

The Bondage of the Will

1525

*Translated by Philip S. Watson
in collaboration with Benjamin Drewery*

Introduction

Martin Luther's *De servo arbitrio*, of which a translation is presented in this volume, was reckoned by Luther himself to be one of his two or three very best works. Luther wrote it in the autumn of 1525 in reply to a criticism of his teaching which Erasmus of Rotterdam had published under the title of *De libero arbitrio* a year earlier.

Erasmus had been for several years under diverse and increasing pressure to declare himself openly for or against Luther. He was considerably senior to the latter, his reputation as the most brilliant scholar in Europe was established, and his support was coveted by both Lutherans and anti-Lutherans. Yet, although between them he was variously subjected to cajolery and threats, provocation and the offer of bribes, he had hitherto steadfastly refused to commit himself.

At first it seemed to many on both sides that Erasmus ought in honesty to declare in favor of Luther. He had, after all, wielded the rapier of his pen in the cause of reform long before Luther began laying about him with his bludgeon. He had incurred the enmity of theologians, monks, and ecclesiastics, who were now also the enemies of Luther; and he seemed to show himself Luther's friend when he spoke well of him personally, pointed out that the best sort of men approved of him, and insisted that his teaching should not be condemned out of hand as heretical, but should be given a fair hearing before competent judges. He also offered the flimsiest excuses for refusing to pass judgment himself—he had not read Luther's writings and had no time to do so, he was not theologically qualified, and in any case he had no authority to act in this matter.

Erasmus' wish was to remain neutral through the whole affair, as he stated again and again, and as he made clear to Luther himself, from whom he received a letter appealing for his support in 1519. Luther had written (March 28) in adulatory tones, almost as of a disciple to a master, and Erasmus may well have been moved by his appeal, since he delayed over two months to reply. Yet when he did so (May 30), although he wrote in very friendly and even encouraging terms, he still preserved his neutrality. Not surprisingly, therefore, he came to be accused by both sides of cowardice, timeserving, and self-interest.

Yet when powerful churchmen and princes kept urging him to write against Luther, promising him high preferment if he would, Erasmus still refused to commit himself. This

had little to do with either cowardice or self-interest, but much with his concern for “good letters” (*bonae literae*), i.e., for the languages and literature of antiquity, pagan and Christian, which were being newly brought to light by the Humanistic scholarship of the Renaissance. These “good letters,” to which Erasmus had dedicated his life, had been under attack by the opponents of reform, particularly the theologians and monks, ever since he had published his edition of the Greek New Testament (1516). They were suspected (not without reason) of being at the root of both his own and Luther’s reforming ideas—for Luther had welcomed the new learning, and had eagerly used Erasmus’ Greek Testament from the moment it appeared. If, then, Erasmus allied himself with Luther, “good letters” would come under still heavier attack; and he had no confidence in either the ability or the will of the Lutherans to defend them. On the other hand, it would be difficult to cast his vote against Luther without virtually surrendering to the forces of reaction and repudiating all he had written about the need for reform. There might not be safety in neutrality, but there was less danger than in taking sides. In any case, he could not write against Luther, for he could not rid himself of the thought that in attacking him he “might be found fighting against the Spirit of God.”

Nevertheless, the increasing truculence of Luther’s utterances and the increasing turbulence of events from 1520 onward did much to alienate whatever sympathy Erasmus had had for the Lutheran version of reform. If he disapproved of the papal bull condemning Luther’s teaching, he approved even less of Luther’s burning it; and he could not but be distressed by Luther’s attack (as it seemed to him), no longer simply on abuses in the church, but on the church itself, in his book *On The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. He had hitherto rather sharply distinguished Luther from his followers, for most of whom he had scant respect, but now by his own words and actions Luther himself seemed to be encouraging rebellion and schism in the church, and to that Erasmus would not be a party. Increasingly, therefore, he felt that he must dissociate himself from Luther, if only he could find a way of doing it that would not identify him with obscurantism and reaction.

In the meantime, because of his refusal to join them, Erasmus came under fire from Luther’s supporters, who sought to goad him into changing his mind. A climax was reached with the publication of Ulrich von Hutten’s *Expostulation*, to which Erasmus replied with his *Sponge*, wiping Hutten out. This kind of thing did no good to the Lutheran cause, and in the spring of 1524 Luther wrote to Erasmus (ca. April 18) proposing a truce. If Erasmus would keep quiet about the Lutherans, Luther would see to it that they kept quiet about him. He deplored the *Expostulation* and the *Sponge*; he recognized that Erasmus had neither the spirit nor the stamina to fight at his side, but he was doing fine work with his scholarship, and if he would simply stick to that, all would be well. Erasmus was naturally rather stung by this, as his reply (May 8) shows; but even had he not been, Luther’s appeal for a truce

came too late. The die had already been cast, and in September the *De libero arbitrio* appeared.

Erasmus had found a way of dissociating himself from Luther without in any way repudiating that concern for reform which they shared in common. He could take issue with him on a point of doctrine, concerning divine grace and human freedom, on which he differed from him totally. For Luther in his *Assertio*, published in 1520, had utterly denied the reality of human freedom and asserted that everything that happens, happens by absolute necessity.¹⁰ This was in flat contradiction to the teaching of the church, which, however much room it had left for debate about its extent and efficacy, had always maintained the reality of human freedom. Here Luther was wrong; and he was wrong, not only in what he taught, but in publicizing it; for it could not but have effects deleterious to any reform—it provided the common herd with a perfect excuse for every kind of wickedness and ungodliness.

The full title of Erasmus' work was *A Diatribe or Discourse concerning Free Choice (De libero arbitrio diatribe sive collatio)*. It was written in what Erasmus considered a thoroughly irenic spirit, with no intention of attacking Luther personally, though taking strong exception to his ideas. He made no claim to solve the problem of grace and freedom, but only to set the various views of it side by side, indicating which he thought the most probable, but leaving it to his readers to make up their own minds. That is why he called his book a *Diatribe or Discourse*, in deliberate contrast to Luther's very dogmatic *Assertion*. *Diatribe* and *collatio* are respectively Greek and Latin terms, which in medieval usage were virtually synonymous. The former is a disquisition or essay, while the latter can mean either quite generally a discussion or more specifically a comparison or comparative study.

Erasmus begins with a lengthy Preface and a short Introduction, in which he states the problem and the difficulties that it raises. He points out that Luther has the weighty authority of the church fathers against him, but agrees to abide by the verdict of Scripture on the subject, since that is all that Luther will accept. At the same time he emphasizes that the issue here is not that of the authority of Scripture, but of its interpretation, and he raises the question how one can know whose interpretation is correct. He then proceeds to discuss a series of Scripture passages that seem to support free choice (Part I), and others that seem to oppose it (Part II); after which he examines the arguments of Luther in his *Assertio* (Part III), and finally ends with an Epilogue in which he proposes a mediating solution and leaves the reader to judge.

As Erasmus sees it, it is essential that man should have freedom of choice. Without it there would be no sense in meting out praise or blame, since there could be no possibility of man's meriting either. Nor would there be any sense in God's law and commandments, for

their imperative “Thou shalt” implies the indicative “Thou canst,” and to deny the latter is to stultify the former. In practice, moreover, to teach men that they have no real choice can only foster irresponsibility and encourage antinomianism. But that is not the worst of it. If man acts solely from necessity, having no freedom, he cannot possibly deserve either reward or punishment; hence if God rewards and punishes men he is manifestly unjust. Erasmus’ concern for human freedom is thus also a concern for the character of God. Not that he is at all unmindful of God’s grace, which transcends any strict legality, and without which no man can possibly be saved. Yet men must have the freedom to choose or refuse grace, so that if they are damned for the lack of it, their damnation will at least have been justly deserved. At this Luther wryly observes that people seem more upset by the injustice of God’s wrath in damning the undeserving than by the injustice of his grace in saving the undeserving!

When the *Diatribes* arrived at Wittenberg, it appears to have been read with interest and sympathy by Melancthon and others; and although Luther was disgusted at what he regarded as the “rubbish”¹⁴ that Erasmus had written, he was at first disinclined to waste time answering it. It achieved, however, a wide circulation and considerable acclaim, and Luther’s supporters persuaded him that he really must take issue with it. When at length he did so, he admitted that Erasmus had hit upon the real bone of contention between them, and he set about refuting him in a way that was hardly irenic, taking his arguments apart point by point in a book nearly four times the length of the *Diatribes*. It is in many ways a pity that he adopted this procedure, since with the possible exception of Part VI his argumentation is so shaped by his opponent’s point of view that his own position hardly emerges with the clarity or the balance that would have been desirable.

Nevertheless, the main lines of his thinking can be traced out more or less as follows. First of all, neither man’s salvation nor his damnation has anything to do with merit. In relation to God, the thought of merit has no place, and to teach that it has can only lead to legalism and a vain striving for salvation by works. There is a reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked, but to seek the righteousness in order to merit the reward is the surest way to find neither. But that is not all. God, Luther insists, is not moved by the merits or demerits of men; he is not determined in what he does by what men do. This is essential to the freedom of God—whatever it does to his justice. And Luther is concerned for God’s freedom, because to deny it is to undermine the gospel and grace; indeed, it is to deny God himself. For God’s freedom is precisely the freedom of grace, that is, of the divine love revealed in Christ, which startlingly ignores the calculated schemes of merit and reward which prevail among men. Not that this in the least makes God’s law and commandments meaningless; on the contrary, it discloses their true meaning, which is ultimately a demand for just such love as is seen in Christ. So far, therefore, from showing man what he ought to

do and can do, they show him what he ought but does not and cannot do unless he is radically transformed by grace, that is, by God himself.

Unfortunately, Erasmus was deeply hurt and offended by the tone of Luther's book, which he took as a personal attack upon himself. Nor was he in the least mollified by a letter (now lost) which he received from Luther early in 1526. From his reply (April 11) it appears that Luther half apologised for the excessive vehemence of some of his statements (putting them down to his temperament), suggested that there should be no more attacking of one another, and hoped that God would grant Erasmus to see the light! Erasmus, however, was already busy with a reply to the *De servo arbitrio* under the title of *A Defense of the Diatribe (Hyperaspistes diatribae)*. Of this, Part I appeared in June, 1526, and Part II in September, 1527. It achieved a considerable circulation, but Luther was never moved to make any reply to it.

Erasmus and Luther never met, and but little correspondence passed between them. In his earlier days, Luther expressed enthusiastic admiration for Erasmus' work in reviving the study of languages and literature, which he believed to be the necessary precursor of any rediscovery of the word of God; and as we have said, he made eager and immediate use of the *Novum Instrumentum* (as Erasmus' Greek New Testament was called). At the same time, he was always doubtful about Erasmus' theological position, and as early as 1516 he contrived to tell him so. After using his New Testament he wrote to his friend Spalatin (October 19, 1516), pointing out a deficiency in Erasmus' understanding of St. Paul and criticizing his predilection for St. Jerome, with the request that Spalatin should pass this on to Erasmus. Spalatin did so, though without naming Luther, but referring to him simply as an Augustinian friar.

Luther had written humbly and courteously and with expressions of high admiration, and his letter was passed on almost verbatim. Yet only a short while after (March 1, 1517) he wrote to another correspondent, John Lang:

I read our Erasmus and my enthusiasm for him decreases daily.... I fear he does not sufficiently exalt Christ and God ...; things human count more with him than things divine.

