

FREE WILL: MAN'S GREAT LIE TO HIMSELF

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Introduction

Luther's debate with Erasmus on free will was one of the most consequential intellectual battles in Western history, a fact that any serious student of the West is willing to acknowledge. Erasmus, the darling of the Church at the finest courts in Europe, who had contributed to the rising chorus among his contemporaries to reform the religious state of affairs, finally couldn't avoid the less than hyper-cultivated monk who lived between God and the devil. We Lutherans care about this Luther/Erasmus debate—it is one of those events that we should at least know about. But for us, of course, it's far more than just an academic debate. We, with the monk after whom we're willing to be named, see this issue of free will as far more than just another theological topic to be argued. It is the truth that shapes and informs the foolishness of preaching that kills and makes alive before the face of God himself. It is, as Luther recognized in the *Bondage of the Will*, the jugular issue in theological debate (“*jugulum petisti*” “you have grabbed me by the throat”).

Our next presentation then focused on the section of *De Servo Arbitrio* where Luther stopped refuting Erasmus and where he simply expounded the Scriptures that he was called to teach, especially those Scriptures that assert that man's natural will is bound, in need of liberation by God.

As Lutheran pastors, you swore to conform all “your” teaching and practice to the Scriptures as the *norma normans* and to the Lutheran confessions as the *norma normata*. You know that the Formula of Concord, Article II, specifically mentions Luther's *Bondage of the Will* as the article explicates the peaceful consensus among the Lutherans regarding so-called free will. Anyone who has said “amen” to the For-

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mula's teaching concerning free-will recognizes that *De Servo Arbitrio* is part of his theological heritage and *habitus*.

Soon, we Christian pastors (or is it catholic pastors, or catholic Evangelical, or Evangelical Lutheran, or confessional Lutheran, or Lutheran pastors?) go back to the everyday grind of parish life in an America and in a congregation deeply affected by an America that knows virtually nothing of the bondage of the will. And we're supposed to go home with something to show for the last couple days.

In this essay you want the "practical" import of all this bondage talk. As one who drinks American water daily, you want to know how this worn out, egghead topic actually matters to Fred Farmer, Joe Six Pack, Ashley Engineer or Sarah Soccer (or hockey) Mom, especially at a missionaries' conference which, by its very nature, is to avoid the "how many angels can dance on the head of a pin?" questions and get down to business.

It is wise that those gathered here regain a place for this teaching at the very heart ("*jugulum petisti*") of the proclamation in our congregations to unbelievers and believers. If this paper helps us to that end, practically speaking, we'll thank the Lord of the Church that our time here was well spent.

**I. The contemporary context:
We live, move and have our being
in a "Freedom of Choice" world.**

Years ago, it fell to me to serve as a vicar in Puerto Rico. That meant, in those days, that one needed to learn Spanish in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. Good adult spoken-language students need to be immersed in the give-and-take of life which necessitates—surprise!—conversations. Said conversations repeatedly turned to topics of the day. "What do you Americans think about . . ." was a frequent question. It made this writer consciously think how typically (or un-typically) American I was. It also made me realize how silly and arrogant it is to ask anyone to speak for an entire nation or people as is regularly the custom among media types, asking other *reporters* (!) what a whole nation (or continent!) thinks of this or that.

¹To understand the term "free will" we need to remember the difference between *voluntas* and *arbitrium*. *Voluntas* is man's capacity to choose. *Arbitrium* is his ability to choose freely between two options. In inner spiritual things man's *arbitrium* is bound. He cannot by nature choose between good and evil. He cannot choose to love God. His *voluntas*, however, is free. He sins willingly. Man's *arbitrium* is bound in regard to things "above us" (God, faith). The *arbitrium* is to some degree free in things "beneath us" (shoes, clothes, whether or not to attend church).

