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An Investigation of Luther's View of the Bondage of the Will with Implications for Soteriology and Theodicy

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Martin Luther sparked one of the greatest movements of Christian history when he challenged tenets of the Catholic faith in 1517, and his influence is still very strong.¹ One of Luther's major contributions to theology was his emphasis on grace. This was extracted from the writings of Paul and also influenced by the works of the great church father Augustine. This paper endeavors to look at Luther's view of the human will in the context of his soteriology of grace. Specifically, what is Luther's conception of the freedom of the will? Does the human nature have any such thing as free will in its post-fall state? Moreover, how does Luther define the process of salvation? In other words, why are some saved and others lost? These and other questions must be addressed from Luther's perspective. Luther lays out his views on the will of God and the will of man in a polemic against the viewpoints of Desiderius Erasmus in the book, *The Bondage of the Will*. Therein, Luther's soteriology is made explicit. This paper will look at Luther's theology and interact with it from a biblical perspective with the purpose of exposing Luther's theology of the will. The coherence or incoherence of Luther's theology of the human will is also of great importance to this study. The issue of the will also bears heavily on the ability to uphold the goodness

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)*, 5 vols., *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984), 4:139.

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and justice of God. How does Luther's approach integrate with some biblical passages on the nature of God and the nature of salvation?

Martin Luther's famous struggle and arduous trial (*Anfechtung*) over his own salvation through works brought him to the conclusion that "by his own understanding or strength he could not believe in Jesus Christ or come to him."² Luther was "very troubled by the idea of *iustitia Dei*, the 'righteousness of God.'"³ He thought of God as a completely impartial judge, a dispassionate umpire. He states, "I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners . . ."⁴ Thus Luther became certain that he could not be saved.⁵ Accordingly, the promise of salvation was bitter, it was "as if God had promised a blind man a million dollars, provided that he could see."⁶ Luther struggled long and arduously, but finally found light. He discovered that the righteousness of God is not His just condemnation of sinners but "the righteousness which is given to us so that we may meet that precondition."⁷ Luther then spent a career preaching the grace of God. The primacy of grace thus became fundamental to his Christian belief. So when the issue of free will was raised, Luther saw it as a great threat to his doctrine of salvation. His position is laid out clearly in his dispute with Erasmus entitled *The Bondage of the Will* (*De servo arbitrio*). He always considered this a very important work, saying "'none of my works is worth anything except' the catechism and *De servo arbitrio*."⁸

It is important to understand the context of this work before Luther's arguments are examined. The opponent of Luther was a towering scholar.⁹ Erasmus originally was a supporter of Luther's and had called for reforms himself. However, as things heated up, he felt that he needed to distance himself. By speaking out against predestination, Erasmus "would be able to separate himself from the reformer without rejecting

² Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 11.

³ Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (New York: Blackwell, 1988), 93.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Career of the Reformer IV*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), 34:336.

⁵ McGrath, 93.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁸ Kolb, 15.

⁹ "If any figure stands head and shoulders above other northern European humanists . . . it was Erasmus of Rotterdam" (McGrath, 53). Erasmus is also famous for his compilation of the New Testament in the original Greek.

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his own call for reform.”¹⁰ Luther, on the other hand, considered Erasmus to be merely a “moralist” or a proponent of “works-piety”¹¹ and thought that “Erasmus had no notion of the nature of the gospel.”¹² This made Luther less likely to consider Erasmus’ view on its merits. They also disagreed on the interpretation of Scripture. Gerhard O. Forde represents Erasmus’ method as a “box score” method, whereas Luther might rely on just “one passage” to convince of truth.¹³ Erasmus also held the view that Scripture should be interpreted carefully by trained scholars, whereas Luther thought the Bible should interpret itself and that everyone should read it for themselves.¹⁴ Their concerns over the application of Scripture were likewise at odds. As will be seen shortly, their definition of the very meaning of terms was often very different, and thus they often “talked past each other.”¹⁵ The tone of the argument is often quite strong and argumentative. However, it must be understood that polemic was a commonly accepted style of writing, and thus the words of Luther may seem harsher to the contemporary reader than they really are.¹⁶ Moreover, this was more than an academic dispute to Luther, it was a

¹⁰ Kolb, 12.

¹¹ Harry J. McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong?: An Ecumenical-Theological Study of Luther’s Major Work, the Bondage of the Will* (New York: Newman, 1969), 287.

¹² Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 3:56. For an interesting early 20th century analysis of Luther and Erasmus, see Robert H. Murray, *Erasmus and Luther: Their Attitude to Toleration* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1920).

¹³ Gerhard O. Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther Vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 24.

¹⁴ Kolb, 22.

¹⁵ Kolb, 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17. Gerrish refers to “Luther’s cheerful truculence and fondness for overstatement [which] may have appeared to make predestination a bone of contention between Rome and Wittenberg” (Brian A. Gerrish, “Sovereign Grace: Is Reformed Theology Obsolete?” *Interpretation* 57/1 [2003]: 55). McSorley states that at this time “an opponent was read not in order to understand him, but to refute him!” (McSorley, 287).

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matter of Christian warfare.¹⁷ Based on this belief, “Luther was driven by his concern for terrified consciences.”¹⁸

Luther's Concept of Free Will

Definition of Free Will. Martin Luther states the prime question of “whether God foresees anything contingently, or whether we do all things of necessity.”¹⁹ In his answer he defines “free will” by saying, “all who hear mention of ‘free-will’ take it to mean . . . a will that can and does do, God-ward, all that it pleases, restrained by no law and no command; for you would not call a slave, who acts at the beck of his lord, free.”²⁰ Thus, for Luther, the term free will delineates a will that is able to do just about anything.²¹ Conversely, Erasmus defines his view by saying, “By free choice in this place we mean a power of the human will by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from them.”²² This definition clearly allows power to the human will, especially in matters of salvation.²³ These conflicting definitions continue to be problematic throughout the debate.²⁴

¹⁷ Kolb notes that “Luther was certain that their exchange was part of the final combat between God and the devil. The warfare between God and Satan took place throughout human history in the clash of God’s truth with the devil’s lies, and Luther sensed the end of history at hand, when only an intensification of the conflict could be expected” (Kolb, 18). For a study of Luther’s view of reason, philosophy, and scholasticism, see Brian A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962).

¹⁸ Kolb, 23.

¹⁹ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. O. R. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 79.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

²¹ This is an extreme definition of freedom of will that would be very difficult to defend. In effect, one would have to be omnipotent to have free will, which is why Luther holds that only God has free will. However, this definition is not the one defended by advocates of free will, even though it is the one Luther argues against most often, as we will see.

²² Desiderius Erasmus, “De Libero Arbitrio,” in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, ed. E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 47.

²³ However, it is not clear what the phrase “apply himself” entails. Luther found Erasmus’ view incoherent because it “leaves man effort and endeavour, but does not leave him anything that he may ascribe to his own strength” (Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 144). It is true that Erasmus’ view is historically viewed as inconsistent, and it need not be defended here. For an excellent discussion of Erasmus’ own struggle between contradictions during his debate with Luther, see James D. Tracy, “Two Erasmuses, Two

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Another important distinction for understanding Luther's position is his definition of contingency and necessity. First, Luther clarifies that "*being done contingently* does not, in Latin, signify that the thing done is itself contingent, but that it is done by a contingent and mutable will—such as is not to be found in God."²⁵ On the other hand, Luther says that "*necessity* . . . cannot accurately be used of either man's will or God's."²⁶ Luther does, however, speak of a "necessity of immutability." He writes that the human will is not compelled: "I did not say 'of compulsion'; I meant, by a necessity, not of *compulsion*, but of what they call *immutability*."²⁷ By this he means one acts "spontaneously and voluntarily. And this willingness or volition is something which he cannot in his own strength eliminate, restrain or alter."²⁸ Thus, all that occurs, including the

Luthers: Erasmus' Strategy in Defense of De Libero Arbitrio," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 78 (1987): 37-60.

²⁴ This effectively limits any constructive dialogue on the subject. For, in the definitions themselves there is given no ground between an absolutely free will as previously defined and a will that is enslaved. Thus, it seems one must be a Pelagian or a determinist.