Luther could hardly have been surprised, then, even if he was disappointed, that his overtures to the great man in 1519 and 1524 were politely rejected, seeing he knew that their minds were so far apart. By the publication of the *Diatribe* and the *Hyperaspistes*, however, he was embittered. He had always spoken less flatteringly about Erasmus than to him, and now that he had been directly criticized by him he became vituperative, as his *Table Talk* only too abundantly shows. He called Erasmus a heretic, a heathen, an atheist; and he said "I owe nothing to Erasmus" and "I hate Erasmus with all my heart."

Erasmus no doubt felt bitter, too, but as he had always tended to speak more favorably about Luther than to him, so he continued to do. Unhappy as he was about much that Luther said and did, yet he could think that perhaps, as desperate diseases need desperate remedies, God might be using Luther as he used Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar. And even though he came to question whether it was a good or an evil spirit that animated him, he could still write:

The theologians curse Luther, and in cursing him curse the truth delivered by Christ to the Apostles.... No fact is plainer than that this tempest has been sent from heaven by God's anger ...

Luther's books were burnt when they ought to have been read and studied by serious persons. There was too much haste to persecute; we tolerate Jews and Bohemians, we might have tolerated Luther.

Today, when Luther's books, so far from being burnt, are being made increasingly accessible, Erasmus' admonition that they be read and studied is as pertinent as it was in his own time. Not least is this true of *The Bondage of the Will*, which, if it is one of the more difficult, is also one of the most rewarding of Luther's works.

The Bondage of the Will

To the Venerable Master Erasmus of Rotterdam, Martin Luther sends grace and peace in Christ.

[Introduction]

[Luther Explains His Delay in Replying and Admits Erasmus' Superior Talent]

That I have taken so long to reply to your *Diatribes Concerning Free Choice*, venerable Erasmus, has been contrary to everyone's expectation and to my own custom; for hitherto I have seemed not only willing to accept, but eager to seek out, opportunities of this kind for writing. There will perhaps be some surprise at this new and unwonted forbearance—or fear!—in Luther, who has not been roused even by all the speeches and letters his adversaries have flung about, congratulating Erasmus on his victory and chanting in triumph, “Ho, ho! Has that Maccabee, that most obstinate Assertor, at last met his match, and dares not open his mouth against him?” Yet not only do I not blame them, but of myself I yield you a palm such as I have never yielded to anyone before; for I confess not only that you are far superior to me in powers of eloquence and native genius (which we all must admit, all the more as I am an uncultivated fellow who has always moved in uncultivated circles),⁴ but that you have quite damped my spirit and eagerness, and left me exhausted before I could strike a blow.

There are two reasons for this: first, your cleverness in treating the subject with such remarkable and consistent moderation as to make it impossible for me to be angry with you; and secondly, the luck or chance or fate by which you say nothing on this important subject that has not been said before. Indeed, you say so much less, and attribute so much more to free choice than the Sophists have hitherto done (a point on which I shall have more to say later) that it really seemed superfluous to answer the arguments you use. They have been refuted already so often by me,⁶ and beaten down and completely pulverized in Philip Melanchthon's *Commonplaces*—an unanswerable little book which in my judgment deserves not only to be immortalized but even canonized. Compared with it, your book struck me as so cheap and paltry that I felt profoundly sorry for you, defiling as you were your very elegant and ingenious style with such trash, and quite disgusted at the utterly unworthy matter that was being conveyed in such rich ornaments of eloquence, like refuse or ordure being carried in gold and silver vases.

You seem to have felt this yourself, from the reluctance with which you undertook this piece of writing. No doubt your conscience warned you that, no matter what powers of eloquence you brought to the task, you would be unable so to gloss it over as to prevent me from stripping away the seductive charm of your words and discovering the dregs beneath, since although I am unskilled in speech, I am not unskilled in knowledge, by the grace of God. For I venture thus with Paul [2 Cor. 11:6] to claim knowledge for myself that I confidently deny to you, though I grant you eloquence and native genius such as I willingly and very properly disclaim for myself.

What I thought, then, was this. If there are those who have imbibed so little of our teaching or taken so insecure a hold of it, strongly supported by Scripture though it is, that they can be moved by these trivial and worthless though highly decorative arguments of Erasmus, then they do not deserve that I should come to their rescue with an answer. Nothing could be said or written that would be sufficient for such people, even though it were by recourse to thousands of books a thousand times over, and you might just as well plow the seashore and sow seed in the sand or try to fill a cask full of holes with water. Those who have imbibed the Spirit who holds sway in our books have had a sufficient service from us already, and they can easily dispose of your performances; but as for those who read without the Spirit, it is no wonder if they are shaken like a reed by every wind. Why, God himself could not say enough for such people, even if all his creatures were turned into tongues.⁹ Hence I might well have decided to leave them alone, upset as they were by your book, along with those who are delighted with it and declare you the victor.

It was, then, neither pressure of work, nor the difficulty of the task, nor your great eloquence, nor any fear of you, but sheer disgust, anger, and contempt, or—to put it

plainly—my considered judgment on your *Diatribē* that damped my eagerness to answer you. I need hardly mention here the good care you take, as you always do, to be everywhere evasive and equivocal; you fancy yourself steering more cautiously than Ulysses between Scylla and Charybdis as you seek to assert nothing while appearing to assert something. How, I ask you, is it possible to have any discussion or reach any understanding with such people, unless one is clever enough to catch Proteus? What I can do in this matter, and what you have gained by it, I will show you later, with Christ's help.

There have, then, to be special reasons for my answering you at this point. Faithful brethren in Christ are urging me to do so, and point out that everyone expects it, since the authority of Erasmus is not to be despised, and the truth of Christian doctrine is being imperiled in the hearts of many. Moreover, it has at length come home to me that my silence has not been entirely honorable, and that I have been deluded by my mundane prudence—or knavery—into insufficient awareness of my duty, whereby I am under obligation both to the wise and to the foolish [Rom. 1:14], especially when I am called to it by the entreaties of so many brethren. For although the subject before us demands more than an external teacher, and besides him who plants and him who waters outwardly [1 Cor. 3:7], it requires also the Spirit of God to give the growth and to be a living teacher of living things inwardly (a thought that has been much in my mind), yet since the Spirit is free, and blows not where we will but where he wills [John 3:8], we ought to have observed that rule of Paul, "Be urgent in season and out of season" [2 Tim. 4:2], for we do not know at what hour the Lord is coming [Matt. 24:42]. There may be, I grant, some who have not yet sensed the Spirit who informs my writings, and who have been bowled over by that *Diatribē* of yours; perhaps their hour has not yet come.

And who knows but that God may even deign to visit you, excellent Erasmus, through such a wretched and frail little vessel of his as myself, so that in a happy hour—and for this I earnestly beseech the Father of mercies through Christ our Lord—I may come to you by means of this book, and win a very dear brother. For although you think and write wrongly about free choice, yet I owe you no small thanks, for you have made me far more sure of my own position by letting me see the case for free choice put forward with all the energy of so distinguished and powerful a mind, but with no other effect than to make things worse than before. That is plain evidence that free choice is a pure fiction; for, like the woman in the Gospel [Mark 5:25 f.], the more it is treated by the doctors, the worse it gets. I shall therefore abundantly pay my debt of thanks to you, if through me you become better informed, as I through you have been more strongly confirmed. But both of these things are gifts of the Spirit, not our own achievement. Therefore, we must pray to God that he may open my mouth and your heart, and the hearts of all men, and that he may himself be present in our midst as the master who informs both our speaking and hearing.

But from you, my dear Erasmus, let me obtain this request, that just as I bear with your ignorance in these matters, so you in turn will bear with my lack of eloquence. God does not give all his gifts to one man, and “we cannot all do all things”; or, as Paul says: “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit” [1 Cor. 12:4]. It remains, therefore, for us to render mutual service with our gifts, so that each with his own gift bears the burden and need of the other. Thus we shall fulfill the law of Christ [Gal. 6:2].

[Part I. Review of Erasmus’ Preface]

[Christianity Involves Assertions; Christians Are No Skeptics]

I want to begin by referring to some passages in your Preface, in which you rather disparage our case and puff up your own. I note, first, that just as in other books you censure me for obstinate assertiveness, so in this book you say that you are so far from delighting in assertions that you would readily take refuge in the opinion of the Skeptics wherever this is allowed by the inviolable authority of the Holy Scriptures and the decrees of the Church, to which you always willingly submit your personal feelings, whether you grasp what it prescribes or not. This [you say] is the frame of mind that pleases you.

I take it (as it is only fair to do) that you say these things in a kindly and peace-loving spirit. But if anyone else were to say them, I should probably go for him in my usual manner; and I ought not to allow even you, excellent though your intentions are, to be led astray by this idea. For it is not the mark of a Christian mind to take no delight in assertions; on the contrary, a man must delight in assertions or he will be no Christian. And by assertion—in order that we may not be misled by words—I mean a constant adhering, affirming, confessing, maintaining, and an invincible persevering; nor, I think, does the word mean anything else either as used by the Latins or by us in our time.

I am speaking, moreover, about the assertion of those things which have been divinely transmitted to us in the sacred writings. Elsewhere we have no need either of Erasmus or any other instructor to teach us that in matters which are doubtful or useless and unnecessary, assertions, disputings, and wranglings are not only foolish but impious, and Paul condemns them in more than one place. Nor are you, I think, speaking of such things in this place—unless, in the manner of some foolish orator, you have chosen to announce one topic and discuss another, like the man with the turbot, or else, with the craziness of some ungodly writer, you are contending that the article about free choice is doubtful or unnecessary.

Let Skeptics and Academics keep well away from us Christians, but let there be among us “assertors” twice as unyielding as the Stoics themselves. How often, I ask you, does the apostle Paul demand that *plērophoria* (as he terms it)—that most sure and unyielding

assertion of conscience? In Romans 10[:10] he calls it “confession,” saying, “with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” And Christ says: “Everyone who confesses me before men, I also will confess before my Father” [Matt. 10:32]. Peter bids us give a reason for the hope that is in us [1 Peter 3:15]. What need is there to dwell on this?

Nothing is better known or more common among Christians than assertion. Take away assertions and you take away Christianity. Why, the Holy Spirit is given them from heaven, that he may glorify Christ [in them] and confess him even unto death—unless it is not asserting when one dies for one’s confession and assertion. Moreover, the Spirit goes to such lengths in asserting, that he takes the initiative and accuses the world of sin [John 16:8], as if he would provoke a fight; and Paul commands Timothy to “exhort” and “be urgent out of season” [2 Tim. 4:2]. But what a droll exhorter he would be, who himself neither firmly believed nor consistently asserted the thing he was exhorting about! Why, I would send him to Anticyra!

But it is I who am the biggest fool, for wasting words and time on something that is clearer than daylight. What Christian would agree that assertions are to be despised? That would be nothing but a denial of all religion and piety, or an assertion that neither religion, nor piety, nor any dogma is of the slightest importance. Why, then, do you too assert, “I take no delight in assertions,” and that you prefer this frame of mind to its opposite?