You are a Confessional Lutheran pastor. You are also serving in a specific historical context. We live in a specific time in a specific place. Our people elected a specific president in these times in which we live. Military personnel sign up to be ready to fight specific enemies of this people at this time. Schools seek to educate the children of this time and of this place which is, obviously, a different time and a different place from that of our grandparents. It is 21st century America.

We have been awash in images and information from our nation's capital. Could all of last week's visitors have told the difference between the Jefferson Memorial and the Lincoln Memorial? Maybe not. Were all the visitors on the mall last week able to quote from memory Jefferson's words engraved in marble? Of course not. But judge for yourself if Jefferson's memorial and the words on the walls inside have shaped and helped interpret our thought world today: Panel One says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, that to secure these rights governments are instituted among men. We . . . solemnly publish and declare, that these colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent states. . . And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence, we mutually pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

Panel Two states: "Almighty God hath created the mind free. All attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burthens . . . are a departure from the plan of the Holy Author of our religion . . . No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship or ministry or shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief, but all men shall be free to profess and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion. I know but one code of morality for men whether acting singly or collectively."

Panel Three: "God who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep forever. Commerce between master and slave is despotism. Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free. Establish a law for educating the common people. This it is the business of the state and on a general plan."

Within walking distance of Jefferson's words, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is engraved on the walls inside his memorial:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in *Liberty*, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that *this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom*—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

In no way do I want to detour this conference and get us into the affairs of the kingdom of God's left hand—government. I simply wish to point out that *freedom, liberty*, is as close as it can get to being a sacred concept for Americans. Not that the great lie of the free will doesn't exist in dictatorships. The lie is as human as human gets, regardless of culture, time or place. It's just that, in America, the natural human flesh is further encouraged to gorge itself on freedom. Blue or red, it's as American as apple pie to say, "Let freedom ring!"

Church historian James Eckman thinks that what I'll call *Americanism*² is something that has flowed out of the Enlightenment when thinkers were trying to free humans from all bondage.³ The Enlightenment thinkers taught the basic goodness of man and, along with it, the truth that religion is basically privately derived and is therefore to be privately expressed.

Twenty-first century American Lutheran seminary professor James Nestingen comments on the American context in which we work and he introduces, finally, the lie of free will to our audience today:

This . . . is particularly important in a context where there are so many competing paradigms. The public schools have one—a pop psych interpretation of the child as a self-contained individual

²I thank Arthur Eggert for the term. ("The Relevancy of the Augsburg Confession Today: A Layman's Perspective," a paper delivered to the Central Pastoral Conference of the Western Wisconsin District on October 16, 2006)

³Eckman, p. 73.

replete with all the necessities for coping with life if only the artifices are removed so that feelings can be freely expressed. The marketplace has another—using advertising to present an image of selfhood which is actively in charge of its destiny, shopping for its fate, but at the same time only truly in control when in possession of a particular product. Television religion has its own version of the marketplace paradigm, only in theirs the essential product is different, and “shop ‘til you drop” takes on a different meaning.

These public paradigms have been very effective in undermining the Lutheran witness. Each of them is premised on a free will which classical Lutheranism regards as myth and *prima facie* evidence of rebellion; each of them tries to manage or manipulate the free will they have posited in some particular direction, insisting on the necessity of law to contain it, while Lutheranism’s classic declaration is the freedom of the gospel. Conflict comes at every level. Not surprisingly, until they discover how the old Lutheran paradigm makes sense of experience in the light of grace, people often respond to it with some shock and offense. “You mean there’s no free will—you’ve got to be kidding!”⁴

It’s fair to say that, in America, a (the?) dominant narrative is *freedom*—a decidedly different “freedom” than the Apostle Paul’s, but *freedom* nonetheless. Freedom to believe—largely in private—what I want to believe is as American as GM. Freedom to not believe is also American. Freedom to think that “faith” is merely something that specific sociological groupings develop and then follow was certainly showcased in last week’s Inauguration festivities and First Day prayer service. The politics of human life will continue to ingrain *free choice* at the center of our American discourse. As will gay rights. We won’t be able to avoid it.