²⁵ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 81. He states also on contingency, "If the will of God were such that, when the work had been done and while it yet remained in being, the will ceased . . . then it could be truly said that things happen contingently and mutably" (Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 81). Thus, since God is absolutely immutable for Luther, He cannot do anything "mutably" or contingently. This not only denies freedom to humans, but by implication to God himself. And because God is omnipotent, everything must happen necessarily, even though Luther would not utilize this terminology. For a discussion of the problem of the classical conception of divine immutability, see Bruce A. Ware, "An Evangelical Reexamination of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God," (1984; Dissertation presented to Fuller Theological Seminary). See also an interesting perspective in Isaak August Dorner, *Divine Immutability: A Critical Reconsideration*, trans. Robert R. Williams and Claude Welch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

²⁶ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 81. McSorley contends that "Luther did not really grasp the distinction of the two kinds of necessity" (McSorley, 317).

²⁷ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 102. He maintains paradoxically that "The will, whether it be God's or man's, does what it does, good or bad, under no compulsion, but just as it wants or pleases, as if totally free" (Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 81). This is what is now called compatibilism, or sometimes monergism. For an excellent introduction to monergism, see Terrence L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?: Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004). For an excellent discussion of the issues and a moderate Calvinist view, see Norman Geisler, *Chosen but Free* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1999). For an excellent and thorough collection of the contemporary debate on free will, see Robert Kane, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002).

²⁸ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 102. Here again it seems Luther is really talking about power, or potency. That one cannot do something for lack of power does not neces-

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will of man, is under necessity based on the immutability of God's will and God's decree, yet paradoxically the will is not compelled.

The Will of Humanity. Based on these definitions, Luther's view of the human will is clarified. According to Luther, there is a will in man, but it is not free. "You are no doubt right in assigning to man a will of some sort, but to credit him with a will that is free in the things of God is too much."²⁹ The term "free" makes the will too powerful. He reacts to any conception of this free will by saying, "what is here left to grace and the Holy Ghost? This is plainly to ascribe divinity to 'free-will'!"³⁰ But for Luther the will is not neutral; rather, because of sin, it is in total bondage. Luther therefore rejects free will due to its implication of a neutral will that denies human sinfulness.³¹

Luther does qualify this rejection. "I am not speaking of 'natural being', but of 'gracious being', as they call it. I know that 'free-will' can do some things by nature; it can eat, drink, beget, rule, etc."³² Forde thus claims Luther is not teaching determinism writing, "It is something more

sarily mean that one has no free will, especially if there were allowed a supplementary source of power, such as a prevenient grace. He further defines the term by saying, "This is what we mean by *necessity of immutability*: that the will cannot change itself, nor give itself another bent, but rather, is the more provoked to crave the more it is opposed, as its chafing proves; for this would not occur, were it free or had 'free-will'" (Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 103).

²⁹ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 137. Luther is very concerned about upholding the sovereignty of God. This may have influenced his conception of the human will.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 140. It seems that the problem here lies primarily in the definition of free will. Erasmus has not argued for a conception of an omnipotent will, and he does not deny a place to the Holy Spirit. But Luther sees no middle ground that preserves his concept of God's sovereignty and grace.

³¹ Gonzalez, 56. B. A. Gerrish notes that for Luther, "God has taken salvation out of the control of our wills and has placed it under the control of his. It is but a short step from here to a full-blown doctrine of divine determinism" (Brian A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982], 135).

³² Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 265. This seems to contradict some other statements. We will look at the internal coherence of Luther's view in a subsequent section. Moreover, the *Loci Communes*, written by Luther's companion Philip Melancthon early in his career, makes it explicit that "If you relate human will (*voluntas*) to predestination, there is freedom neither in external nor internal acts, but all things take place according to divine determination" (Philip Melancthon, "Loci Communes," in *Melancthon and Bucer*, ed. Wilhelm Pauck [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969], 30). Thus, Melancthon makes clear that whether you speak of *voluntas* or *arbitrium*, there is no freedom in either when one holds that all takes place by divine determination. Melancthon later revised his views on free will.

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like an addiction. We all do what we want to do! That is precisely our bondage. We are not jerked around by a transcendent puppeteer.”³³ At the same time, Luther paradoxically holds that everything happens according to necessity of God’s immutability. Moreover, when it pertains to matters of salvation Luther unequivocally denies any role to the human will. When Erasmus questions what man would endeavor to repent if he were certain he had no free will. Luther replies “Nobody [will reform his life]! Nobody can! God has not time for your practitioners of self-reformation, for they are hypocrites. The elect, who fear God, will be reformed by His Holy Spirit.”³⁴ Here we can see the strength of Luther’s *sola gratia*. For Luther, only God controls the will of man.³⁵ Moreover, God as the Creator meant “that God’s willing creates an absolute necessity embracing all of his creation.”³⁶

The Will as Beast Ridden. Luther states unequivocally that “in all that bears on salvation or damnation, [man] has no ‘free-will,’ but is a captive, prisoner and bonds slave, either to the will of God, or to the will of Satan.”³⁷ He goes on to say, “For if a man has lost his freedom, and is

³³ Forde, 37. McSorley agrees, saying that Luther’s position is “not really a denial of man’s natural free will” (McSorley, 327). This is due to Luther’s position that man is free in immaterial matters but bound in matters of salvation.

³⁴ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 99. Moreover, Luther has clearly espoused that everything happens according to necessity by the will of God. Thus, even if we are doing “what we want to do,” it is still God who controls the will and controls all events. Thus, if we are not puppets, we are still seemingly like a computer that runs on software that is pre-programmed.

³⁵ He cites selected biblical verses to support this position. Among them are those that speak of God directing man’s steps, preparing hearts, and holding the power of salvation (Jer 10:23; Prov 16:1; Rom 3:16).

³⁶ Kolb, 26, 29. Further, Luther was influenced toward this absoluteness of God’s will while studying at Erfurt, especially by Gabriel Biel, where he “assimilated a definition of God as the almighty Creator, who according to his absolute power could do anything he pleases, who conformed to no external standard, who defined the Good by his Word or covenant.” Yet, he rejected Biel and Ockham’s view of human responsibility that gave some part to the will in salvation. McSorley contends that this position is not solely from Scripture but also includes “philosophical or metaphysical thinking,” thus he cannot claim to argue solely from Scripture (McSorley, 311).

³⁷ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 107. The inclusion of the possibility of being in bondage to Satan raises a question regarding the will of God and that of Satan. This problem will be taken up in a subsequent section. For a philosophical discussion of foreknowledge and free will, see Ted A. Warfield, “Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom Are Compatible,” *Nous* 31/1 (1997): 80-86. See also the critique of Warfield’s view by Anthony Brueckner, “On an Attempt to Demonstrate the Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom,” *Faith and Philosophy* 17/1 (2000): 132-148.

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forced to serve sin, and cannot will good, what conclusion can more justly be drawn concerning him, than that he sins and wills necessarily?"³⁸ Elsewhere Luther holds that no man has any power to change his will, for "God does not lie, but does all things immutably, and that his will can neither be resisted nor changed nor hindered."³⁹ Luther compares this captive will to a beast with either God or Satan as its rider. "If Satan rides, it goes where Satan wills. If God rides, it goes where God wills. In either case there is no 'free choice.'"⁴⁰ Yet, sin is still not God's fault, for "the rider [God] of the horse is not responsible for the lameness which gives him a bad ride."⁴¹ Moreover, under Satan's sway man's "reason (*ratio*) is blinded; his will (*voluntas*) is hostile to God; he wants only to sin; and his choice (*arbitrium*) is always sinful."⁴² Thus, the will is bound to the will of its rider and can do nothing about it.⁴³

Erasmus questions Luther's view and notes the "paradox that all we do is done, not by 'free-will' but of mere necessity and Augustine's view that God works in us both good and evil; that He rewards His own good works in us, and punishes His own evil works in us?"⁴⁴ Erasmus goes on "What a flood-gate of iniquity . . . would the spread of such news open to the people! What wicked man would amend his life? Who would believe that God loved him? Who would fight against his flesh?"⁴⁵ Despite

³⁸ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 149. Luther uses the word "forced" here, yet elsewhere he claims the will is not compelled.

³⁹ Martin Luther, *Career of the Reformer III*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, Luther's Works (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), 33:42. On Luther's view of choice, Kolb comments, "the reformer fashioned this new universe out of elements from his own personal experience and from his instruction at the university" (Kolb, 28).

⁴⁰ Forde, 58.

⁴¹ Kolb, 53. Luther states, "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" (Luther, *Career of the Reformer III*, 176).

⁴² Packer and Johnston, 49. Notice the fluctuation between God and Satan as the controller of the will.