However, you will wish it to be understood that you have said nothing here about confessing Christ and his dogmas. I am rightly reminded of that, and as a favor to you I will waive my right and my custom, and not judge of your heart, but will leave that for another time or to other people. Meanwhile, I advise you to correct your tongue and your pen and to refrain in future from using such expressions, for however upright and honest your heart may be, your speech (which they say is the index of the heart) is not so. For if you think that free choice is a subject we need know nothing about, and one that has nothing to do with Christ, then your language is correct, but your thought is impious. If, on the other hand, you think it is a necessary subject, then your language is impious, though your thought is correct. And in that case, there was no room for such a mass of complaints about useless assertions and wranglings, for what have these to do with the question at issue?

But what will you say about this statement of yours, in which you do not refer to the subject of free choice alone, but to all religious dogmas in general, when you say that if it were allowed by the inviolable authority of the divine writings and the decrees of the Church, you would take refuge in the opinion of the Skeptics, so far are you from delighting in assertions? What a Proteus is in these words “inviolable authority” and “decrees of the Church”! You pose as having a great reverence for the Scriptures and the Church, and yet

make it plain that you wish you were at liberty to be a Skeptic. What Christian would talk like that?

If you are speaking about useless and indifferent dogmas, what are you saying that is new? Who would not wish for the liberty to adopt a skeptical attitude here? Indeed, what Christian does not in fact freely make use of this liberty, and condemn those who are committed and bound to any particular opinion? Unless you take Christians in general (as your words almost suggest) to be the kind of people who hold useless dogmas over which they stupidly wrangle and wage battles of assertions. If on the other hand you are speaking of dogmas that are vital, what more ungodly assertion could anyone make than that he wished for the liberty of asserting nothing in such cases?

This is how a Christian will rather speak: So far am I from delighting in the opinion of the Skeptics that, whenever the infirmity of the flesh will permit, I will not only consistently adhere to and assert the sacred writings, everywhere and in all parts of them, but I will also wish to be as certain as possible in things that are not vital and that lie outside of Scripture. For what is more miserable than uncertainty?

What, furthermore, are we to say of the comment you add: “To which I everywhere willingly submit my personal feelings, whether I grasp what it prescribes or not”? What are you saying, Erasmus? Is it not enough to have submitted your personal feelings to the Scriptures? Do you submit them to the decrees of the Church as well? What can she decree that is not decreed in the Scriptures? Then what becomes of the liberty and power to judge those who make the decrees, as Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 14[:29]: “Let the others judge”? Does it displease you that anyone should sit in judgment on the decrees of the Church, although Paul enjoins it? What new religion, what new humility is this, that you would deprive us by your own example of the power of judging the decrees—of *men*, and subject us in uncritical submission—to *men*? Where does the Scripture of God impose this on us?

Then again, what Christian would so throw the injunctions of Scripture and the Church to the winds, as to say, “Whether I grasp them or not”? Do you submit yourself without caring at all whether you grasp them? Anathema be the Christian who is not certain and does not grasp what is prescribed for him! How can he believe what he does not grasp? For by “grasp” you must mean here to “apprehend with certainty” and not to “doubt like a Skeptic”; for otherwise, what is there in any creature that any man could “grasp” if “grasp” meant perfect knowledge and insight? In that case, there would be no possibility that anyone should at the same time grasp some things and not others; for if he had grasped one thing, he would have grasped all—in God, I mean, since whoever does not “grasp” God never “grasps” any part of his creation.

In short, what you say here seems to mean that it does not matter to you what anyone believes anywhere, so long as the peace of the world is undisturbed, and that in case of danger to life, reputation, property, and goodwill, it is permissible to act like the fellow who said, "Say they yea, yea say I; say they nay, nay say I," and to regard Christian dogmas as no better than philosophical and human opinions, about which it is quite stupid to wrangle, contend, and assert, since nothing comes of that but strife and the disturbance of outward peace. Things that are above us, you would say, are no concern of ours. So, with a view to ending our conflicts, you come forward as a mediator, calling a halt to both sides, and trying to persuade us that we are flourishing our swords about things that are stupid and useless.

That, I say, is what your words seem to mean; and I think you understand, my dear Erasmus, what I am driving at. But as I have said, let the words pass. Meanwhile, I absolve your heart so long as you display it no further. See that you fear the Spirit of God, who tries the minds and hearts [Ps. 7:9; Jer. 11:20], and is not deceived by cleverly devised phrases. For I have said all this so that you may henceforward cease from charging me with obstinacy and willfulness in this matter. By such tactics you only succeed in showing that you foster in your heart a Lucian, or some other pig from Epicurus' sty who, having no belief in God himself, secretly ridicules all who have a belief and confess it. Permit us to be assertors, to be devoted to assertions and delight in them, while you stick to your Skeptics and Academics till Christ calls you too. The Holy Spirit is no Skeptic, and it is not doubts or mere opinions that he has written on our hearts, but assertions more sure and certain than life itself and all experience.

[The Clarity of Scripture]

I come now to the second passage, which is of a piece with this. Here you distinguish between Christian dogmas, pretending that there are some which it is necessary to know, and some which it is not, and you say that some are [meant to be] obscure and others quite plain. You thus either play games with other men's words or else you are trying your hand at a rhetorical sally of your own. You adduce, however, in support of your views, Paul's saying in Romans 11[:33]: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God," and also that of Isaiah 40[:13]: "Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord, or what counselor has instructed him?"

It was easy for you to say these things, since you either knew you were not writing to Luther, but for the general public, or you did not reflect that it was Luther you were writing against, whom I hope you allow nonetheless to have some acquaintance with Holy Writ and some judgment in respect of it. If you do not allow this, then I shall force you to it. The distinction I

make—in order that I, too, may display a little rhetoric or dialectic—is this: God and the Scripture of God are two things, no less than the Creator and the creature are two things.

That in God there are many things hidden, of which we are ignorant, no one doubts—as the Lord himself says concerning the Last Day: “Of that day no one knows but the Father” [Mark 13:32], and in Acts 1[:7]: “It is not for you to know times and seasons”; and again: “I know whom I have chosen” [John 13:18], and Paul says: “The Lord knows those who are his” [2 Tim. 2:19], and so forth. But that in Scripture there are some things abstruse, and everything is not plain—this is an idea put about by the ungodly Sophists, with those lips you also speak here, Erasmus; but they have never produced, nor can they produce, a single article to prove this mad notion of theirs. Yet with such a phantasmagoria Satan has frightened men away from reading the sacred writings and has made Holy Scripture contemptible, in order to enable the plagues he has bred from philosophy to prevail in the Church.

I admit, of course, that there are many texts in the Scriptures that are obscure and abstruse, not because of the majesty of their subject matter, but because of our ignorance of their vocabulary and grammar; but these texts in no way hinder a knowledge of all the subject matter of Scripture. For what still sublimer thing can remain hidden in the Scriptures, now that the seals have been broken, the stone rolled from the door of the sepulcher [Matt. 27:66; 28:2], and the supreme mystery brought to light, namely, that Christ the Son of God has been made man, that God is three and one, that Christ has suffered for us and is to reign eternally? Are not these things known and sung even in the highways and byways? Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what will you find left in them?

The subject matter of the Scriptures, therefore, is all quite accessible, even though some texts are still obscure owing to our ignorance of their terms. Truly it is stupid and impious, when we know that the subject matter of Scripture has all been placed in the clearest light, to call it obscure on account of a few obscure words. If the words are obscure in one place, yet they are plain in another; and it is one and the same theme, published quite openly to the whole world, which in the Scriptures is sometimes expressed in plain words, and sometimes lies as yet hidden in obscure words. Now, when the thing signified is in the light, it does not matter if this or that sign of it is in darkness, since many other signs of the same thing are meanwhile in the light. Who will say that a public fountain is not in the light because those who are in a narrow side street do not see it, whereas all who are in the marketplace do see it?

Your reference to the Corycian cave, therefore, is irrelevant; that is not how things are in the Scriptures. Matters of the highest majesty and the profoundest mysteries are no longer hidden away, but have been brought out and are openly displayed before the very doors.

For Christ has opened our minds so that we may understand the Scriptures [Luke 24:45], and the gospel is preached to the whole creation [Mark 16:15]; “Their voice has gone out to all the earth” [Rom. 10:18], and “Whatever was written was written for our instruction” [Rom. 15:4]; also: “All Scripture inspired by God is profitable for teaching” [2 Tim. 3:16]. See, then, whether you and all the Sophists can produce any single mystery that is still abstruse in the Scriptures.

It is true that for many people much remains abstruse; but this is not due to the obscurity of Scripture, but to the blindness or indolence of those who will not take the trouble to look at the very clearest truth. It is as Paul says of the Jews in 2 Corinthians [3:15]: “A veil lies over their minds”; and again: “If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this world has blinded” [2 Cor. 4:3 f.]. With similar temerity a man might veil his own eyes or go out of the light into the darkness and hide himself, and then blame the sun and the day for being obscure. Let miserable men, therefore, stop imputing with blasphemous perversity the darkness and obscurity of their own hearts to the wholly clear Scriptures of God.

Now, when you quote Paul’s saying: “Unsearchable are his judgments” [Rom. 11:33], you appear to make the pronoun *eius* refer to Scripture, but Paul does not say that the judgments of Scripture are unsearchable, but the judgments of God. Similarly, Isaiah 40[:13] does not say, “Who has known the mind of the Scripture,” but “the mind of the Lord”; and although Paul asserts that the mind of the Lord *is* known to Christians, he is referring of course to “the gifts bestowed on us,” as he says in the same passage, 1 Corinthians 2[:12]. So you see how inattentively you have looked at these passages of Scripture, and how aptly you have quoted them—just as aptly as in almost all your quotations on behalf of free choice.

Similarly, the examples you go on to give, though not without a suspicion of sarcasm, are quite wide of the mark—things such as the distinction of the Persons [of the Trinity], the conjunction of the divine and human natures [in Christ], and the unforgivable sin; in all these cases, you say, there is ambiguity that has never been cleared up. If you have in mind the questions debated by the Sophists in connection with these subjects, what has Scripture in its entire innocence of such things done to you that you should make the abuse of it by scoundrelly men a reproach to its purity? Scripture simply confesses the trinity of God and the humanity of Christ and the unforgivable sin, and there is nothing here of obscurity or ambiguity. But *how* these things can be, Scripture does not say (as you imagine), nor is it necessary to know. It is their own dreams that the Sophists are busy with here, so you should accuse and condemn them, and acquit the Scriptures. If, on the other hand, what you have in mind is the fact itself, again you should not accuse the Scriptures,

but the Arians, and those for whom the gospel is so veiled that, through the working of their god Satan, they do not see the very clearest testimonies concerning the trinity of the Godhead and the humanity of Christ.

To put it briefly, there are two kinds of clarity in Scripture, just as there are also two kinds of obscurity: one external and pertaining to the ministry of the Word, the other located in the understanding of the heart. If you speak of the internal clarity, no man perceives one iota of what is in the Scriptures unless he has the Spirit of God. All men have a darkened heart, so that even if they can recite everything in Scripture, and know how to quote it, yet they apprehend and truly understand nothing of it. They neither believe in God, nor that they themselves are creatures of God, nor anything else, as Psalm 13[14:1] says: "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no god.'" For the Spirit is required for the understanding of Scripture, both as a whole and in any part of it. If, on the other hand, you speak of the external clarity, nothing at all is left obscure or ambiguous, but everything there is in the Scriptures has been brought out by the Word into the most definite light, and published to all the world.