That man’s supposed *freedom* (and *free choice*) is at the heart of the matter, not politically, but theologically, seems obvious, yet it needs to be pointed out. The Epiphany 2009 issue of *Logia* quotes a “BWK,” who, while slaying a different dragon, says that Romanism is “alive and well in Lutheranism in America. Where? . . . (It) thrives and metastasizes in congregations whose pastors have not only adopted the American Evangelical “style,” but also its *sine qua non* theological substance: the exercise of the free will with regard to salvation.”⁵ Mark Mattes, of Grand View College in Des Moines, IA, USA says the same in his theses listed in the bibliography. Gerhard Forde, ditto, as he divides all theologies into two, either of glory or of the cross, the latter being the one that necessitates faithful teaching of the bound will of humans in reference to God. Daniel Deutschlander says that our

⁴Nestingen, p. 67.

⁵BWK, p. 63.

American country and culture, more than most, is fertile soil for *free choice* thinking.⁶

If it's true what Luther said to Erasmus—that this (the locus of the un-free/bound will of man over against God) is the jugular—then a consideration of it should be eminently practical in a country that swims in freedom, celebrates freedom, and dies for freedom. For all over the world, but especially in our part of the world and in our time, the dominant story starts from *free choice*, lives in *free choice*, moves in *free choice* waters and ends in *free choice*. But a faithful Confessional Lutheran pastor must disagree (“must be countercultural” sounds more appealing to the post-modern ear . . .) and must constantly swim upstream in these waters, for “what starts in freedom ends in bondage; (only) what starts in bondage, ends up in freedom” (Forde, *The Captivation of the Will*).

II. Application of the principle of the bound will to evangelism. Let's liberate them.

Let's be practical and help the unbeliever trust that a *Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none*. Any thinking and/or talking about evangelism has to deal with the subject that is acted upon, the human who is targeted for it. Is his will bound or free?

It's a known that plenty of Americans don't see a need for evangelism, at least evangelism in the sense that you and I are considering today. Who can claim to be so culturally arrogant to assert the right to change another's belief system which, after all, that person is free to choose? Haven't we progressed, as a people, out of such imperial enslavements of other people from the past?

It's a known that plenty of today's church leaders in America (especially among those in old mainline Protestantism) don't see a need for evangelism, at least “evangelism” in the sense that you and I are considering today. Who can claim to be so morally superior so as to assert the right to change another's belief system which, after all, he's free to choose? Haven't we progressed, as the people of God, out of such enslavements and judgmental arrogance handed down to us from a darker, more inquisitional and dogmatic past? Aren't those who still evangelize others in the name of God on the wrong side of history?

Some in the Christian churches in America (especially among the Evangelicals) are completely committed to evangelism and preach very clearly about how sinful we humans are and how much God has loved the world and that he sent Jesus to die for all and how much

⁶Deutschlander, p. 16.

God wants you to believe in him. “So won’t you please respond, exercise your free choice and believe in him?”

Some in the Christian churches in America respond to such free choice statements with assertions regarding how wrong such teachers are regarding Scripture and how they should get it straight. They should know that man is totally depraved. And then, the Calvinists seek to convince the listener of his depravity with serious teaching rather than the dumbed-down version of Christianity that prevails today. And they say how much God has loved the world that he sent Jesus to die for his own and to effectually call them in his Word. And they tell the listener the teachings of God that they are to take seriously and follow.

OK, but. . . .

Luther wants you to know both who you are and who your god is. He teaches the daddies in the homes to teach the kids: “You shall have no other gods. *Was ist das?* We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” The kiddies sitting on daddy’s lap are to see their life, at all times and in all places, *coram Deo*. They are to have one God and no other. “Who is your god?” For little Joey in the daddy’s lap—*incurvatus in se est* as he is—Joey is god, of course.

That’s not hard for many people to see and to say if Joey’s a particularly selfish bully who smokes, is an addict and a child molester.