⁴³ Packer and Johnston state that "If man could choose his own rider, his will would indeed be free, and he would be sovereign over his own salvation" (ibid., 53). However, the Bible does speak of resisting the devil (James 4:7).

⁴⁴ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 97.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Erasmus' point, Luther refuses to wrestle with this issue. "It should be enough to simply say that God has willed . . . and the reason of the Divine will is not to be sought, but simply to be adored."⁴⁶

Luther's View of Soteriology

The Human Condition. The condition of humanity is foundational to Luther's view of salvation, especially the total depravity of man's nature (Gen 6:5,21).⁴⁷ This is a primary basis for his soteriology. He states, "If we believe that Christ has redeemed human creatures by his blood, we are bound to confess that the whole human being was lost. Otherwise, we should make Christ either superfluous or the redeemer of only the lowest part of humanity . . . and that would be blasphemy and sacrilege."⁴⁸ Further, he writes, "salvation is not of our own strength or counsel, but depends on the working of God alone . . . does it not clearly follow that when God is not present to work in us, all is evil, and of necessity we act in a way that contributes nothing towards salvation?"⁴⁹ This view of salvation is tied to his belief in justification by faith in which "God does everything necessary for salvation."⁵⁰ Thus, there is no part that man plays in his own salvation. For Luther, anything man could do would only detract from the glory of God. Rather, "the best, infallible preparation for grace, and the only disposing factor for its reception, is God's eternal choosing and predestination."⁵¹ Therefore, "man's destiny

⁴⁶ Ibid., 100. For an interesting view that Erasmus' fate was to lay the groundwork for this reformatory work, see Terrence M. Reynolds, "Was Erasmus Responsible for Luther?: A Study of the Relationship of the Two Reformers and Their Clash over the Question of the Will," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 41/4 (1977): 18-34.

⁴⁷ The will is completely evil and in bondage. "The whole man is captured by sin, not just certain portions of man" (Mark Migotti, "Luther's Word on Man's Will: A Case Study in Comparative Intellectual History," *Religious Studies* 20/D (1984): 660).

⁴⁸ Luther, *Career of the Reformer III*, 293. On the importance of the view of the sinfulness of sin for postmodernity, see a brief but nuanced discussion by Kathryn A. Kleinhans, "The Bondage of the Will as Good News for Postmodern Selves," *Dialog* 39/2 (2000): 93-98.

⁴⁹ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 102.

⁵⁰ McGrath, 100.

⁵¹ Luther, *Career of the Reformer III*, 190. Some, like Kenneth Hagen, claim that Luther did not hold the view of double predestination. Hagen writes, "Only in connection with the doctrine of redemption is an evangelical doctrine of predestination possible" (Kenneth Hagen, "Luther's Understanding of the Bondage of the Will, and the Problem of Free Will in Melancthon and Later Theologians," *Reformation & Revival* 7/4 (1998): 139. Moreover, he writes, "while He [God] creates in man the possibility to believe, the

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depends entirely upon the free decision of God.”⁵² Luther considered this belief in a bound will “the corner-stone of the gospel and the very foundation of faith.”⁵³

Grace and Divine Mercy. In Luther’s theology it is supremely clear that humans cannot be saved unless the grace of God works in them. For “nothing we do has any saving significance prior to His working in us.”⁵⁴ There is no place for the will in matters of salvation, but only grace. Erasmus holds man has free will and simultaneously allows that grace is needed for man to will good. Luther finds this inconsistent, saying, “man without grace cannot will good . . . so there is found in your ‘free-will’ at the same moment a yes and a no”⁵⁵ Yet, might there be room for a will that can accept or reject the grace of God? For Luther, to allow this would be an offense to the power of God’s grace. “If God’s grace is wanting, if it is taken away from that small power [of the will that Erasmus posits] what can it do?”⁵⁶ On the contrary, humans can do nothing without God’s grace. “Hence, it follows that “free will” without God’s grace is not free at all, but is the permanent prisoner and bondsman of evil.”⁵⁷ There is no halfway between salvation and damnation. “For if God is in us, Satan is out of us, and then it is present with us to will only good.”⁵⁸ Thus grace is all in all.

He also raises the issue of meritorious works. This exemplifies his overarching concern about faith versus works and his dispute with Roman Catholicism. He will not allow any salvific part to the will, for this might mean the will has somehow merited salvation. He states, “if ‘free-will’ merits a ‘tiny bit’, and grace the rest, why does ‘free-will’ receive the total reward?”⁵⁹ Even the slightest will in man becomes, for him, salvation by works. He leaves no room for unmerited grace as a gift that can be accepted or rejected. It is clear, then, that Luther felt he needed to

ability to reject remains” (Hagen, 140). However, Hagen does not cite Luther on this point, and Luther suggests much to the contrary throughout *The Bondage of the Will*.

⁵² Packer and Johnston, 53.

⁵³ Ibid., 43.

⁵⁴ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 102.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 145. He continues his critique of Erasmus and finds it inconsistent that “though [the will] by its own power it can only go down, and can go up only with the help of another” (ibid., 143).

⁵⁶ Ibid., 104.

⁵⁷ Ibid. There seems to be lacking here a distinction between power and will which might be a helpful nuance.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 147.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 237.

deny free will to maintain the sovereignty of God's grace, and thus the whole basis of his theology, "for this was the real matter under debate."⁶⁰ Because of his concept of salvation, central to his reforms, he was obliged to "uphold the absolute necessity of God's grace for every human act that has any relevance for salvation."⁶¹ There is no place for contingency; all is performed by the will and the power of God. The will is bound, and thus, salvation is bestowed solely by God, with no input from the human will. Luther states, "to believers he [God] gives the righteousness of God; to unbelievers he [God] denies it."⁶²

Luther's Biblical Interpretation

Luther relies on many texts to support his interpretation of the bondage of the will. Some prominent ones include "I know whom I have chosen" (John 13:18) and "The Lord knoweth them that are his" (2 Tim 2:19).⁶³ This, coupled with Luther's view of foreknowledge as God's decree, asserts a predestinarian view of salvation. He also references Isaiah 46:10, "Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things that are not yet done, Saying, 'My counsel shall stand, And I will do all My pleasure.'" Moreover, God made "promises before the world began" and "whom he will he hardeneth" (Tit 1:2; Rom 9:18,22). Luther also references the narrative of Balaam in Num 22, claiming it as proof against free will. "Thus Balaam's inability to say what he wished is a clear proof from the Scriptures that man is not in his own power, nor free in choosing and doing what he does. Were it not so, no such case could stand in the Scriptures."⁶⁴

Love of Jacob, Hatred of Esau. Luther finds some of his most prominent examples in Rom 9. He begins by discussing Romans 9:13, where God declares "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated." Luther comments, "God chose Jacob and chose him before he was born . . . He

⁶⁰ Packer and Johnston, 47.

⁶¹ McSorley, 304. McSorley goes on to say, "Despite some ambiguities, Luther's early attacks on free will should be interpreted as a defense of the Augustinian doctrine of the powerlessness of free will without grace in matters of salvation" (McSorley, 369). Packer and Johnston contend that the alternative would be that "Man earns his passage; man, in the last analysis, saves himself" (Packer and Johnston, 49). Forde agrees saying, "The entire gospel is destroyed if one tries like Erasmus, and most theologians still do these days, to avoid the problem of necessity" (Forde, 68).

⁶² Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 290.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 259.

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so hated Esau that He removed his place of abode in the desert.”⁶⁵ This is a primary proof for the decrees of God. Luther goes on to accuse Israel of being ungrateful for the grace of God. “I know that men are grafted in by faith and cut off by unbelief, and that they must be exhorted to believe, lest they be cut off. But it does not hence follow, nor does this prove, that they can believe or disbelieve by the power of ‘free-will’, which is the point we are discussing.”⁶⁶ Even still, he holds that we have no will either to believe or not to believe. “Paul teaches that faith and unbelief come to us by no work of our own, but through the love and hatred of God.”⁶⁷

Pharaoh. Luther also utilizes the hardening of Pharaoh that Paul speaks of in Romans 9. He writes that Pharaoh “allowed his own ungodly corruption, under Satan’s sway, to blaze with anger, to swell with pride, to boil with rage and to advance along the path of scornful recklessness.”⁶⁸ This would not have occurred without the effective will of God, for “His evil will would not have been moved or hardened of itself, but as the omnipotent Agent makes it act . . .”⁶⁹ Thus God acts on Pharaoh’s heart. “God presents from without to his villainous heart that which by nature he hates; at the same time, He continues by omnipotent action to move within him the evil which he finds there.”⁷⁰ Notice that God is the causative agent, yet from within; this helps us understand Luther’s concept that the will is not compelled, yet at the same time, in bondage. Erasmus, contrastingly, holds that “God hardens when He does not straightway punish the sinner.”⁷¹ But, for Luther, under the decree of God Pharaoh had no choice but to be hardened. If it were not so, “God could not with such certainty have foretold his hardening.”⁷² Thus, he

⁶⁵ Ibid., 227. Luther interprets this somewhat differently in his commentary on Romans, where he views this as a statement that natural descent is of no value. He writes, “It did not help Esau that he descended from so good a father and so good a mother . . . How much less will it benefit the unbelieving Jews who are born so long afterwards . . .” (Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. J. Theodore Mueller [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1976], 122). He does go on, however, to assert that this election of Jacob was, in fact, salvific (124).