[It Is Vital to Know the Truth About Free Choice]

But what is still more intolerable is that you count this subject of free choice among the things that are useless and unnecessary, and replace it for us with a list of the things you consider sufficient for the Christian religion. It is such a list as any Jew or Gentile totally ignorant of Christ could certainly draw up with ease, for you make not the slightest mention of Christ, as if you think that Christian godliness can exist without Christ so long as God is worshiped with all one's powers as being by nature most merciful. What am I to say here, Erasmus? You reek of nothing but Lucian, and you breathe out on me the vast drunken folly of Epicurus. If you consider this subject unnecessary for Christians, then please quit the field; you and I have nothing in common, for I consider it vital.

If it is irreverent, if it is inquisitive, if it is superfluous, as you say, to know whether God foreknows anything contingently; whether our will accomplishes anything in things pertaining to eternal salvation, or simply suffers the action of grace; whether it is of mere necessity that we do, or rather suffer, whatever we do of good or ill; then what, I ask you, is there that it is reverent or serious or useful to know? This is no use at all, Erasmus; you go much too far. It is difficult to attribute this to your ignorance, for you are no longer young, and you have lived among Christians and have long studied Holy Writ, so that you leave no room for us to excuse you or to think well of you. And yet the papists pardon and put up with these enormities of yours simply because you are writing against Luther; otherwise, if Luther were out of the way and you wrote such things, they would get their teeth into you and tear you to shreds.

Let Plato be a friend and Socrates a friend, but truth must be honored above all. For suppose you had no great understanding of the Scriptures or of Christian piety, surely even an enemy of Christians ought to have known what Christians regard as necessary and useful, and what they do not. But when you who are a theologian and a teacher of Christians set out to describe the nature of Christianity for them, so far from showing even your usual skeptical hesitation about what is useful and necessary for them, you actually fall into precisely the opposite error. For contrary to your natural bent, and with an assertion unprecedented for you, you declare that those things are not necessary; whereas, unless they are necessary and known with certainty, then neither God, nor Christ, nor gospel, nor faith, nor anything is left, not even of Judaism, much less of Christianity. By the immortal God, Erasmus, what a “window” or rather, what a wide arena you open for one to act and speak against you! How could you write anything good or true about free choice when by saying things of this kind you confess such an ignorance of Scripture and piety? But I will draw in my sails, and not deal with you here in my own words (as I may perhaps later), but in yours.

Christianity as you describe it includes this among other things: that we should strive with all our might, have recourse to the remedy of penitence, and entreat by all means the mercy of the Lord, without which no human will or endeavor is effective; also, that no one should despair of the pardon of a God who is by nature most merciful. These words of yours, devoid of Christ, devoid of the Spirit, are colder than ice itself, so that they even tarnish the beauty of your eloquence. Perhaps they were dragged out of you, poor fellow, by fear of the pontiffs and tyrants, lest you should seem to be altogether an atheist! They do, however, assert that there are powers in us, that there is a striving with all our powers, that there is a mercy of God, that there are means of entreating mercy, that God is by nature just, by nature most merciful, etc. If, then, anyone does not know what those powers are, what they can achieve, what they can passively receive, what their striving means, and what their efficacy or lack of it may be, what is he to do? What would *you* tell him to do?

It is, you say, irreverent, inquisitive, and superfluous to want to know whether our will does anything in matters pertaining to eternal salvation or whether it is simply passive under the action of grace. Yet now you contradict this by saying that Christian godliness means striving with all one’s powers, and that without the mercy of God the will is not effective. Here you plainly assert that the will does something in matters pertaining to eternal salvation, when you represent it as striving, though you make it passive when you say it is ineffective apart from mercy. You do not, however, state precisely how this activity and passivity are to be understood, for you take good care to keep us in ignorance of what God’s mercy and our will *can* achieve, even while you are telling us what they actually do. Thus that prudence of yours makes you veer about, determined not to commit yourself to either

side, but to pass safely between Scylla and Charybdis; with the result that, finding yourself battered and buffeted by the waves in the midst of the sea, you assert everything you deny and deny everything you assert.

Let me show you by a few analogies what your theology is like. Suppose that a man who wants to compose a good poem or speech should not consider what sort of talent he has, or ask himself what he is and is not capable of, and what the subject he has chosen requires—plainly ignoring that precept of Horace about “what the shoulders can stand, and what they will refuse to bear—but instead should just rush headlong to work, thinking: “The effort must be made to get it done; it is inquisitive and superfluous to ask whether such learning, such eloquence, such force of intellect as it requires is forthcoming.” Or suppose someone who wants to get a good crop from his land should not be inquisitive and take superfluous care to examine the soil, as Virgil inquisitively and vainly teaches in his *Georgics*, but should rush blindly on, thinking of nothing but the work, plowing the seashore and sowing the seed in whatever turns up, whether sand or mud. Or suppose someone who is going to war and wants a glorious victory, or who has any other public duty to fulfill, should not be so inquisitive as to give careful thought to what it is in his power to do—whether he has sufficient funds, whether his troops are fit, whether there is any scope for action—but should completely disregard the historian’s remark that “before you act, careful thought is needed, and when you have thought, prompt action,”³⁰ and rush in with his eyes and ears shut, simply shouting, “War, war!” and press on with the job. What, I ask you, Erasmus, would be your verdict on such poets, farmers, generals, and heads of state? I will add the Gospel saying about one who desires to build a tower, and does not first sit down and count the cost, and whether he has enough to complete it. What is Christ’s verdict on him?

But this is just what you are doing. You prescribe our actions, but forbid us first to examine and measure our powers, or to find out what we can and cannot do, as if that were inquisitive and superfluous and irreverent. Hence, while with your excessive prudence you abhor recklessness and make a show of sober judgment, you arrive at the point of actually teaching the utmost recklessness. For whereas the Sophists are indeed reckless and mad in pursuing their inquisitive inquiries, yet their sin is less serious than yours, who make madness and recklessness the positive point of your teaching. And to make the madness all the greater, you try to persuade us that this recklessness is the most beautiful Christian piety, sobriety, godly seriousness, and salvation; and unless we do as you say, you assert that we are irreverent, inquisitive, and vain—you who are such an enemy of assertions! A fine job you make of avoiding Scylla while you are steering clear of Charybdis!

But it is confidence in your own wits that has driven you to this, for you believe you can so impose on everyone's intelligence by your eloquence that no one will notice what you cherish in your heart and what your purpose is with these slippery writings of yours. But God is not mocked [Gal. 6:7], and it is not safe to run up against him. Furthermore, if the matter at issue were composing poems, preparing crops, conducting wars or other public undertakings, or building houses, and you had taught us such recklessness, then although it would be intolerable in so eminent a man, you would nevertheless have been deserving of some indulgence, at least among Christians, who set no store on temporal affairs. But when you tell Christians themselves to become reckless workers, and order them not to be inquisitive about what they can and cannot do in the matter of obtaining eternal salvation, this is beyond question the truly unforgivable sin. For as long as they are ignorant of what and how much they can do, they will not know what they should do; and being ignorant of what they should do, they cannot repent if they do wrong; and impenitence is the unforgivable sin. This is what your moderate Skeptical Theology leads us to.

Therefore, it is not irreverent, inquisitive, or superfluous, but essentially salutary and necessary for a Christian, to find out whether the will does anything or nothing in matters pertaining to eternal salvation. Indeed, as you should know, this is the cardinal issue between us, the point on which everything in this controversy turns. For what we are doing is to inquire what free choice can do, what it has done to it, and what is its relation to the grace of God. If we do not know these things, we shall know nothing at all of things Christian, and shall be worse than any heathen. Let anyone who does not feel this confess that he is no Christian, while anyone who disparages or scorns it should know that he is the greatest enemy of Christians. For if I am ignorant of what, how far, and how much I can and may do in relation to God, it will be equally uncertain and unknown to me, what, how far, and how much God can and may do in me, although it is God who works everything in everyone [1 Cor. 12:6]. But when the works and power of God are unknown, I do not know God himself, and when God is unknown, I cannot worship, praise, thank, and serve God, since I do not know how much I ought to attribute to myself and how much to God. It therefore behooves us to be very certain about the distinction between God's power and our own, God's work and our own, if we want to live a godly life.

So you see that this problem is one half of the whole sum of things Christian, since on it both knowledge of oneself and the knowledge and glory of God quite vitally depend. That is why we cannot permit you, my dear Erasmus, to call such knowledge irreverent, inquisitive, and vain. We owe much to you, but godliness claims our all. Why, you yourself are aware that all the good in us is to be ascribed to God, and you assert this in your description of Christianity. But in asserting this, you are surely asserting also that the mercy of God alone does everything, and that our will does nothing, but rather is passive; otherwise, all is not

ascribed to God. Yet a little later you say that it is not religious, pious, and salutary to assert or to know this. But it is a mind at variance with itself, uncertain and inexpert in matters of religion, that is compelled to talk like that.

[God's Foreknowledge; Contingency and Necessity]

The other half of the Christian *summa* is concerned with knowing whether God foreknows anything contingently, and whether we do everything of necessity. And this, too, you find irreverent, inquisitive, and vain, just as all ungodly men do, or rather, as the demons and the damned find it hateful and detestable. You are well advised to steer clear of such questions if you can, but you are a pretty poor rhetorician and theologian when you presume to discuss and expound free choice without the two subjects just mentioned. I will act as a whetstone and, although no rhetorician myself, will teach a distinguished rhetorician his business.

Suppose Quintilian, proposing to write about oratory, were to say: "In my judgment, that stupid and superfluous stuff about choice of subject, arrangement of material, style, memorization, delivery, ought to be omitted; suffice it to know that oratory is the art of speaking well"—would you not ridicule such an exponent of the art? Yet you act no differently yourself. You propose to write about free choice, and you begin by rejecting and throwing away the whole substance and all the elements of the subject on which you are going to write. For you cannot possibly know what free choice is unless you know what the human will can do, and what God does, and whether he foreknows necessarily.

Do not even your rhetoricians teach you that when you are going to speak on any subject, you ought to say first whether it exists, then what it is, what its parts are, what things are contrary to it, akin to it, similar to it, etc.? But you deprive free choice (poor thing!) of all these advantages, and lay down no question concerning it, unless perhaps the first, namely, whether it exists; and you do this with arguments (as we shall see) of such a kind that, apart from the elegance of the language, I have never seen a feeblar book on free choice. The very Sophists provide at least a better discussion on this subject, for while they have no idea of style, yet when they tackle free choice they do define all the questions connected with it—whether it exists, what it is, what it does, how it is related, etc.—though even they do not succeed in doing what they set out to do. In this book, therefore, I shall press you and all the Sophists hard until you define for me the strength and effectiveness of free choice; and I shall press you (with Christ's aid) so hard that I hope I shall make you repent of ever having published your *Diatribes*.

Here, then, is something fundamentally necessary and salutary for a Christian, to know that God foreknows nothing contingently, but that he foresees and purposes and does all

things by his immutable, eternal, and infallible will. Here is a thunderbolt by which free choice is completely prostrated and shattered, so that those who want free choice asserted must either deny or explain away this thunderbolt, or get rid of it by some other means. However, before I establish this point by my own argument and the authority of Scripture, I will first deal with it in your words.