But it’s a lot harder for Americans to see it if Joey’s been a good boy; if Joey has chosen to be a volunteer in helping with the homeless, got straight A’s on his way to be a cancer research specialist and an AIDS doctor in Central Africa and the inner city, giving 90% of his considerable earnings to the poorest of the poor. If he’s a boy who does the right thing. A lot. Maybe, we’d even say, he does the right thing all the time. To assert that such a good one *has the wrong god* is a conversation stopper. “Who are you to judge?” the typical American asks.

He thinks that only the harshest of church people would assert the bondage of the will. Only the most traditional, the strictest. Only those who aren’t on the same team as the narrow-minded preacher are being told by the narrow-minded preacher that they have the wrong god.

And here’s so often where the inevitable comments regarding the supposed culture wars make an appearance. You know, the liberals speak against the conservatives and vice versa; the strict vs. the tolerant; churches the way they used to be vs. churches that are relevant; those for change vs. those against change; “we used to know where the lines were” vs. “anything goes.” In this day, you can say anything you want but not really. You can say anything you feel, but not really. Even among the nihilists all around, there still is enough discrimination left

over to push some who are inappropriate to the margins. And, since it's politically incorrect to speak like a narrow-minded preacher, and we're put into the corner (we think) as narrow-minded preachers, we show our teeth and respond with boatloads of political incorrectness. As if faithfulness in the gospel and orthodoxy is equated with being politically incorrect.

There are plenty of embattled "conservative" Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, and Jews around. There are plenty (atheists, too) who are railing on the laxity and superficiality of the times. It's not only Confessional Lutherans who are still against sin. And it's certainly not only conservatives who are still against sin. It's simply that they don't all agree (did they ever, really?) on what sin is anymore. So, let's not get caught up in the culture wars and miss the real problem.

"The law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot advance man on his way to righteousness, but rather hinders him," Luther said in May, 1518 in his first thesis at Heidelberg while he was defending his teaching among his Augustinian brethren.

The problem is not only that the bad guys don't care about God and don't try. It's not only that some try to take God out of the public school or courtroom or bedroom or take him out of everywhere. The problem is not primarily that there are those who want no religion. The bigger problem is that the *good* guys are trying too hard to be good. The problem is that "good" always means "my guys," and bad always means "those guys." The real problem is the wrong god dominates.

It's easy to pick on and preach against the supposedly vile atheists and God-haters out there. But it's more useful to recognize the "God-lovers" are a similar sized problem.

Is Joey, the one who is god in his own eyes and being doted upon in his daddy's lap, good or bad, depending upon which information drives him to behave in appropriate or inappropriate ways? Is education the solution? Is more information, even from the Bible? Or is his problem that he's bound to make the wrong choice in the God question, even when it looks like a good choice from the human perspective?

Americans are taught that education is the path to enlightenment and a better future. Look what we can accomplish! We still do live in the country where, if you put your mind to it, you (or we) can do anything. So goes the narrative in today's present climate of hope and change for the better.

But it's OK for the Christian in America today to see life the way it is. Education, per se, is a good thing. Lutherans, especially, realize this. But does it give us the right god? No. In fact, education (or a host

of other great gifts from God to humans) can be turned on its head and can replace the Creator/created relationship. That's most useful and practical for us to see. And to teach.

No, evangelism has to do with humans who always, invariably, have the wrong god. Especially those humans who are bent on doing the good things.

Wait a minute. Shouldn't we, especially in the church, be encouraging the doing of good things? Yes, but let's be clear about our distinctions—between God's view or my view of "good," between "good" in the kingdom of God's left hand and in the kingdom of God's right hand. In the end, we must distinguish between the only two theologies there are—the theology of the cross and the theology of glory.

Seeing that this is the issue (rather than something else, immorality, or even sin, for example) changes one's service to the one being acted upon in the evangelism enterprise. If sin is the problem, then, the sinner will simply stop sinning, he thinks. If sin is the problem, then I need to deal with it somehow, wash it away or balance it off or overcome it by making the right choice of the right god that's available to me at the time. It's kind of like dealing with cell phone companies. You do some homework and make your pick, knowing you'll probably change your mind in the future and make another choice.