⁶⁶ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 228.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 229.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 206.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 207.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 195. Luther actually considers this “plausible” but does not accept it, asking “how is it proved?” (ibid., 195).

⁷² Ibid., 211.

must have caused it. “If He [God] cannot lie, then Pharaoh cannot but be hardened.”⁷³

The Potter and the Clay. On Paul’s reference to the potter and the clay in Romans 9:19-23, Luther states, “He is speaking of men, comparing them to clay, and God to a potter.”⁷⁴ Thus, God is the only agent in this operation, and the clay cannot form itself. Erasmus appeals to the other places where this metaphor arises in the OT, but Luther rejects this approach. He writes, “Paul does not appear to have taken this passage from the prophets . . .”⁷⁵ Yet, it is clear that Paul is alluding to the prominent OT appearances of this metaphor. Nevertheless, for Luther this passage shows the omnipotence of God and absolute lack of free will in man. It is obvious that we are the clay and don’t control our circumstances, “for there is no doubt that afflictions come from God against our will, and impose on us necessity of bearing them.”⁷⁶ Thus, Luther considers his position to be on firm biblical footing. According to his methodology, Romans 9 alone would give him enough proof of his position.

Issues in Luther’s View of the Human Will

Foreknowledge and Free Will. Luther sees the problem strictly as “whether God foresees anything contingently, or whether we do all things of necessity.”⁷⁷ Luther is explicit in his answer that “God foreknows nothing contingently, but that He foresees, purposes, and does all things according to His own immutable, eternal, and infallible will.”⁷⁸ In other words, His foreknowledge is bound to His decree—they are the same. He admits that there is an illusion of free will. Yet, “however it

⁷³ Ibid., 212. Fifteen years later, Luther was asked about the hardening of the heart, “Luther averred that God’s hardening of the Egyptian should be understood ‘literally’ (*proprie*) rather than ‘figuratively,’ but not as if God actively caused the rejection in Pharaoh’s heart because ‘God does not do evil though his omnipotence does all things. God hardened Pharaoh, who was evil, by not sending him his Spirit and his grace. Why such things happen lies beyond proper human inquiry’” (Martin Luther, *Tischreden*, Dr. Martin Luther’s Werke [Weimar: Bohlau, 1883-1993], 4:642-43; quoted in Kolb, 53).

⁷⁴ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 219.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 229.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 230. Luther here seems to refer to external factors that limit the possibilities of the human will. However, it seems extreme for Luther to suggest that external factors amount to “necessity.” On the contrary, it seems more than possible that the issue of external influences and/or constraints does not require a total denial of free will but, rather, the exclusion of an absolutely free or omnipotent will.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 79.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 80.

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may appear to us to be done mutably and contingently, it is in reality done necessarily and immutably in respect of God's will."⁷⁹ Luther, accordingly, asks how one who believes in contingency can believe God's promises. Further, Luther asks the question, "Do you suppose that He does not will what He foreknows, or that he does not foreknow what He wills?"⁸⁰ Luther sees no will that thwarts God's will, all happens according to God's determining.

He takes the case of Judas to illustrate his point:

If God foreknew that Judas would be a traitor, Judas became a traitor of necessity, and it was not in the power of Judas or of any creature to act differently, or to change his will, from that which God had foreseen. It is true that Judas acted willingly, and not under compulsion, but his willing was the work of God, brought into being by His omnipotence, like everything else.⁸¹

He goes on to assert "it would certainly be a hard question, I allow—indeed, an insoluble one—if you sought to establish *both* the foreknowledge of God *and* the freedom of man together."⁸² Moreover, he states, "Either God makes mistakes in His foreknowledge, and errors in His action (which is impossible), or else we act, and are caused to act, according to foreknowledge and action."⁸³ This is in accord with Luther's view of necessity, the will and foreknowledge of God are bound up together in His decrees. Nevertheless, "Judas betrayed Christ willingly. My point is that this act of will in Judas was certainly infallibly bound to take place, if God foreknew it."⁸⁴ Therefore, there was no other alternative, for "how could Judas change his will while God's infallible foreknowledge stands?"⁸⁵ When Luther states that Judas sinned willingly, he does not mean that Judas could have done otherwise, but simply that he did what was in his will to do. This does not refer to freedom, but the nuance of lack of compulsion.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 213.

⁸² Ibid., 215. He even uses the Gentile belief in fate for support saying "for even the Gentiles ascribed to their gods 'fate inevitable!'" (ibid., 216).

⁸³ Ibid., 217.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 220.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

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However, is it true that God's foreknowledge must deprive man of freedom? Must contingency and freedom injure God's foreknowledge?⁸⁶ For Luther, the answer is yes. However, consider this example. A free agent may choose to read this or choose not to read this. That God knows you would read this does not necessarily entail that you have no choice. The perceived problem is that if God knew *before* what you would do, then you have no choice in the *present*. However, the problem is not the perfect knowledge of your action, but the timing of the action.⁸⁷ Rather, if the problem is conceived from a different angle, it may be that if you would not read this, God would have known you would not read it. In other words, God would not be in error in His foreknowledge, but He would foreknow your free decisions themselves.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, because

⁸⁶ The issue of God's foreknowledge has been a subject of great discussion recently. For a critical analysis of God's foreknowledge in relation to his freedom, see the view of Open Theism. For an excellent introduction to Open Theism by multiple proponents, see Clark H. Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994). See also William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge*, Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989); Clark H. Pinnock, *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1989). For further delineations of this view, see Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible & Spiritual Conflict* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1997); John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998). For a thorough investigation and critique, see Millard J. Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He Know It?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003). See also William Lane Craig, *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom: The Coherence of Freedom* (New York: Leiden, 1991); William Lane Craig, "Hasker on Divine Knowledge," *Philosophical Studies* 67 (1992): 57-78; Norman L. Geisler, H. Wayne House, and Max Herrera, *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001); Steve Nichols, "An Early Response to Open Theism," *Reformation and Revival* 12/2 (2003): 111-129.

⁸⁷ This raises the question of God's relation to time. The possibility remains that God transcends time so that His foreknowledge does not create the time problems that we perceive. How he does this is unknown, but it may be possible. This is not to assert that God is timeless, or ahistorical, but that He is not necessarily restricted by time. For an excellent and brief discussion of the historicity of God and foreknowledge in relation to free will, see Fernando Canale, "Doctrine of God," in *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000). For a critique of timelessness and presentation of God's historicity and analogical temporality, see Fernando Canale, *A Criticism of Theological Reason: Time and Timelessness as Primordial Presuppositions* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1987).

⁸⁸ This is a very controversial and complicated question in contemporary discussion. A detailed discussion of this problem is beyond the scope of this project. However, for an excellent discussion of these issues see Kane, ed.