Was it not you, my dear Erasmus, who asserted a little earlier that God is by nature just, by nature most merciful? If this is true, does it not follow that he is immutably just and merciful—that as his nature never changes, so neither does his justice or mercy? But what is said of his justice and mercy must also be said of his knowledge, wisdom, goodness, will, and other divine attributes. If, then, the assertion of these things concerning God is, as you state, religious, pious, and salutary, what has come over you that you now contradict yourself by asserting that it is irreverent, inquisitive, and vain to say that God foreknows necessarily? You declare that the will of God is to be understood as immutable, yet you forbid us to know that his foreknowledge is immutable. Do you, then, believe that he foreknows without willing or wills without knowing? If he foreknows as he wills, then his will is eternal and unchanging (because his nature is so), and if he wills as he foreknows, then his knowledge is eternal and unchanging (because his nature is so).

From this it follows irrefutably that everything we do, everything that happens, even if it seems to us to happen mutably and contingently, happens in fact nonetheless necessarily³⁶ and immutably, if you have regard to the will of God. For the will of God is effectual and cannot be hindered, since it is the power of the divine nature itself; moreover it is wise, so that it cannot be deceived. Now, if his will is not hindered, there is nothing to prevent the work itself from being done, in the place, time, manner, and measure that he himself both foresees and wills. If the will of God were such that, when the work was completed, the work remained but the will ceased—like the will of men, which ceases to will when the house they want is built, just as it also comes to an end in death—then it could be truly said that things happen contingently and mutably. But here the opposite happens; the work comes to an end and the will remains, so remote is it from possibility that the work itself, during its production and completed existence, should exist or persist contingently. To happen contingently, however—in order that we may not misuse terms—means in Latin, not that the work itself is contingent, but that it is done by a contingent and mutable will, such as there is not in God. Moreover, a work can only be called contingent when *from our point of view* it is done contingently and, as it were, by chance and without our expecting it, because our will or hand seizes on it as something presented to us by chance, when we have thought or willed nothing about it previously.

[I could wish indeed that another and a better word had been introduced into our discussion than this usual one, “necessity,” which is not rightly applied either to the divine or the human will. It has too harsh and incongruous a meaning for this purpose, for it suggests a kind of compulsion, and the very opposite of willingness, although the subject under discussion implies no such thing. For neither the divine nor the human will does what it does, whether good or evil, under any compulsion, but from sheer pleasure or desire, as with true freedom; and yet the will of God is immutable and infallible, and it governs our mutable will, as Boethius sings: “Remaining fixed, Thou makest all things move”; and our will, especially when it is evil, cannot of itself do good. The reader’s intelligence must therefore supply what the word “necessity” does not express, by understanding it to mean what you might call the immutability of the will of God and the impotence of our evil will, or what some have called the necessity of immutability, though this is not very good either grammatically or theologically.]

The Sophists have labored for years over this point, but in the end they have been beaten and forced to admit that everything happens necessarily, though by the necessity of consequence (as they say) and not by the necessity of the consequent. They have thus eluded the full force of this question, or indeed it might rather be said they have deluded themselves. For how meaningless this is I shall have no difficulty in showing. What they call the necessity of consequence means broadly this: If God wills anything, it is necessary for that thing to come to pass, but it is not necessary that the thing which comes to pass should exist; for God alone exists necessarily, and it is possible for everything else not to exist if God so wills. So they say that an action of God is necessary if he wills it, but that the thing done is not itself necessary. But what do they achieve by this playing with words? This, of course, that the thing done is not necessary, in the sense that it has not a necessary existence. But this is no different from saying that the thing done is not God himself. Nevertheless, it remains a fact that everything that comes into being does so necessarily, if the action of God is necessary, or if there is a necessity of consequence, however true it is that, when it has been brought into being, it does not exist necessarily, that is to say, it is not God and has not a necessary existence. For if I myself am brought into existence necessarily, it is of little concern to me that my being or becoming is mutable; for my contingent and mutable self, though not the necessary being that God is, is nonetheless brought into existence.

Hence their amusing idea, that everything happens by necessity of consequence but not by necessity of the consequent, amounts to no more than this: all things are indeed brought about necessarily, but when they have thus been brought about, they are not God himself. But what need was there to tell us this? As if there were any fear of our asserting that created things are God, or that they have a divine and necessary nature! Hence the

proposition stands, and remains invincible, that all things happen by necessity. Nor is there here any obscurity or ambiguity. It says in Isaiah: "My counsel shall stand and my will shall be done" [Isa. 46:10]. What schoolboy does not know the meaning of these terms "counsel," "will," "shall be done," "shall stand"?

But why are these things abstruse to us Christians, so that it is irreverent and inquisitive and vain to discuss and come to know them, when heathen poets and even the common people speak of them quite freely? How often does Virgil (for one) remind us of Fate! "By changeless law stand all things fixed"; "Each man's day stands fixed";⁴¹ "If the Fates call thee"; "If thou canst break the harsh bonds of Fate."⁴³ That poet has no other aim than to show that in the destruction of Troy and the rise of the Roman Empire, Fate counts for more than all the endeavors of men, and therefore it imposes a necessity on both things and men. Moreover, he makes even their immortal gods subject to Fate, to which even Jupiter himself and Juno must necessarily yield. Hence the current conception of the three Parcae, immutable, implacable, irrevocable. The wise men of those days were well aware of what fact and experience prove, namely, that no man's plans have ever been straightforwardly realized, but for everyone things have turned out differently from what he thought they would. Virgil's Hector says, "Could Troy have stood by human arm, then it had stood by mine." Hence the very common saying on everyone's lips, "God's will be done"; and "God willing, we will do it," or "Such was the will of God." "So it pleased those above"; "Such was your will," says Virgil. From this we can see that the knowledge of God's predestination and foreknowledge remained with the common people no less than the awareness of his existence itself. But those who wished to appear wise went so far astray in their reasonings that their hearts were darkened and they became fools (Rom. 1[:21 f.]), and denied or explained away the things that the poets and common people, and even their own conscience, regarded as entirely familiar, certain, and true.

I go farther and say, not only how true these things are—as will be shown more fully below from the Scriptures—but also how religious, devout, and necessary a thing it is to know them. For if these things are not known, there can be neither faith nor any worship of God. For that would indeed be ignorance of God, and where there is such ignorance there cannot be salvation, as we know. For if you doubt or disdain to know that God foreknows all things, not contingently, but necessarily and immutably, how can you believe his promises and place a sure trust and reliance on them? For when he promises anything, you ought to be certain that he knows and is able and willing to perform what he promises; otherwise, you will regard him as neither truthful nor faithful, and that is impiety and a denial of the Most High God. But how will you be certain and sure unless you know that he knows and wills and will do what he promises, certainly, infallibly, immutably, and necessarily? And we ought not only to be certain that God wills and will act necessarily and immutably, but also

to glory in this fact; as Paul says in Romans 3[:4]: “Let God be true though every man be false,” and again [Rom. 9:6]: “Not as though the word of God had failed,” and elsewhere: “But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are his’ ” [2 Tim. 2:19]. And in Titus 1[:2] he says: “Which God, who never lies, promised ages ago,” and in Hebrews 11[:6]: “Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who hope in him.”

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

See now, my dear Erasmus, what that most moderate and peace-loving theology of yours leads to! You warn us off, and forbid us to try to understand the foreknowledge of God and the necessity laid on things and men, advising us to leave such things alone, and to shun and condemn them. And by this ill-advised labor of yours you teach us both to cultivate ignorance of God (which comes of its own accord, and indeed is inborn in us), and to despise faith, let go the promises of God, and treat all the consolations of the Spirit and certitudes of conscience as of no account. Such advice Epicurus himself would scarcely give! Then, not content with this, you call anyone who seeks knowledge of such things irreverent, inquisitive, and vain, but one who despises them, religious, devout, and sober. What else do you imply by these words than that Christians are inquisitive, vain, and irreverent, and that Christianity is a matter of no moment at all, but vain, foolish, and really quite impious? So it happens again that while you wish above all to preserve us from temerity, you are carried away, as foolish people often are, and do the very opposite, teaching nothing but the greatest temerities, impieties, and perditions. Do you not see that in this part your book is so impious, blasphemous, and sacrilegious that it is without an equal anywhere?

I am not, as I said above, speaking of your heart, nor do I think you so abandoned that at heart you desire either to teach these things or to see them taught and practiced. But I am trying to show you what frightful things a man is bound to babble if he undertakes to support a bad cause, and what it means to run counter to divine truth and divine Scripture when we put on an act to please others and play a part that is foreign to us against our conscience. It is no game or joke to give instruction in Holy Writ and godliness, for it is very easy to fall here in the way that James describes: “Whoever fails in one point has become guilty of all” [James 2:10]. For thus it comes about that when we think we mean to trifle only

a little, and do not treat Holy Writ with sufficient reverence, we are soon involved in impieties and immersed in blasphemies, just as has happened to you here, Erasmus—may the Lord forgive you and have mercy on you.

That the Sophists have produced such swarms of questions on these subjects, and have mixed up a lot of other useless things with them, many of which you specify, we know and admit as you do, and we have attacked them more sharply and more fully than you have. But you are imprudent and rash when you mix up, confuse, and assimilate the purity of sacred realities with the profane and stupid questions of ungodly men. “They have defiled the gold and changed its good color,” as Jeremiah says [Lam. 4:1], but the gold must not forthwith be treated like rubbish and thrown away, as you are doing. The gold must be rescued from these men, and the pure Scripture separated from their dregs and filth, as I have always sought to do, in order that the divine writings may be kept in one place, and their trifles in another. And it ought not to disturb us that nothing has come of these questions, “except that with the loss of harmony we love one another the less, while seeking to be wiser than we need.” For us the question is not what the Sophists have gained by their questions, but how we may become good Christians; and you ought not to blame it on Christian doctrine that the ungodly behave badly, since that has nothing to do with the case, and you could have spoken of it in another place and spared your paper here.

[Should Divine Truth Be Kept from Common Ears?]

In the third section you proceed to turn us into modest and peaceloving Epicureans, with a different sort of advice, though no sounder than the two already mentioned. That is to say, you tell us that some things are of such a kind that even if they were true and might be known, it would not be proper to prostitute them before common ears.

Here again you confuse and mix everything up in your usual way, putting the sacred on a level with the profane and making no distinction between them at all, so that once again you have fallen into contempt and abuse of Scripture and of God. I said above that things which are either contained in or proved by Holy Writ are not only plain, but also salutary, and can therefore safely be published, learned, and known, as indeed they ought to be. Hence your saying that they ought not to be prostituted before common ears is false if you are speaking of the things that are in Scripture; and if you are speaking of other things, what you say does not interest us and is out of place, so that you are wasting your time and paper on it. Besides, you know that there is no subject on which I agree with the Sophists, so that you might well have spared me and not cast their misdoings in my teeth. For it was against me that you were to speak in that book of yours. I know where the Sophists go wrong without needing you to tell me, and they have had plenty of criticism from me. I should like this said once for all, and repeated every time you mix me up with the Sophists

and make my case look as crazy as theirs, for you are being quite unfair, as you very well know.