Seeing that evangelism, above all, means dealing with others who have the wrong god means that we who have the only God have to come to grips with how that has come about in the first place. The dominant religious narrative of the land tells the human that it's possible for him to get onto God's side of the bridge, made possible by the bridge that is Jesus Christ; all that needs to be there is faith in Jesus. Cue the music and wholesome encouragement and kind people giving support and *Voila!* we then all sing, "Amazing Grace" together.

In some of the traditions, such a road has a bit more strict talk about the choice that one made at the altar—that it is by the Spirit's power. But the encouragement to "have faith" is real. And essential.

Some say, "No" to man's free will, but "Yes" to God's sovereign responsibility.

Over against this dominant American Evangelical paradigm, a few sincere Christian preachers rail against man's non-existent free will and emphasize the other part of the picture, God's sovereign will. And the sinner is not told to act on his own free will (for, in reality, he has none). He is told not to believe that Jesus died for all, but that he died for his own and that the Spirit will bring the elect to faith. There aren't many of these honest Calvinist preachers around anymore. They are spot on when it comes to nailing the dominant American

Evangelical message of free will for the siren song twaddle that it is and can sound eerily like a “conservative” Lutheran pastor who hasn’t come to grips with Luther’s *theologia crucis*. They’re spot on in condemning the wrong choice, but end up offering another false alternative, even though it says it gives all the credit to God.

We say, “No” to man’s free will, and “Yes” to God’s responsibility in the Preached God.

Here’s Luther’s solution to the problem. The solution is to give God to the bound sinner who is curved in on himself as his own god by proclaiming that savior God to him.

Such a solution involves dealing with the Divine One as he wills to be dealt with. Such an approach lets God and his sovereign will stay hidden from humans. It proclaims his saving will in what he has revealed in the face of Christ. Luther’s catholic way cuts the human down to size and exposes him before God for what he is—one who’s bound to try to peer into God’s glory and who’s bound to try to find God behind the curtain like Dorothy found the Wizard of Oz and exposed him for who he was. Moses couldn’t do it—see the face of God—and live. Other humans can’t either. All we are to do is see God where he has bound himself to be “seen”—in the face of Jesus Christ. And the only way for humans to “see” that God is to have him clearly portrayed for them as crucified, to have him *proclaimed* in words.

All this talk about God coming to the human in proclamation and giving himself therein does not leave anything for the human to do. This proclamation talk makes us come to grips with something that Luther was forced to come to grips with in 1518 at the Heidelberg Disputation—man’s supposedly free will is not what it’s cracked up to be. “Free will, after the fall, exists in name only, and as long as it does what it is able to do, it commits a mortal sin” (Thesis 13). “Free will, after the fall, has the power to do good only in a passive capacity, but it can always do evil in an active capacity” (Thesis 14). It sounds like Luther, called to be expositor of Scripture, does not think it’s about man reaching up to God.

Also at Heidelberg, as he fleshed out what he thought was faithful catholic teaching for his fellow Augustinians, he uttered a phrase that is being repeated more and more on the American religious scene: *theologia crucis* as opposed to *theologia gloriae*. Man, by himself, thinks he can see through to the heart of the matter. Luther disagrees:

Thesis 19: That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened” (Ro 1:20) (Latin—*ea, quae facta sunt*—“those things that have been made”).

Thesis 20: He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

Thesis 21: A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.

Thesis 22: That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened. (*LW* 31, p. 40)

We've been awash in political pundits recently, many of whom have been telling us what's *really* going on. They see what is, claim to see through to the heart of the matter, and then come back down from their lofty thoughts to inform us commoners of the way it is. We've seen some such political experts get handed their lunch and their jobs precisely because they couldn't see it the way it is—in the end.