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of Luther's definition of foreknowledge as nearly synonymous with the will and of omnipotence as causation of every action in the world, he must hold this view: "If the foreknowledge and omnipotence of God are admitted, then we must be under necessity."⁸⁹

Divine Will and Human Responsibility. Luther's rejection of any freedom of the will begs the question, is it coherent to assert that the human will is bound *and* that it is responsible for sin and deserving of punishment? How can one be morally responsible for one's actions, if they are the only actions one could take? Luther comments:

I say that man without the grace of God nonetheless remains under the general omnipotence of the God who effects, moves, and impels all things in a necessary, infallible course; but the fact of man's thus being carried along is 'nothing'—that is, avails nothing in God's sight, nor is reckoned anything but sin.⁹⁰

All humans are responsible for their own actions and sinners deserving of punishment. Luther allows "merely that the creature co-operates with the operation of God!"⁹¹ He goes on to state, "Paul co-operates with God in teaching the Corinthians; he preaches without, and God teaches within. The work of each is in that case distinct."⁹² Moreover, "all things, even the ungodly, co-operate with God."⁹³ Luther is thus not always consistent in his pastoral concerns about the will. For instance, he often speaks as though the will can be negatively affected by the writings of Erasmus. He also states, "For as long as they do not know the limits of their ability, they will not know what they should do, they cannot repent

⁸⁹ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 218.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 265. In an interesting and brief article Roland Goeden wrestles with the implications of a will in bondage for religious education. He accepts Luther's view and comes to the conclusion that it is liberating, saying, "If nothing is at stake, then I can fight for justice, peace, and better environment, sometimes more relaxed than as if everything depends on my success and on being a model" (Roland Goeden, "Luther's 'Bondage of the Will' and Its Contribution to Education," *Religious Education* 80 (Spring 1985): 271. However, this begs the question, why fight at all? Moreover, what if one's actions really do affect the world and responsibilities are neglected due to a false sense of complacency?

⁹¹ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 267.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

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when they err . . .”⁹⁴ Elsewhere he counsels, “If you accept the gospel and God’s Word and cling to it and grasp it, and remain faithful to the end, then you will be saved, and if not, you will be damned, 2 Timothy 2:[12].”⁹⁵ This seems to imply that human beings have some control over whether or not they will repent.⁹⁶ However, this has already been categorically denied elsewhere.

Accordingly, this “co-operation” should not be confused with a free operation on the human will’s part. Luther seems to only mean that humans are not compelled in their actions. Nonetheless, those actions are willed by God, and the human will is bound in its course. The lack of compulsion simply denotes the belief that humans don’t act against their will because their will itself is bound.⁹⁷ So, when a human acts, it is never compelled against its will, yet the very will is controlled by God.

Consequently, human beings seem to merit their own punishment but not reward. Yet, only “God makes believers righteous, and unbelievers ungodly, unrighteous, under wrath.”⁹⁸ Thus, Luther holds that humans are justly condemned. The unrighteous deserve destruction, even though they cannot do otherwise but be unrighteous. He states, “To say man does not seek God, is the same as saying: man cannot seek God . . . If there were potency or power in man to will good, the movement of Divine omnipotence would not suffer it to remain inactive or keep holiday.”⁹⁹ How, then, can God be just if he arbitrarily selects, from eternity, who will be saved and who will be damned? Kolb notes the enormity of

⁹⁴ Ibid., 78. Luther makes many statements to this effect that imply detriment from Erasmus’ doctrines by making people think in error. Yet, if God wills all that happens, it does not follow that any human’s salvation should be affected by a misunderstanding, or that one would change one’s mind if one knew better.

⁹⁵ Martin Luther, *Briefe*, Dr. Martin Luther’s Werke (Weimar: Bohlaus, 1883-1993), 10:492-494, 494.214-218; quoted in Kolb, 41.

⁹⁶ Forde notes that the language of free choice “is so firmly embedded in the language that we would be rendered virtually speechless in our speaking about human activity and morals without it . . .” (48). Yet this very language is used consistently in the Bible. Luther himself uses the “language of willing” in his own writing and speaking (49). This is especially true of his speaking on Christian conduct. He states, “A Christian man is the most free Lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone” (Martin Luther, *Christian Liberty*, trans. A. A. Buchheim [Philadelphia: United Lutheran, 1929], 6).

⁹⁷ Forde comments, “We do what we want. And that is just the trouble! We are bound to do what we want.” Forde, 54.

⁹⁸ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 275.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 281.

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this issue, saying, “The tension between the two defies solution, in spite of the best efforts of human reason.”¹⁰⁰ Luther is clear: “God, he says, works every human deed, whether good or evil. He works in the evil man according to that man’s nature, as He finds it.”¹⁰¹ Therefore all responsibility lies with God for good and for evil.

The Divine Will and the Will of Satan. There is some ambiguity in regard to the relationship of Satan in Luther’s view. As part of his denial of free will, Luther emphasizes Satan as holding the human will in bondage. He writes, “in all that bears on salvation or damnation, [one] has no ‘free-will,’ but is a captive, prisoner and bondsman, either to the will of God, or to the will of Satan.”¹⁰² This theme runs throughout Luther’s polemic. He also states, “how mighty is the dominion and power of Satan over the sons of men, which prevents them hearing and grasping the plainest words of God.”¹⁰³ Therefore man cannot be the cause of sin. Rather, “the cause is the wickedness of Satan, who is enthroned and reigns over us in our weakness, and who himself resists the Word of God. If Satan did not do so, the whole world could be converted by a single word of God, heard once; there would be no need of more.”¹⁰⁴ So Satan actively works against God. Does this mean that he has freedom? Does he work against the immutable will of God? Luther acknowledges that Satan blinds people, saying some “by reason, of the working of Satan, their god, cannot see the plainest proofs of the Trinity in the Godhead and of the humanity of Christ.”¹⁰⁵ He goes on to say:

So the Word of God and the traditions of men fight each other in implacable opposition. God and Satan are personally engaged in this same conflict, each labouring [sic] to destroy the works and subvert the doctrines of the other, like two kings

¹⁰⁰ Kolb, 64. According to McSorley this idea of bondage of the will “makes it impossible . . . to give a satisfactory explanation of man’s responsibility for sin” (McSorley, 340). Kolb calls this an “insoluble problem of how God can condemn those who were born in sin and guilt and have no power of their own to free themselves” (Kolb, 64).

¹⁰¹ Packer and Johnston, 51.

¹⁰² Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 107.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 73. Luther utilizes Jesus’ teaching about Satan as “the strong man” in Luke 11. He goes on to assert that “if a stronger appears, and overcomes Satan, we are once more servants and captives, but now desiring and willingly doing what He wills—which is royal freedom” (*ibid.*, 103).

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laying waste each other's kingdoms. 'He that is not with me,' said Christ, 'is against me.' (Luke 11.23)¹⁰⁶

This is actually characterized by Luther as a real war; he states, "there is no middle kingdom between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, which are ever at war with each other."¹⁰⁷ Satan, in this war, prevents man from choosing to serve God. "The power of 'free-will' amounts to this: because Satan rules over it, it rejects even grace, and the Spirit who fulfils the law—so excellently do its own 'endeavour' and 'effort' avail to fulfil the law."¹⁰⁸

Yet how can Satan war against God? Would this not entail that Satan has a free will of his own? If one applies the same rules to Satan's will as to the human will, this is impossible. If God determines all from eternity past and is absolutely immutable, Satan can have no free will. Thus, in order for Luther to be consistent, God must actually be controlling Satan, and God Himself holds humans in bondage and is, in effect, working against Himself. Is it possible to reconcile these seemingly opposed viewpoints? Luther, contrary to what he elsewhere implies, admits that God is behind the works of Satan, saying, "He moves and works of necessity even in Satan and the ungodly. But He works according to what they are, and what He finds them to be: which means, since they are evil and perverted themselves, that when they are impelled to action by this movement of Divine omnipotence they do only that which is perverted and evil."¹⁰⁹ Therefore, God's omnipotence holds primacy, regardless of the consequences for His character.

Luther himself acknowledges the apparent contradiction at this juncture. He says, "If I could by any means understand how this same God, who makes such a show of wrath and unrighteousness, can yet be merciful and just, there would be no need for faith."¹¹⁰ Thus, he seems resigned to the fact that he does not understand how God can be just, and at the same time condemn humans to eternal death based only on His immutable will. This brings us to the problem of God's justice, the problem of theodicy which is tied to the doctrine of the human will.

¹⁰⁶ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 93.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 204. Packer and Johnston write, "it is God who energises [sic] Satan, according to his nature, and such power as Satan has is held and exercised by God's own appointment" (Packer and Johnston, 51).

¹¹⁰ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 101.