Now, let us see the reasons for your advice. Even if it were true that “God, according to his own nature, is no less present in the hole of a beetle” or even in a sewer than in heaven (though you are too reverent to say this yourself, and blame the Sophists for blathering so), yet you think it would be unreasonable to discuss such a subject before the common herd.

First, let them blather who will; we are not here discussing what men do, but what is right and lawful, not how we live, but how we ought to live. Which of us always lives and acts rightly? But law and precept are not condemned on that account, but they rather condemn us. Yet you go looking for irrelevancies like these, and rake a pile of them together from all sides, because this one point about the foreknowledge of God upsets you; and since you have no real argument with which to overcome it, you spend the time trying to tire out your reader with a lot of empty talk. But we will let that pass, and get back to the subject. What, then, is the point of your contention that certain matters ought not to be discussed publicly? Do you count the subject of free choice among them? In that case, all I said above about the necessity of understanding free choice will round on you again. Moreover, why did you not follow your own advice and leave your *Diatribē* unwritten? If it is right for you to discuss free choice, why do you denounce such discussion? If it is wrong, why do you do it? On the other hand, if you do not count free choice among the prohibited subjects, you are again evading the real issue, dealing like a wordy rhetorician with topics that are irrelevant and out of place.

Even so, you are wrong in the use you make of this example, and in condemning as unprofitable the public discussion of the proposition that God is in the hole or the sewer. Your thoughts about God are all too human. There are, I admit, some shallow preachers who, from no motives of religion or piety, but perhaps from a desire for popularity or a thirst for some novelty or a distaste for silence, prate and trifle in the shallowest way. But these please neither God nor men, even if they assert that God is in the heaven of heavens. But where there are serious and godly preachers who teach in modest, pure, and sound words, they speak on such a subject in public without risk, and indeed with great profit. Ought we not all to teach that the Son of God was in the womb of the Virgin and came forth from her belly? But how does a human belly differ from any other unclean place? Anyone could describe it in foul and shameless terms, but we rightly condemn those who do, seeing that there are plenty of pure words with which to speak of that necessary theme even with decency and grace. Again, the body of Christ himself was human as ours is, and what is fouler than that? Are we therefore not to say that God dwelt in it bodily, as Paul has said

[Col. 2:9]? What is fouler than death? What more horrifying than hell? Yet the prophet glories that God is present with him in death and hell [Ps. 139:8].

Therefore, a godly mind is not shocked to hear that God is present in death or hell, both of which are more horrible and foul than either a hole or a sewer. Indeed, since Scripture testifies that God is everywhere and fills all things [Jer. 23:24], a godly mind not only says that He is in those places, but must needs learn and know that he is there. Or are we to suppose that if I am captured by a tyrant and thrown into a prison or a sewer—as has happened to many saints—I am not to be allowed to call upon God there or to believe that he is present with me, but must wait until I come into some finely furnished church?

If you teach us to talk such nonsense about God, and are so set against the locating of his essence, you will end by not even allowing him to remain for us in heaven; for the heaven of heavens cannot contain him, nor is it worthy of him [1 Kings 8:27]. But as I have said, it is your habit to stab at us in this hateful way in order to disparage our case and make it odious, because you see that for you it is insuperable and invincible.

As for your second example, I admit that the idea that there are three Gods is a scandal if it is taught; but it is neither true, nor does Scripture teach it. The Sophists speak in this way with their newfound dialectic, but what has that to do with us?

In the remaining example, regarding confession and satisfaction, it is wonderful to see with what felicitous prudence you put your case. Everywhere you walk so delicately, as is your habit, in order to avoid giving the impression either that you do not wholeheartedly condemn our views or that you are not opposed to the tyranny of the popes, for that would be by no means safe for you. So you bid adieu meanwhile to God and to conscience—for how does it concern Erasmus what God wills in these matters and what is good for the conscience?—and launch an attack on mere externals, charging the common people with abusing the preaching of free confession and satisfaction and turning it into carnal liberty to suit their own evil inclination, whereas by the necessity of confessing (you say) they were at all events restrained.⁵⁴

What outstandingly brilliant reasoning! Is that the way to teach theology? To bind souls by laws and, as Ezekiel says [Ezek. 13:18 f.], to slay them, when they are not bound by God? By this token you set up for us again the whole tyranny of papal laws, as being useful and salutary because by them too the wickedness of the common people is restrained. But instead of attacking this passage in the way it deserves, let me put the point briefly. A good theologian teaches as follows: the common people are to be restrained by the external power of the sword when they behave wickedly, as Paul teaches in Romans 13[:4]; but their consciences are not to be ensnared with false laws, so that they are burdened with sins

where God has not willed that there should be sins. For consciences are bound only by a commandment of God, so that the interfering tyranny of the popes, which falsely terrifies and kills souls inwardly and vainly wearies the body outwardly, has simply no place in our midst. For although it makes confession and other outward burdens compulsory, the mind is not kept in order by these means, but is rather provoked into hatred of God and men; and it is in vain that the body is tortured to death with outward observances, for this makes mere hypocrites, so that legal tyrants of this kind are nothing else but ravening wolves, thieves, and robbers of souls [Matt. 7:15; John 10:8]. Yet it is these that you, good spiritual counselor that you are, commend to us again. You set before us the cruellest of soul destroyers, and want us to let them fill the world with hypocrites who blaspheme and dishonor God in their hearts, as long as outwardly they are kept in some degree of order, as if there were not another means of keeping them in order, which makes no hypocrites and is applied without any ruination of consciences, as I have said.

Here you produce analogies, of which you seek to give the impression that you have an abundant store and make very apt use. You say, for instance, that there are diseases which it is a lesser evil to endure than to cure, such as leprosy, etc. You also bring in the example of Paul, who distinguished between things lawful and things expedient [1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23]. It is lawful, you say, to speak the truth, but it is not expedient to do so to everybody at all times and in all circumstances. What a fluent orator you are! Yet you understand nothing of what you are saying. In a word, you treat this subject as if it were simply an affair between you and me about the recovery of a sum of money, or some other quite trivial matter, the loss of which (as being of much less value than your precious external peace) ought not to trouble anyone enough to prevent him from giving way, and doing or suffering as the occasion requires, so as to make it unnecessary for the world to be thrown into such an uproar. You thus plainly show that outward peace and quietness are to you far more important than faith, conscience, salvation, the Word of God, the glory of Christ, and God himself.

Let me tell you, therefore—and I beg you to let this sink deep into your mind—that what I am after in this dispute is to me something serious, necessary, and indeed eternal, something of such a kind and such importance that it ought to be asserted and defended to the death, even if the whole world had not only to be thrown into strife and confusion, but actually to return to total chaos and be reduced to nothingness. If you do not understand this or are not concerned about it, then mind your own affairs and let those understand and be concerned about it on whom God has laid the charge.

For even I, by the grace of God, am not such a fool or so mad as to have been willing to maintain and defend this cause for so long, with so much zeal and constancy (which you

call obstinacy), amid so many dangers to life, so much hatred, so many treacheries, in short, amid the fury of men and demons, simply for the sake of money (which I neither possess nor desire), or popularity (which I could not obtain if I wished, in a world so incensed against me), or physical safety (of which I cannot for a moment be certain). Do you think that you alone have a heart that is moved by these tumults? Even we are not made of stone, or born of the Marpesian rocks; but when nothing else can be done, we prefer to be battered by temporal tumult, rejoicing in the grace of God, for the sake of the Word of God, which must be asserted with an invincible and incorruptible mind, rather than to be shattered by eternal tumult under the wrath of God, with intolerable torment. May Christ grant, as I hope and pray, that your mind may not come to that, although your words certainly sound as if you thought, like Epicurus, that the Word of God and a future life were fables; for you seek with your magisterial advice to persuade us that, as a favor to pontiffs and princes or for the sake of peace, we ought if occasion arises, to give way and set aside the most sure Word of God. But if we do that, we set aside God, faith, salvation, and everything Christian. How much better is the admonition of Christ, that we should rather spurn the whole world [Matt. 16:26]!

You say things like these, however, because you do not read or do not observe that it is the most unvarying fate of the Word of God to have the world in a state of tumult because of it. This is plainly asserted by Christ, when he says: "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" [Matt. 10:34], and in Luke: "I came to cast fire upon the earth" [12:49]. And Paul in 1 [2] Corinthians 6[:5] says: "In tumults," etc. And the prophet in the Second Psalm abundantly testifies the same, asserting that the nations are in tumult, the peoples murmur, kings rise up, princes conspire, against the Lord and against his Christ; as if he would say, numbers, rank, wealth, power, wisdom, righteousness, and whatever is exalted in the world, opposes itself to the Word of God. Look into The Acts of the Apostles and see what happens in the world on account of Paul's word alone, to say nothing of the other apostles. See how he alone sets both Gentiles and Jews by the ears, or as his enemies themselves say in the same place, he turns the world upside down [Acts 17:6; cf. 24:5]. Under Elijah the Kingdom of Israel was troubled, as Ahab complains [1 Kings 18:17]. And what tumult there was under the other prophets! They are all killed or stoned, while Israel is taken captive to Assyria and Judah to Babylon! Was this peace? The world and its god cannot and will not endure the Word of the true God, and the true God neither will nor can keep silence; so when these two Gods are at war with one another, what can there be but tumult in the whole world?

To wish to stop these tumults, therefore, is nothing else but to wish to suppress and prohibit the Word of God. For the Word of God comes, whenever it comes, to change and renew the world. Even the heathen writers testify that changes of things cannot take place

without commotion and tumult, nor indeed without bloodshed. But it is the mark of a Christian to expect and endure these things with presence of mind, as Christ says: “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet” [Matt. 24:6]. For myself, if I did not see these tumults I should say that the Word of God was not in the world; but now, when I do see them, I heartily rejoice and have no fear, because I am quite certain that the kingdom of the pope, with all his followers, is going to collapse; for it is against this in particular that the Word of God, now at large in the world, is directed.

I am aware, of course, that you, my dear Erasmus, complain in many books about these tumults and the loss of peace and concord, and with the best of intentions (as I verily believe) you try hard to find a remedy for them. But this gouty foot laughs at your doctoring hands; for here in truth you are, as you say, rowing against the stream, or rather, you are putting out a fire with straw. Stop your complaining, stop your doctoring; this tumult has arisen and is directed from above, and it will not cease till it makes all the adversaries of the Word like the mud on the streets. But it is sad to have to remind a theologian like you of these things, as if you were a pupil instead of one who ought to be teaching others.

It is here, therefore, that your aphorism (which is neat enough, though your use of it is inapposite) really belongs—I mean your aphorism about diseases that are less evil to endure than to cure. You should say that the diseases which are less evil to endure are these tumults, commotions, disturbances, seditions, sects, discords, wars, and anything else of this sort, by which the whole world is shaken and shattered on account of the Word of God. These things, I say, because they are temporal, are less evil to endure than the inveterate wickedness through which souls will inevitably be lost if they are not changed by the Word of God; and if that Word were taken away, then eternal good, God, Christ, the Spirit, would go with it. But surely it is preferable to lose the world rather than God the creator of the world, who is able to create innumerable worlds again, and who is better than infinite worlds! For what comparison is there between things temporal and things eternal? This leprosy of temporal evils ought therefore to be endured rather than that all souls should be slaughtered and eternally damned while the world is kept in peace and preserved from these tumults by their blood and perdition, seeing that the whole world cannot pay the price of redemption for a single soul.