If seeing the American political scene “the way it is” is fraught with difficulty, how much more to peer into God's throne room! And, more than that, into the very heart of God himself!

That humanity continually creates its own pantheon of gods can readily be seen, both in any history course and in the perceptive contemporary news shows. That humans repeatedly claim to know the mind of the Divinity by hearing the evening news or being in touch with the world around them would be laughable were it not so idolatrous and blasphemous.

The Holy Scriptures are replete with examples of God's people knowing better than God and trying to outflank him (Adam & Eve, Cain, the builders at Babel, Abraham, Isaac, etc.). On Sinai, Moses, the deliverer, wanted to see God's face. But God would not let Moses see him in his glory (Exodus 33). God only let him see his “hinder parts,” for the good of his beloved fallen creature. God in his glory is far too much for fallen man to behold. To see God in his Altogether destroys. And so God chooses to be God and chooses to hide himself. He clothes himself in hiddenness.

This is exactly how the Apostle Paul explains the work of God on earth to the church at Corinth. He writes: We speak of God's *secret* wisdom, a wisdom that has been *hidden* and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind conceived what God has prepared for those who love him, but God has *revealed* it to us by his Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:7-10).⁷

⁷This paragraph begins a lengthy quotation which is concluded by the next footnote.

Do we catch the key words, "hidden" and "revealed?" They simply mean that when God reveals himself in our world, he goes into hiding. Now that seems mighty strange to us. Revelation normally occurs when, like a butterfly in a cocoon, something comes out of hiding, when something once hidden from sight is now openly revealed. But when God comes out of secrecy, he hides himself. When God shows us his love on earth, he covers himself in flesh and blood. We have said it and sung it, often thoughtlessly, "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail the incarnate Deity" (CW 61).

Miracle of miracles, God reveals himself by hiding himself. There he is at Bethlehem, the baby of whom the angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest." There he is standing in the waters of the Jordan, of whom the Father said, "This is my Beloved Son, listen to him." There he is on the mount, who for a fleeting moment unveiled his glory and stood transfigured before his disciples. And they stood transfixed as Jesus' face shown like the sun and a voice from heaven confirmed, "This is my Son whom I love" (Mt 17:5). And then they saw nothing but Jesus only.

In our history God reveals himself by hiding himself for a reason. He knew that persons whom he once created in the image of God (*imago dei*) wanted in vainglory to be just like God (*sicut deus*, in Genesis 3:5). Eyes which once looked God in the face were now veiled in sin and no longer able to see God as he is. The great "I Am," Yahveh, is too great for us. Pious Israelites did not even dare to pronounce that holy name. But God wants us to know that the Lord of history is the LORD who cares. The Lord of life is willing to go into action on our behalf, even if it meant death on a cross.

That is why God's secret plan was to reveal himself by hiding himself. From eternity he planned the coming of Christ under the veil of flesh to suffer and die on a cross to redeem the times. God remains hidden in the cross (*tectum cruce*). For the cross is not glorious. It is an instrument of torture and death. It is condemnation. And as we look at Jesus with our natural historical eyes, we see a person stricken and smitten by God. And we cannot stand the sight, and hide, as it were, our eyes from him (Isaiah 53).

Why? Because in the cross, God takes our pants down, as it were, and we stand before him naked and exposed. What happened there to this righteous and innocent Son of Man reflects with graphic vividness what is to happen to us. The cross is the ultimate preaching of God's anger over sin (FC: Ep V:9). In it God exposes the root sin out of which all the fruit sins, like disobedience, sexual impurity, pride and selfishness grow (SA III, I, 1f; Galatians 5:19). The root sin is our total separation from God from birth. Devoid of all true fear and faith in him, we are turned back upon ourselves and, try as we may, cannot keep the royal law of love (James 2:8).

But what our natural eyes cannot see in Jesus' cross because of sin's veil, the eye of faith does see. By the Spirit of the living God, we can

see that Jesus' cross is our salvation, that his death is our life, that his obedience is our rescue. The wisdom of the cross is simply this: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Co 5:19).