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The Problem of Theodicy. The question of free will is very closely related to theodicy. There is a “persistent problem that arises when God is seen as condemning those whom He wills not to save.”¹¹¹ Luther acknowledges this difficulty but deflects the immediate question by focusing on the theology of the cross.¹¹² Even amidst the question of God’s justice, Luther “trusted that the God who had come to engage evil at its ugliest on the cross would triumph finally over evil.”¹¹³ Yet, this does not answer why God condemns some and saves others based on His will alone. Luther himself struggles with this problem, saying:

And who would not stumble at it? I have stumbled at it myself more than once, down to the deepest pit of despair, so that I wished I had never been a man . . . this is why so much toil and trouble has been devoted to clearing the goodness of God, throwing the blame on man’s will.¹¹⁴

Luther admits the difficulty but cannot affirm free will, saying:

Though He saves so few and damns so many; to believe that He is just, though of His own will He makes us perforce proper subjects for damnation, and seems (in Erasmus’ words) ‘to delight in the torments of poor wretches and to be a fitter object for hate than for love.’¹¹⁵

Even though it is beyond understanding, Luther asserts that when “God saves those who don’t deserve it ‘man’s heart does not accuse . . . nor demand to know why He wills to do so.’”¹¹⁶ But what about those who are lost? He goes on to say:

Why then does He not alter those evil wills which He moves? This question touches on the secrets of His majesty, where ‘His judgments are past finding out’ (cf. Rom. 11.33). It is not for us to inquire into these mysteries, but to adore them. If

¹¹¹ Tiessen, 15.

¹¹² For a thorough and scholarly discussion of Luther’s theology of the cross see Alister McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).

¹¹³ Kolb, 63.

¹¹⁴ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 217.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 234.

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flesh and blood take offence here, and grumble, well, let them grumble.¹¹⁷

Luther's contention that one ought not be troubled by this issue does not seem satisfactory. The problem of evil and God's justice is too real and present to dismiss lightly. The problem was very real for Luther, and he honestly had no satisfactory answer, but he believed in the goodness of God by faith. Luther's faith in God is admirable, but the question of God's goodness still remains.

The Hidden God. How did Luther attempt to conceive of the justice of God? The main attempt is the concept of the *deus absconditus*, the hidden God. Roland Bainton states that for Luther, "there are almost two Gods, the inscrutable God whose ways are past finding out and the God made known to us in Christ."¹¹⁸ Luther seemingly retained the idea of God hidden as vestige "from his Ockhamist instructors" that God is beyond human grasp.¹¹⁹ God is unknowable beyond what is revealed, and, thus, hidden.¹²⁰ God revealed is found primarily in the incarnation. Luther imagines Jesus saying, "from an unrevealed God I will become a revealed God. Nevertheless, I will remain the same God. I will be made flesh, or send My Son . . ." ¹²¹

Luther holds Isaiah 45:7 as an example that God creates evil. It says, "I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 208. He goes on to say, "Why did God let Adam fall, and why did He create us all tainted with the same sin, when He might have kept Adam safe, and might have created us of other material, or of seed that had first been cleansed? God is He for Whose will no cause or ground may be laid down as its rule or standard. . . . If any rule or standard, or cause or ground, existed for it, it could no longer be the will of God" (ibid., 209).

¹¹⁸ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Meridian, 1995), 48. For an interesting study of reflection on this concept of Luther, see John Dillenberger, *God Hidden and Revealed: The Interpretation of Luther's Deus Absconditus and Its Significance for Religious Thought* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1953).

¹¹⁹ Kolb, 35.

¹²⁰ Steven Paulson states that "it is not so much that God cannot be seen that concerns Luther, but that God actually and actively *hides*" (Steven D. Paulson, "Luther on the Hidden God," *Word & World* 19 (Fall 1999): 363).

¹²¹ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 26-30*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther's Works*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), 5:45. However, behind this "revealed dualism of cosmic conflict between God and evil lies the hidden mystery of absolute Divine sovereignty; evil is brought to expression only by the omnipotent working of the good God" (Packer and Johnston, 51). Forde comments that "Luther could even say that apart from Jesus God is indistinguishable from the devil" (Forde, 45).

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LORD do all these *things*.” However, this evil might be understood as being in contrast to peace, often meaning prosperity and calamity. This need not be in reference to ontological evil.¹²² Yet Luther is unconvinced; he holds that God Himself creates evil and good in His hidden will, hence He is the author not just of goodness, but also of evil. “Thus God conceals His eternal mercy and loving kindness beneath eternal wrath, His righteousness beneath unrighteousness.”¹²³ How are we to understand this internal dualism in God’s nature? Can it be reconciled with the justice of God? In Ezekiel 18:32, God Himself declares His desire for life, not death, “For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth.”¹²⁴ Erasmus says “If He does not will our death, it must be laid to the charge of our own will if we perish.”¹²⁵

Here is Luther’s response to the biblical statement:

Ezekiel speaks of the published offer of God’s mercy, not of the dreadful hidden will of God, Who, according to His own counsel, ordains such persons as He wills to receive and partaken of the mercy preached and offered. This will is not to be inquired into, but to be reverently adored, as by far the most awesome secret of the Divine Majesty. He has kept it to Himself, and forbidden us to know it; and it is much more worthy of reverence than an infinite number of Corycian caverns!¹²⁶

So, must it be assumed that God is not here speaking the whole truth? Is the “published offer” of God different from His real will? But to avoid further consideration of this incongruency, Luther counsels that we

¹²² There are also a number of passages throughout the writings of the prophets in the OT which state that the Lord brings evil, but these are in the context of discipline for sin. Another passage Luther utilizes is 1 Sam 2:6, “The Lord killed and maketh alive; He bringeth down to the grave and bringeth up.” For Luther this shows that God brings forth good and evil. However, this passage is in the context of God’s relation to an already sinful planet. That God punishes is not the same as Him bringing forth evil into existence and willing all evil on the earth. He also mentions Isaiah 63:17 that asks the Lord “why has thou made us to err?” In contrast to Luther, Jerome and Origen claim that “He is said to “make to err” in that He does not at once recall from error” (Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 195).

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 101. Gerrish states that this is “a moment antithetical to the attributes of mercy and love. The image of God does not, after all, fully coincide with the picture of Jesus” (Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage*, 138).

¹²⁴ See also 1 Tim 2:5-6; Tit 2:11; 2 Pet 3:9.

¹²⁵ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 167.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 169.

should not think of these things. “Wherever God hides Himself, and wills to be unknown to us, there we have no concern.”¹²⁷ He claims the problem lies in the interpreter that “makes no distinction between God preached and God hidden.”¹²⁸ However, the Bible seems to make the opposite distinction, that God is always the same. Malachi 3:6 asserts that God is not arbitrary, but that men can take confidence in His perfect character, “For I am the Lord, I change not.” Yet, in order to try to harmonize God’s call to sinners in Scripture and a lack of will in man, he uses the construction of two different wills in one God. “Thus, He does not will the death of a sinner—that is, in His word, but He wills it by His inscrutable will.”¹²⁹ Gerrish comments that this view has the “fearful cost of reducing the universal benevolence of the revealed will to a mere appearance.”¹³⁰ Beyond this, by the very principle of Scripture as a basis for all doctrine, by *sola scriptura* itself, God “in His word” is the standard. How can we say regarding God the opposite of what He says about Himself in the Bible? Thus it is very problematic to claim two wills in God and leaves the problem of theodicy in full force.

Analysis of Biblical Support

It is important to look at Luther’s use of biblical texts to support his doctrine about the bondage of the will. Do his texts clearly teach this doctrine? As we consider his use of Scripture we should note, as Justo Gonzalez puts it, that “Luther felt free to take certain liberties with the canon of Scripture, while still insisting on the primacy of Scripture over tradition.”¹³¹ As we saw earlier, Luther reinterpreted the “righteousness of God” to refer to His impartation of righteousness alone. He came to this understanding by utilizing the questionable methodology of the “tropological sense” of Scripture.¹³² Furthermore, Gonzalez states, Luther

¹²⁷ Ibid., 170.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid. He goes on to say, “So it is right to say: ‘If God does not desire our death, it must be laid to the charge of our own will if we perish’: this, I repeat, is right if you spoke of God preached” (ibid., 171).

¹³⁰ Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage*, 144.

¹³¹ Gonzalez, 49.

¹³² McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 101. This was based on a method of interpretation called the Quadriga where Scripture was considered to have four senses. These were the literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical. In the tropological sense, “certain passages were interpreted to produce ethical guidance for Christian conduct.” For more on this see McGrath, 148.

