knowledge and what God desires all people to know.

That we don’t know all the answers to “why?” in regard to God is reasonable: “Since he is the one true God, and is wholly incomprehensible and inaccessible to human reason, it is proper and indeed necessary that his righteousness also should be incomprehensible, as Paul also says where he exclaims: ‘O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways!’”[[31]](#footnote-31) At the end, Luther writes: “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.”[[32]](#footnote-32) He simply exhorts the reader to a focus on God’s Word, especially the Incarnate Word, and proclaims that we should not probe the why of the Divine Will:

The secret will of the Divine Majesty is not a matter for debate, and the human temerity which with continual perversity is always neglecting necessary things in its eagerness to probe this one, must be called off and restrained from busying itself with the investigation of these secrets of God’s majesty…Let it occupy itself instead with God incarnate, or as Paul puts it, with Jesus crucified, in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, though in a hidden manner; for through him it is furnished abundantly with what it ought to know and ought not to know…offering to all men everything necessary for salvation.[[33]](#footnote-33)

**Challenges**

Despite this monumental work of Luther, shortly after his death the synergistic controversy broke out among the Lutherans in 1555 when Johann Pfeffinger asserted that “The difference between the elect and the damned must lie in themselves.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Again, as throughout church history, this arose from the curiosity, speculation and attempt to answer the “why”: why are some saved and not others? However, “Pfeffinger’s argument made human assent, as small and weak as it might be, the key to reconciliation between the sinner and God.”[[35]](#footnote-35) After a number of years of struggle involving a number of theologians, it was resolved in the *Formula of Concord* (1577) with a confession of Luther’s main thesis of *On The Bondage of The Will* (1525):

In this human nature, after the fall and before rebirth, there is not a spark of spiritual power left or present with which human beings can prepare themselves for the grace of God or accept grace as it is offered…Rather they are “the slave of sin” (John 8:34) and prisoners of the devil, by whom they are driven (Eph. 2:2; 2 Tim. 2:26). Therefore, according to its own perverted character and nature, the natural free will has only the power and ability to do whatever is displeasing and hostile to God.[[36]](#footnote-36)

This synergistic challenge is continually present. Lutheran missionaries are not only reaching out to the lost in cultures that are inherently steeped in the belief in the spiritual power of free will, but are also salt to other believers who are tossed about by such speculations and resultant semi-Pelagian pronouncements and beliefs. The witness of many and their outreach to the lost is consequently hindered. A definite concern is that as the Chinese church continues to rise up, mature and grow in widespread influence, there is an ever-present possibility that it will repeat the stumbling semi-Pelagian theology of the Medieval Western Christian world.

**Conclusion**

*On The Bondage of The Will* was “Luther’s most daring reassessment of medieval theology.”[[37]](#footnote-37) In this most monumental work of great theological depth, Luther topples a millennium of semi-Pelagian theology. The message of the Gospel is clear and simple in its proclamation that we are sinners, Christ died and rose for all, and all who believe in Him will not perish but have eternal life. Yet this simple proclamation has great depth as well. We are dead in our sin, not merely sick or wounded. We need God to turn us through the Gospel and make us alive to Him spiritually. Luther’s *Bondage of the Will* deals with this clear simplicity as well as its theological depth in focusing upon the bondage of the human will in order to reform the doctrine of the church, corrupted by a thousand years of struggling with human answers to the question of why some are saved and not others. Luther’s work is immensely applicable in our mission work today as we deal with exactly the same questions, which thoroughly engulf both the Christian and the non-Christian world around us.

1. WA Br 8:99.7-8. In this 1537 letter to Wolfgang Capito, Luther writes that none of his works are of value aside from *Bondage of the Will* and the catechism. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Heinz Schilling, *Martin Luther Rebel In An Age Of Upheaval*, translated by Rona Johnston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 337. As Heiko Oberman has observed, “Scholars have rejected the tract as unsuccessful or exaggerated, the “liberal” view has rendered it innocuous, and the “pastoral” one has tried to put it right.” Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther Man Between God and the Devil*, translated by Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 139-140. Luther’s original surname, Luder, can have negative immoral connotations, so after 1518 Luther retained the “th” of Eleutherios even though he no longer signed his letters with this Greek word. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gerhard O. Forde, *The Captivation of The Will: Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Stephen P. Oliver, “The Moral Visions of The Epistle of James and Zhongyong” (Ph.D. diss., Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, 2002), 104-117. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [www.buddhanet.net/fundbud9.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/fundbud9.htm). January 15, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. LW 33:65. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Bob Dylan, “Gotta Serve Somebody,” www.Bobdylan.com. March 5, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. LW 33:294. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250-1550: An Intellectural and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven, MS: Yale University Press, 1980), 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Alister E. McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of The Cross* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1985, 1990), 86-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 110-111. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. LW 31:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. LW 31:48. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. LW 31:50. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. LW 31:92. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther: 1517, Printing, and the Making of the Reformation* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 230-231. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Eric Metaxas, *Martin Luther: The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World* (New York: Viking, 2017), 366. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and* Salvation, eds. Gordon Rupp and Philip Watson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), 36ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Mataxas, 363. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Luther and Erasmus*, 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Pettegree, 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. LW 33:70. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Luther and Erasmus*, 39-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegrade and Prophet* (New York: Random House, 2016), 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. LW 33:132. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. LW 33:61. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. LW 33:62. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. LW 33:62. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. LW 33:290. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. LW 33:293. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. LW 33:145-146. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Charles Arand, James Nestingen and Robert Kolb, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 544. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)