You have some elegant and unusual analogies and aphorisms, but when you are dealing with sacred matters your application of them is puerile and indeed perverse, for you creep on the ground and never have a thought that rises above human comprehension. For the operations of God are not childish or bourgeois or human, but divine and exceeding human grasp. But you do not seem to see that these tumults and divisions are marching through

the world by the counsel and operation of God, and you are afraid lest the heavens should fall. But I, by the grace of God, see this clearly, because I see other greater troubles in time to come, by comparison with which these present seem no more than the whisper of a breeze or the murmur of a gentle stream.

But the dogma concerning the freedom of confession and satisfaction you either deny or do not know to be the Word of God. That is another question. We, however, know and are sure that it is God's Word by which Christian freedom is asserted, so that we may not allow ourselves to be trapped and brought into bondage by human traditions and laws. This we have abundantly taught elsewhere; and if you wish to go into the question, we are prepared to state our case or debate it with you as well. There are not a few books of ours available on this subject.

But at the same time, you will say, the laws of the pontiffs ought in charity to be endured and observed equally with divine laws, if by any chance it is possible in this way to maintain both eternal salvation through the Word of God and also the peace of the world. I have said above that that is not possible. The prince of this world does not allow the pope and his own pontiffs to have their laws observed freely, but his purpose is to capture and bind consciences. This the true God cannot tolerate, and so the Word of God and the traditions of men are irreconcilably opposed to one another, precisely as God himself and Satan are mutually opposed, each destroying the works and subverting the dogmas of the other like two kings laying waste each other's kingdoms. "He who is not with me," says Christ, "is against me" [Matt. 12:30].

As to your fear that many who are inclined to wickedness will abuse this freedom, this should be reckoned as one of the said tumults, part of that temporal leprosy which has to be endured and that evil which has to be borne. Such people should not be considered so important that in order to prevent their abusing it the Word of God must be taken away. If all cannot be saved, yet some are saved, and it is for their sake that the Word of God comes. These love the more fervently and are the more inviolably in concord. For what evil did ungodly men not do even before, when there was no Word? Or rather, what good did they do? Was not the world always inundated with war, fraud, violence, discord, and every kind of crime? Does not Micah liken the best of the men of his day to a thorn hedge [Micah 7:4]? And what do you think he would call the rest? But now the coming of the gospel begins to be blamed for the fact that the world is wicked, whereas the truth is that the good light of the gospel reveals how bad the world was when it lived in its own darkness without the gospel. In a similar way the uneducated find fault with education because their ignorance is shown up where education flourishes. That is the gratitude we show for the Word of life and salvation.

What apprehension must we not suppose there was among the Jews when the gospel set everyone free from the law of Moses? What did not so great a freedom seem likely to permit to evil men? Yet the gospel was not on that account taken away, but the ungodly were allowed to go their own way, while the godly were charged not to use their freedom as an opportunity to indulge the flesh [Gal. 5:13].

Nor is that part of your advice or remedy of any value, where you say it is lawful to speak the truth, but not expedient to do so to everybody at every time in every way; and it is quite inappropriate for you to quote Paul's saying: "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are expedient" [1 Cor. 6:12]. Paul is not there speaking of doctrine or the teaching of the truth, in the way that you misinterpret him and make him mean what you want. Paul wishes the truth to be spoken everywhere at every time and in every way. He can therefore rejoice even when Christ is preached in pretense and from envy, and he declares plainly and in so many words that he rejoices in whatever way Christ is preached [Phil. 1:15 ff.]. Paul is speaking factually and about the use made of the doctrine, that is, about those who boasted of Christian freedom but were seeking their own ends and took no account of the hurt and offense given to the weak. Truth and doctrine must be preached always, openly, and constantly, and never accommodated or concealed; for there is no scandal in it, for it is the scepter of righteousness [Ps. 45:6–7].

Who has empowered you or given you the right to bind Christian doctrine to places, persons, times, or causes when Christ wills it to be proclaimed and to reign throughout the world in entire freedom? "The word of God is not bound," says Paul [2 Tim. 2:9]; and will Erasmus bind the Word? God has not given us a Word that shows partiality in respect of persons, places, or times; for Christ says: "Go into all the world" [Mark 16:15]. He does not say, "Go to one place and not another," as Erasmus does. And he says, "Preach the gospel to every creature" [*ibid.*], not "to some and not to others." In short, you prescribe for us respect of persons, respect of places and customs, and respect of times, in the service of the Word of God, whereas it is one great part of the glory of the Word that (as Paul says) there is no *prosōpolēmpsia* and God is no respecter of persons. You see again how rashly you run counter to the Word of God, as if you much prefer your own ideas and counsels.

If we now asked you to distinguish for us the times, persons, and ways in which the truth ought to be spoken, when would you be ready to do it? The world would reach the limit of time and its own end before you had established any certain rule. Meanwhile, what would become of the ministry of teaching and the souls that should be taught? But how should you be able to give us a rule when you know no means of assessing either persons or times or methods? And even if you most decidedly did, yet you do not know men's hearts. Or does "method," "time," and "person" mean for you that we should teach the truth in such a

way as not to offend the pope or annoy the emperor or upset the pontiffs and princes, and not to cause any commotions and tumults in the world, lest many be made to stumble and become worse? What sort of advice this is, you have seen above; but you would rather spin fine though useless phrases than say, nothing at all.

How much better it would be for us miserable men to let God, who knows all men's hearts, have the glory of prescribing the manner, persons, and times for speaking the truth! For he knows what should be spoken to each, and when and how. As it is, however, he has enjoined that his gospel, which is necessary for all, should know no limit of place or time, but should be preached to all in every time and place. And I have proved above that the things set forth in the Scriptures are of a kind intended for all, and must necessarily be broadcast and are thoroughly salutary—as even you yourself have stated, with better sense than you show now, in your *Paraclesis*. Those who do not want souls redeemed, like the pope and his crowd—let it be left to them to bind the Word of God and keep men from life and the Kingdom of Heaven, so that they neither enter themselves nor permit others to enter [Matt. 23:13], to whose madness you perniciously pander, Erasmus, by this advice of yours.

The same sort of prudence underlies your next bit of advice, that if some wrong definition had been made in the Councils, it ought not to be proclaimed, lest a handle should be given to scorn the authority of the Fathers. This, of course, was just what the pope wanted you to say; he would rather hear it than the gospel, and he is the worst of ingrates if he does not reward you with a cardinal's hat and the income that goes with it. But in the meantime, Erasmus, what will souls do that are bound and slain by that unjust statute? Is that nothing to you?

You, of course, always hold, or profess to hold, that human statutes can be observed without peril along with the Word of God. If they could, I should not hesitate to join you in the view you express here. So if you do not know it, I tell you again: Human statutes cannot be observed together with the Word of God, because they bind consciences, while the Word sets them free. The two are as mutually incompatible as water and fire, unless the human statutes are kept freely, that is, as not being binding—a thing that the pope will not and cannot allow, unless he wants his kingdom ruined and brought to an end, since it is only maintained by the ensnaring and binding of consciences which the gospel asserts to be free. Therefore the authority of the Fathers is neither here nor there, and statutes wrongly enacted (as are all which are not in accordance with the Word of God) ought to be torn up and thrown away, for Christ ranks higher than the authority of the Fathers. In short, if this view of yours has reference to the Word of God, it is impious; if it refers to other

things, your wordy argument in support of it is nothing to us, for we are arguing about the Word of God.

[Should the Truth of God's Necessitating Will Be Suppressed?]

In the last part of your Preface where you seriously try to dissuade me from my kind of doctrine, you think you have as good as won your point. What, you say, could be more useless than to publish this paradox to the world, that whatever is done by us is not done by free choice, but by sheer necessity? And Augustine's saying, that God works in us good and evil, and rewards his own good works in us and punishes his evil works in us—what is the use of that? You are profuse in giving, or rather demanding, a reason here. What a window to impiety, you say, would the public avowal of this opinion open to mortal men! What evildoer would correct his life? Who would believe he was loved by God?⁶⁶ Who would war against his own flesh? I am surprised that in your great vehemence and contentiousness you did not remember the point at issue and say: Where would free choice then remain?

My dear Erasmus, let me too say in turn: If you think these paradoxes are inventions of men, what are you contending about? Why are you so roused? Against whom are you speaking? Is there anyone in the world today who has more vigorously attacked the dogmas of men than Luther? Therefore, your admonition has nothing to do with me. But if you think these paradoxes are words of God, how can you keep your countenance, where is your shame, where is—I will not say that well-known moderation of Erasmus, but the fear and reverence that are due to the true God, when you say that nothing more useless could be proclaimed than the Word of God? Naturally, your Creator must learn from you his creature what it is useful or useless to preach! That foolish, that thoughtless God did not previously know what ought to be taught until you his master prescribed for him how to be wise and how to give commandments! As though he himself would not have known, if you had not taught him, that the consequences you mention would follow from this paradox! If, therefore, God has willed that such things should be openly spoken of and published abroad without regard to the consequences, who are you to forbid it?

The apostle Paul, in his epistle to the Romans, discusses these same things, not in a corner, but publicly and before all the world, in the freest manner and in even harsher terms, when he says: "Whom he will he hardeneth," and, "God, willing to show his wrath," etc. [Rom. 9:18, 22]. What could be harsher (to the unregenerate nature at least) than Christ's saying: "Many are called, but few chosen" [Matt. 22:14], or: "I know whom I have chosen" [John 13:18]? We have it, of course, on your authority that nothing more profitless could be said than things like these, because ungodly men are led by them to fall into desperation, hatred, and blasphemy.

Here, I see, you are of the opinion that the truth and usefulness of Scripture is to be measured and judged by the reactions of men, and the most ungodly men at that, so that only what has proved pleasing or seemed tolerable to them should be deemed true, divine, and salutary, while the opposite should forthwith be deemed useless, false, and pernicious. What are you aiming at with this advice, unless that the words of God should depend on, and stand or fall with, the choice and authority of men? Whereas Scripture says on the contrary that all things stand or fall by the choice and authority of God, and all the earth should keep silence before the Lord [Hab. 2:20]. To talk as you do, one must imagine the Living God to be nothing but a kind of shallow and ignorant ranter declaiming from some platform, whose words you can if you wish interpret in any direction you like, and accept or reject them accordingly as ungodly men are seen to be moved or affected by them.

Here, my dear Erasmus, you plainly reveal how sincerely you meant your earlier advice that we should reverence the majesty of the divine judgments. There, when we were dealing with the dogmas of Scripture, which there was no need to reverence as things abstruse and hidden, since they are nothing of the kind, you warned us so very solemnly against rushing inquisitively into the Corycian cavern, that we were almost frightened off the reading of Scripture altogether, strongly though Christ and the apostles urge us to read it, as you yourself do elsewhere. But here, where we are concerned not with the dogmas of Scripture and the Corycian cavern only, but in very truth with the awful secrets of the Divine Majesty (namely, why he works in the way we have said), here you smash through bolts and bars and rush in all but blaspheming, as indignant as possible with God because you are not allowed to see the meaning and purpose of such a judgment of his. Why do you not put up a screen of ambiguities and obscurities here also? Why do you not restrain yourself and deter others from prying into things that God has willed to be hidden from us, and has not set forth in the Scriptures? It was here you should have put your finger to your lips in reverence for what lay hidden, and adoring the secret counsels of the Majesty you should have cried with Paul: "O man, who art thou that contendest with God?" [Rom. 9:20].