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“felt free to confess that he was inclined to toss [James] out of the canon . . . Therefore, Luther was no biblicist. His primary authority was not the canon of the Bible, but the gospel that he found in the Bible and that was the touchstone for its interpretation.”¹³³

We have seen many texts that Luther uses to support his doctrine; let us now examine these.¹³⁴ Luther's use of Romans 9 as a proof of predestination is widely disputed. For instance, the context seems to refer not to the question of how people are saved but to the question of whether God has lived up to His promises to His chosen people Israel. Thus, by referring to God's loving Jacob, Paul is pointing to the fact that Israel was chosen by God through no merit of its own.¹³⁵ Israel has no claim to exclusivity because God is free to bestow mercy on whom He will, specifically, to the Gentiles. Yet, He has not rejected Israel, but the Gentiles also will be “grafted in.” Christ has made a way for anyone to come to Christ. Thus, seemingly, the passage lends itself to a widening of the availability of salvation rather than God's choosing of whom He will save and whom He will damn.

The narrative of Pharaoh's hardening is also very interesting. Luther holds God as moving evil within Pharaoh *and* moving upon Him from without in circumstances. It does not seem that the text necessitates holding that God controlled Pharaoh's will, as the hardening can simply mean that God worked through circumstance to push Pharaoh's hand towards decision. Moreover, it should be recognized that the Bible not only says God hardened Pharaoh's heart, but also that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (See Ex 8:15,32; 9:34; 1 Sam 6:6) .

The potter and the clay metaphor is also very important to note. This is clearly an allusion by Paul to the OT metaphor, which does not seem to have predestinarian overtones. God is clearly affirmed as omnipotent, He is the Creator and the shaper, and in comparison to him humans are like clay.¹³⁶ The analogy need not be stretched so far that we are viewed as inanimate like clay. Clay is dead, humans are living. The preface to

¹³³ Gonzalez, 50. James “always caused him difficulties through its insistence on works over against faith” (Gonzalez, 49). Luther writes, “The epistle of James gives us much trouble . . . Accordingly, if they will not admit of my interpretations, then I shall make rubble also out of it. I almost feel like throwing Jimmy into the stove, as the priest in Kalenberg did” (Luther, *Career of the Reformer IV*, 317).

¹³⁴ See the previous section on Luther's Biblical Support

¹³⁵ It is also important to note that the word “hated” for Esau may be correctly understood as a comparative term, and not as a term meaning disdain for Esau.

¹³⁶ Man was made by God, the potter, from clay in Genesis 2.

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Jeremiah 18 uses the potter and the clay example and proceeds to lay out the conditional response of God based on the people's choice (Jer 18:7-10).¹³⁷ Surely, God's power is emphasized in this imagery, but not to the point of complete impotence of the human. The metaphor need not be interpreted as determinist to be consistent with its own context in both Paul and the OT (See also 2 Tim 2:21).

Finally, a little might be said about the case of Balaam. First, this is an exceptional case in Scripture and is not necessarily a paradigm for God's operation. Nevertheless, Balaam's will is thwarted by God's power. Balaam desires to curse Israel and ends up blessing Israel. First, it should be remembered that Balaam claimed to speak for God. Thus, it could be suggested that this circumstance qualified the situation, since Balaam did not have the right to claim to speak for God and thereby injure others. Moreover, there was nothing that God overruled which would keep Balaam from salvation. In other words, by God intervening and overpowering Balaam's will He injured neither Balaam, nor his opportunity for salvation.¹³⁸

We have seen the texts Luther uses to support his position, but what about those that seem to disagree with his view? One example is Matt 23:37, where Jesus states, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, *thou* that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under *her* wings, and ye would not!" This text suggests that it is God's will that Jerusalem be spared and that man's will is to blame. Luther responds, "why the Majesty does not remove or change this fault of will in every man . . . or why He lays this fault to the charge of the will, when man cannot avoid it, it is not lawful to ask."¹³⁹ But why is it not lawful to ask? The text asserts that the situation is not Jesus' will. Luther tries to

¹³⁷ For further analysis of this passage, see John C. Peckham, "The Passible Potter and the Contingent Clay: An Exegetical and Theological Analysis of Jeremiah 18:1-10," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 18/1 (2007): 130-150.

¹³⁸ The question may be asked why God doesn't overrule all wills for salvation. If God were to overrule all wills, than free will would be obsolete, as Luther claims. This would mean that no one can freely enter into a love relationship with God. The Creator does not desire automatons, or robots, but beings that can love and be loved. I have suggested that God may have overruled Balaam's speech in this case, and without contradicting His policy of free will, based at least partly on Balaam's presumption to speak for God and the nature of the case. This does not mean that God arbitrarily overrules wills whenever He pleases; the weight of Scripture is to the contrary of this notion.

¹³⁹ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 171.

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reconcile this text with his own view, saying, "He [God] has granted him [man] a free use of things at his own will, and not hedged him in with any laws of commands."¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, to be consistent with Luther's other statements, God still must have decreed the human will, and so this falls short as a solution. This and other passages seem to require some freedom of the human will to make any sense.

There are many other places where prophets, or God, or Jesus plead with people to repent and to come to Him. There are also many conditional statements that those who believe will be saved (i.e. John 3:16). There is also another prominent example of texts that suggest free will in the Bible. Notice Luther's treatment of Matt 19:17, which says, "if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments." Luther does not accept the text as it reads, but revises it to be in accordance with a will in bondage. His revision states "if ever thou shalt have the will to keep the commandments (which you will have, not of yourself, but of God, who gives it to whom He will), then they also shall preserve thee." This is not what the text says, but is indicative of Luther's interpretation of conditional statements.

McSorley states, "In the course of his argument against Erasmus, Luther lays down a principle which forces him to stand alone in the history of Christian biblical interpretation."¹⁴¹ He dismisses all of these texts based on a single grammatical argument. He states derisively that "a conditional statement asserts nothing indicatively."¹⁴² In other words, God's call for man to do something doesn't mean that man can do it, it does not imply ability to act. McSorley reacts that this is "clearly exaggerated and one-sided because it ignores the rules of personal dialogue."¹⁴³ In other words, this rule cannot really sweep away all the pleadings of God with man throughout the Bible. Why would God make so many calls for repentance in the Bible? Luther claims it is "so as to bring him [man] by experience of himself to a knowledge of his disease

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 150.

¹⁴¹ McSorley, 350.

¹⁴² Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 151. In another place Luther explains, "For they show us what we ought to do, but do not give us the power to do it. They were ordained, however, for the purpose of showing man to himself; that through them he may learn his own impotence for good, and may despair of his own strength" (Luther, *Christian Liberty*, 12).

¹⁴³ McSorley, 351.

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or weakness, to which he cannot lead him by any other course.”¹⁴⁴ So it seems the call is to provoke the sinner, but what good can provocation even do for one who has no power of the will? In response to the common assertion that this would mean God is mocking us, Luther replies, “Why should not this conclusion follow rather: therefore, God is trying us, that by His law He may bring us to a knowledge of our impotence.”¹⁴⁵ Thus these exhortations tell us, “not what we can do, but what we ought to do.”¹⁴⁶ However, this is against a multitude of evidence to the contrary. The clear reading of the texts are that God genuinely desires all to be saved (2 Pet 3:9; Tit 2:11; 1 Tim 2:4) and that they can come to Him if they will choose to do so.

It is interesting to note, however, that Luther, in his final translation in the German Bible (1546) of 1 Tim 2:4 actually changed the word $\sigma\acute{\omega}\zeta\omega$, literally “saved,” to “helped.”¹⁴⁷ On this translation Lowell Green comments, “Therefore, (a) God wills all people to receive help for their temporal needs; (b) God wills all people to know that he alone is the source of all temporal good.”¹⁴⁸ Luther states, “Accordingly, when we make a distinction of salvation between faithful and faithless people, we must draw from those passages this conclusion, that Paul here refers to general salvation.”¹⁴⁹ For Luther, this verse does not speak of salvation meaning eternal life, but refers to temporal helps and general knowledge.

Luther is right in asserting that these calls do not mean “that these things can be done by our own strength!”¹⁵⁰ Yet, what if God makes it possible for man to repent *in God’s own strength*? Luther says of these invitations to turn, “it does not follow from this that man is converted by

¹⁴⁴ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 151. Luther comments, “reason thinks that man is mocked by an impossible command.” Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 158.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 153. He goes on to say, “although the first man was not impotent, inasmuch as grace assisted him, yet God by this commandment shows him clearly enough how impotent he would be without grace” (*ibid.*, 156. However, he will not allow a prevenient assisting grace to resolve this dilemma.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁴⁷ Lowell C. Green, “Luther’s Understanding of the Freedom of God and the Salvation of Man: His Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:4,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 87 (1996): 58.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*: 59. See Luther’s full commentary on 1 Tim 2:4 in Martin Luther, *Lectures on 1 Timothy*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, Luther’s Works (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1999), 28:260-261.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 261.

¹⁵⁰ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 159.

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his own power.”¹⁵¹ This is unchallenged, even by Erasmus, but Luther still considers free will to necessarily mean omnipotent and unassisted will, which confuses the issue. Affirming this limited free will to respond to the biblical call to repentance does not mean that humans can save themselves, but that God has offered grace and has made provision so that they can choose to accept that grace.¹⁵² The gift is no less free because it has been willingly accepted. Thus, it seems that the matter of the definition of freedom, specifically the extent of free will, greatly contributes to the conflict.

Conclusion

Martin Luther stands as a pillar of faith and reform, and Christianity owes a great debt of gratitude to his faith and courage in standing up against persecution for a biblical faith in Jesus Christ. This paper has focused on but one part of Luther's theology, and narrowly at one aspect of Luther's view of justification by faith. This should not be taken as a rebuke of Luther, his reforms, or his whole theology, but as a wrestling with the need for further reform and theological diligence. It is apparent that Luther was sincere and faithful in his desire to protect God's sovereignty and grace from injury. That God sent His Son to save us is at the heart of Luther's argument, as it should be in all biblical theology.

Many understandable factors contributed to Luther's predestinarian view, including his experience with a works-based faith, the polemic context with Erasmus, and his belief that free will was against the gospel in the writings of Paul.¹⁵³ Luther's doctrine of the will might have been quite different if it had developed outside of the polemic concept against Erasmus and works righteousness in the reform movement. Luther was also very influenced by Augustine's writings on predestination, themselves products of the polemic with Pelagius and a neoplatonic ontology.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁵² There are biblical statements that literally assert that works are rewarded, and people are judged “according to their works”(See 2 Chron 15:7; Job 34:11; 2 Tim 2:21). These should not be dismissed simply because they challenge a certain conception of grace. Neither do these statements injure grace, but might be understood in a balanced model of salvation that deals with God's graceful and primary work and the human's cooperation in that work.

¹⁵³ Without rejecting predestination, due to its lack of clarity and abundance of controversy, Gerrish proposes that “This *witness* to grace, not the predestinarian *theology* of grace, is where the preachers of the Reformed church must take their stand” (Gerrish, 57).

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Luther sincerely desired to protect grace from anything that might undermine it. This may have clouded his ability to see the meaning in passages such as 1 Tim 2:4. Theologians of today can learn a great lesson from this. There is always a danger in pure polemics. Often positions are defended and stretched beyond their biblical basis in the heat of debate. We should remember to take a step back and examine our own presuppositions and honestly engage the thoughts of those who differ from our interpretation. Luther was often not granted the freedom of this option. He was constantly facing persecution, even death, and to give any ground would have seemed to him like compromise. Thus, I believe we can understand where Luther was coming from, even if we may not agree with his conclusions on the human will.

Luther's view on the will is not always a coherent picture regarding the God of the Bible. As McSorley states, Luther's refusal to allow any "misuse of free will" in the fall makes him "affirm the justice of God while at the same time affirming that God condemns those who are unfree and who therefore are not deserving of condemnation."¹⁵⁴ This is a blight on the character of God and a danger to people who might give up any thought of turning to God in despair at such a doctrine.

Of course, Luther is absolutely correct that no one deserves grace, but what separates those who receive condemnation? Does God really only give grace to some? Is Jesus Christ's death only applicable to some, or did he die for all? These questions have raged throughout the centuries of Christian history and continue to be topics of debate. Luther's proposed solution, the hiddenness of God, implies a duality in God which is beyond understanding. But if the hidden God is unknown, why does Luther have so much to attribute to the hiddenness of God? It would be more congruent with Luther's methodology if he would stick to what is said about the revealed God.¹⁵⁵ In revelation, God is said to be the Savior *and* He is spoken of as a God of judgment. Thus, both poles are spoken

¹⁵⁴ McSorley, 344.

¹⁵⁵ Robert Shofner, on the other hand, holds that though it often seems that "Luther frequently says a great deal more than this, 'God hidden, God revealed' principle will support . . ." in reality he does not. He contends that Luther speaks of the hidden God to the extent that Scripture does. However, if Scripture speaks of these activities, are they not then revealed? Doesn't Luther still overstep the bounds when he proposes that the reason some are saved and some are lost must reside in the hidden God? This paper contends that he does.

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in the revelation about God, thus about the revealed God.¹⁵⁶ The Bible claims of this same God that He “is not willing that any should perish” (2 Pet 3:9). How is this reconcilable with the idea of a God that wills only some to be saved?¹⁵⁷ It is not, unless God is viewed as different in His hiddenness than in His revelation.¹⁵⁸ But what would this then say about His revelation?

Further, it seems that Luther's conclusion that only some receive grace is utterly connected to his conception of God's sovereign grace. If grace is irresistible, then only those who receive grace are consequently saved. But if, contrary to this, grace is not irresistible, God could theoretically offer grace to all, even though all might not accept it. The Bible claims also that God desires all men to be saved (2 Pet 3:9, Titus 2, 1 Tim 2) and draws all to Himself (John 12:32). If it is God's will that all be saved, surely every person has the opportunity for salvation. Luther once acknowledged this, saying, “God wants all to be saved and participate in his eternal bliss (1 Tim 2:4). God does not want sinners to die but to be turned to him and live (Ezek. 18:32). Thus, Luther's correspondent should know, God's grace is without limit toward those who trust in him.”¹⁵⁹ In saying this, however, Luther did not give up his predestinarian view.¹⁶⁰ Luther felt a burden to uphold the depravity of the will and feared any conception of freedom, meaning neutrality of the will.¹⁶¹ Luther was right to react against a works-based salvation and a belief that man could save himself without God's grace. However, is it not possible that the neutrality of the will can be denied, the fall and effects of sin on

¹⁵⁶ Jesus Himself, the ultimate revelation of God for Luther, is spoken of as a judge, a characteristic which would fall under the category of hidden for Luther.

¹⁵⁷ The tragedy of a logical conclusion, that only some are willed to be saved is countered by the idea of universalism. This idea still posits that God decrees those who are saved, but the conflict is seemingly avoided because God saves everyone. This would not work in Luther's system because of the demands of justice. The demands of justice in the Bible also preclude such a position on salvation.

¹⁵⁸ There is a place for speaking of God hidden, in the sense that we do not and cannot know everything about God, for He is beyond understanding. The problem arises when it is implied that the hidden God is actually different and other than the revealed God. This would make the revelation of God inconsistent with God's true character that we don't know. Thus, there is a lot about God that we don't understand, but it need not be seen as inconsistent with what the Bible does proclaim about Him.

¹⁵⁹ Luther, *Career of the Reformer III*, 140.

¹⁶⁰ Pannenberg claimed Luther changed his position to a freedom of the will later in life, but there is no objective evidence that supports this claim (McSorley, 356-357).

¹⁶¹ Forde, 55.

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man can be affirmed, *and* God can grant each sinner opportunity and ability to respond to the gospel?

A potential solution to this paradox might be an amendment of the view of the reception of grace with a possibility to refuse God's grace. Without such a nuance, one is left with utter determinism. Furthermore, if there is no choice, even unmeritorious, included in salvation, then it seems difficult to see God as the righteous judge. If God predestines the will, apart from any human contribution, then the fall of man was God's responsibility. If He does not, then the option is given to choose to serve or not to serve Him. The latter seems to be in accord with God's call for repentance throughout the Bible.

Allowing the human will a choice in salvation would still preserve a serious view of the sinfulness and depravity that has attached itself to human nature after the fall. In this model, man's freedom does not consist of power to overcome sin solely by his own will, but only through the power of God offered freely as a gift. The acceptance of the gift is not meritorious, and salvation is not earned. Moreover, God's omnipotence is not damaged, for it is His power that He extends to creation, granting them the actual power to effect history. His power is no less because He chooses not to overrule all wills but His own. Rather, His power is extended as it manifests itself in love. Through Jesus Christ, God's power is "made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Far from meaning that man can save himself, God shows that man can only be saved through Jesus Christ, and He beckons the weary to come to Him (Matt 11:28-30). The actuality and power of this very choice is explicit in a most famous text of the Bible, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16)."

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