Who, you say, will take pains to correct his life? I answer: No man will and no man can, for God cares nothing for your correctors without the Spirit, since they are hypocrites. But the elect and the godly will be corrected by the Holy Spirit, while the rest perish uncorrected. Augustine does not say that no man's or all men's good works are crowned, but that some men's are. So there will be some who correct their life.

Who will believe, you say, that he is loved by God? I answer: No man will or can believe this; but the elect will believe while the rest perish in unbelief, indignant and blaspheming as you are here. So some will believe.

As to your saying that a window is opened for impiety by these dogmas, let it be so; such people belong to the above-mentioned leprosy of evil that must be endured. Nevertheless, by these same dogmas there is opened at the same time a door to righteousness, an entrance to heaven and a way to God for the godly and the elect. But if, as you advise, we left these dogmas alone and concealed this Word of God from men, so that they were deluded by a false assurance of salvation and no one learned to fear God and be humbled, so as to come through fear at length to grace and love, then we might very well have closed your window, but in its place we should be opening for ourselves and all men floodgates, or rather great chasms and gulfs, not only to impiety, but to the depths of hell. In this way we should neither enter heaven ourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in [Matt. 23:13].

What then, you may ask, is the utility or necessity of publishing such things when so many evils appear to proceed from them? I answer: It would be enough to say that God has willed them to be published, and we must not ask the reason for the divine will, but simply adore it, giving God glory that, since he alone is just and wise, he does no wrong to anyone and can do nothing foolishly or rashly, though it may seem far otherwise to us. With this answer the godly are content. Still, out of our abundance we will do a work of supererogation and mention two considerations which demand that such things should be preached. 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.

First, God has assuredly promised his grace to the humble [1 Peter 5:5], that is, to those who lament and despair of themselves. But 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 the choice, will, and work of another, namely, of God alone. For as long as he is persuaded that he himself can do even the least thing toward his salvation, he retains some self-confidence and does not altogether despair of himself, and therefore he is not humbled before God, but presumes that there is—or at least hopes or desires that there may be—some place, time, and work for him, by which he may at length attain to salvation. But when a man has no doubt that everything depends on the will of God, then he completely despairs of himself and chooses nothing for himself, but waits for God to work; then he has come close to grace, and can be saved.

It is thus for the sake of the elect that these things are published, in order that being humbled and brought back to nothingness by this means they may be saved. The rest resist this humiliation, indeed they condemn this teaching of self-despair, wishing for something, however little, to be left for them to do themselves; so they remain secretly proud and

enemies of the grace of God. This, I say, is one reason, namely, that the godly, being humbled, may recognize, call upon, and receive the grace of God.

The second reason is that faith has to do with things not seen [Heb. 11:1]. 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, when he justifies he does it by making men guilty, when he exalts to heaven he does it by bringing down to hell, as Scripture says: "The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up" (1 Sam. 2[6]). This is not the place to speak at length on this subject, but those who have read my books have had it quite plainly set forth for them.

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, and to believe him righteous when by his own will he makes us necessarily damnable, so that he seems, according to Erasmus, to delight in the torments of the wretched and to be worthy of hatred rather than of love. If, then, I could by any means comprehend how this God can be merciful and just who displays so much wrath and iniquity, there would be no need of faith. As it is, since that cannot be comprehended, there is room for the exercise of faith when such things are preached and published, just as when God kills, the faith of life is exercised in death. That is now enough by way of preface.

My way of dealing with people who argue about these paradoxes is better than yours. You advise silence and refusal to be drawn, with the idea of humoring their impiety; but you really achieve nothing by this. For if you either believe or suspect them to be true (since they are paradoxes of no small moment), such is the insatiable desire of mortals to probe into secret matters, especially when we most want them kept secret, that as a result of your publishing this warning everybody will now want to know all the more whether these paradoxes are true. They will have been aroused by your contention to such a degree that no one on our side will ever have provided such an opportunity for publicizing these paradoxes as you have done by this solemn and vehement warning. You would have been much wiser to say nothing at all about the need to beware of them if you wanted to see your desire fulfilled. The game is up when you do not directly deny that they are true; they cannot be kept dark, but the suspicion of their truth will prompt everybody to investigate them. Either, then, you must deny that they are true or set the example of silence if you want others to keep silence too.

[Divine Necessity and the Human Will]

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

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

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

In short, if we are under the god of this world, away from the work and Spirit of the true God, we are held captive to his will, as Paul says to Timothy [2 Tim. 2:26], so that we cannot will anything but what he wills. For he is that strong man armed, who guards his own palace in

such a way that those whom he possesses are in peace [Luke 11:21], so as to prevent them from stirring up any thought or feeling against him; otherwise, the kingdom of Satan being divided against itself would not stand [Luke 11:18], whereas Christ affirms that it does stand. And this we do readily and willingly, according to the nature of the will, which would not be a will if it were compelled; for compulsion is rather (so to say) “unwill.” But if a Stronger One comes who overcomes him and takes us as His spoil, then through his Spirit we are again slaves and captives—though this is royal freedom—so that we readily will and do what he wills. Thus the human will is placed between the two like a beast of burden. If God rides it, it wills and goes where God wills, as the psalm says: “I am become as a beast [before thee] and I am always with thee” [Ps. 73:22 f.]. If Satan rides it, it wills and goes where Satan wills; nor can it choose to run to either of the two riders or to seek him out, but the riders themselves contend for the possession and control of it.

What if I can prove from the words you yourself use in asserting freedom of choice that there is no free choice? What if I convict you of unwittingly denying what you seek so carefully to affirm? Frankly, unless I do so, I swear to regard everything I write against you in the entire book as revoked, and everything your *Diatribes* either asserts or queries against me as confirmed.

You make the power of free choice very slight and of a kind that is entirely ineffective apart from the grace of God. Do you not agree? Now I ask you, if the grace of God is absent or separated from it, what can that very slight power do of itself? It is ineffective, you say, and does nothing good. Then it cannot do what God or his grace wills, at any rate if we suppose the grace of God to be separated from it. But what the grace of God does not do is not good. Hence it follows that free choice without the grace of God is not free at all, but immutably the captive and slave of evil, since it cannot of itself turn to the good. If this is granted, I give you leave to make the power of free choice, instead of something very slight, something angelic, indeed if possible something quite divine; yet if you add this mournful rider, that apart from the grace of God it is ineffective, you at once rob it of all its power. What is ineffective power but simply no power at all?

Therefore, to say that free choice exists and has indeed some power, but that it is an ineffective power, is what the Sophists call *oppositum in adjecto* [“a contradiction in terms”]. It is as if you said that there is a free choice which is not free, which is as sensible as calling fire cold and earth hot. For fire may have the power of heat, even infernal heat, but if it does not burn or scorch, but is cold and freezes, let no one tell me it is a fire at all, much less a hot one, unless you mean a painted or imaginary fire. But if the power of free choice were said to mean that by which a man is capable of being taken hold of by the Spirit and imbued with the grace of God, as a being created for eternal life or death, no

objection could be taken. For this power or aptitude, or as the Sophists say, this disposing quality or passive aptitude, we also admit; and who does not know that it is not found in trees or animals? For heaven, as the saying is, was not made for geese.

It is settled, then, even on your own testimony, that we do everything by necessity, and nothing by free choice, since the power of free choice is nothing and neither does nor can do good in the absence of grace—unless you wish to give “efficacy” a new meaning and understand it as “perfection,” as if free choice might very well make a start and will something, thought it could not carry it through. But that I do not believe, and will say more about it later. It follows now that free choice is plainly a divine term, and can be properly applied to none but the Divine Majesty alone; for he alone can do and does (as the psalmist says [Ps. 115:3]) whatever he pleases in heaven and on earth. If this is attributed to men, it is no more rightly attributed than if divinity itself also were attributed to them, which would be the greatest possible sacrilege. Theologians therefore ought to have avoided this term when they wished to speak of human ability, leaving it to be applied to God alone. They should, moreover, have removed it from the lips and language of men, treating it as a kind of sacred and venerable name for their God. And if they attributed any power at all to men, they should teach that it must be called by another name than free choice, especially as we know and clearly perceive that the common people are miserably deceived and led astray by that term, since they hear and understand it in a very different sense from that which the theologians mean and discuss.

For the expression “free choice” is too imposing, too wide and full, and the people think it signifies—as the force and nature of the term requires—a power that can turn itself freely in either direction, without being under anyone’s influence or control. If they knew that it was not so, but that hardly the tiniest spark of power was meant by this term, and a spark completely ineffectual by itself as a captive and slave of the devil, it would be surprising if they did not stone us as mockers and deceivers who say one thing and mean something quite different, or rather who have not yet decided or agreed on what we do mean. For he who speaks sophistically is hateful, as the Wise Man says [Prov. 6:17], particularly if he does this in matters of piety, where eternal salvation is at stake.

Since, then, we have lost the meaning and content of such a vainglorious term, or rather have never possessed it (as the Pelagians wanted us to, who like you were led astray by the term), why do we so stubbornly hold on to an empty term, deceptive and dangerous as it is for the rank and file of believers? It is as sensible as when kings and princes hold on to or claim for themselves and boast about empty titles of kingdoms and countries, when in fact they are practically paupers and anything but the possessors of those kingdoms and countries. That, however, can be tolerated, since they deceive or mislead no one by it, but

simply feed themselves on vanity, quite fruitlessly. But in the present case there is a danger to salvation and a thoroughly injurious illusion.

Who would not think it ridiculous, or rather very objectionable, if some untimely innovator in the use of words attempted to introduce, against all common usage, such a manner of speaking as to call a beggar rich, not because he possessed any riches, but because some king might perhaps give him his, especially if this were done in seeming seriousness and not in a figure of speech, such as antiphrasis or irony. In this way, one who was mortally ill could be said to be perfectly well because some other might give him his own health, and a thoroughly illiterate fellow could be called very learned because someone else might perhaps give him learning. That is just how it sounds here: Man has free choice—if, of course, God would hand over his own to him! By this misuse of language, anyone might boast of anything, as for instance, that man is lord of heaven and earth—if God would grant it to him. But that is not the way for theologians to talk, but for stage players and public informers. Our words ought to be precise, pure, and sober, and as Paul says, sound and beyond censure [Titus 2:8].

But if we are unwilling to let this term go altogether—though that would be the safest and most God-fearing thing to do—let us at least teach men to use it honestly, so that free choice is allowed to man only with respect to what is beneath him and not what is above him. That is to say, a man should know that with regard to his faculties and possessions he has the right to use, to do, or to leave undone, according to his own free choice, though even this is controlled by the free choice of God alone, who acts in whatever way he pleases. On the other hand 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.¹

¹ Luther, M. (1999). [*Luther's works, vol. 33: Career of the Reformer III*](#) (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.; pp. 3–70). Fortress Press.