But the work of Christ on the cross would have meant nothing to us if it were not the work of the Spirit of the Living God. The Holy Spirit is the one who lifts up the cover for us to see, and there he lets us see with the eyes of faith the One hidden behind the veil. Now for the first time we learn the meaning of life and of history from God's perspective.

Yet that mask behind which God operates in the cross will not be fully revealed until we see God face to face. Only at the end of time will the full meaning of history become clear to us. The Christian view of history is truly eschatological.⁸

Luther believed, taught and confessed that it's the teaching of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church that "I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him." He continued, "But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." Clearly, for Luther, to get the right God had nothing to do with Luther's choice, free or otherwise. But it had everything to do with the gospel being proclaimed through the lips of another flesh and blood creature, whose lips were used by the Lord of the Church to kill and make alive, to liberate, to put another into his church. "In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."

No, it's not either a matter of my free choice of God or of being puppets before a God whose sovereign will we don't know in the matter of the individual sinner. It's not about solving the human freedom/God's responsibility question or the God's freedom/human responsibility question. It is a matter of letting God be God and hearing the Word of God that proclaims *Christus pro nobis* to the sinner whose will is bound to sin and play God. It is the Word of God—that *Christus pro nobis* Word—that is proclaimed that "calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies" the sinner. It is God preached (for this is what God wills and how he wills to be known) who is the actor. It is the human who is the one acted upon by that powerful Word.

Evangelism that is Lutheran evangelism says it trusts in the power of the Word of God to liberate the sinner from his bondage to the devil, the world, and his own curved-in-upon-itself flesh as master. The Word of God, those Scriptures which testify of the life-giving Christ, is proclaimed with all the humility that created ones feel when doing anything in the name of the One behind the veil. And it is done with all the

⁸Koelpin, p. 54-56.

confidence that comes with all the trust that God's Spirit gives, and such proclamation—we believe, teach and confess—gives God himself to the baby at the font and to the evangelism prospect in his home. It is that gospel, and that one alone, that is to be spoken, even with the Pauline condemnation of those who speak another gospel, even if it's from an angel, ringing in the church's ears. It is to be spoken and not merely "used" as if it's a commodity that can be hoarded or traded according to the will or whim of the person who acts as if he's in control of the Word of God, as if it's the church that's in control of the Word of God, editorializing him down to size or shaping him to the times! No. The church is called into existence and nurtured by the Spirit's work in proclamation, *where and when he wills*.

Word of God proclamation, that is, Word of God evangelism, therefore, has to be recognized as completely in the hands of the Spirit of God. "Success" or "failure" are words that are not used in faithful Lutheran evangelism speech, but *faithfulness* with the mysteries of God is. The only thing that matters, Paul says, is faith working itself out through love. Miraculous faith. Faith *alone*, apart from the deeds of the law. "Faith" that is decidedly NOT an active choice of the free will, but faith in God Revealed that is entirely and purely the gift of God.

Think about "evangelism" that talks about God's law, sin, grace, Jesus, redemption, forgiveness, Word of God, etc., but does NOT assume and is not shaped by the truth of the un-free will. Doesn't proclamation from and in such a theological package assume an entirely different form from the Pauline gospel of freedom in Christ? Doesn't such proclamation, in the end, turn the very gospel of freedom in Christ into just another diatribe against the wrong things and telling folks to do and/or take the right thing?

Is the problem in the American church scene really that the churches don't proclaim enough law? Or is it that the preachers don't preach enough of the crucified God, enough of the hidden God who reveals himself on the cross of Jesus Christ? Is it that they have a spirit that attempts to make God act on the basis of our free choices? Is it that they have a spirit that does not let God be God in his way. Is it that they don't let God be present where and when he wills? Is it that in their attempts to do the right thing, to use the law to advance themselves or others on the way to righteousness, they stop being beggars before God and create their own gods? (cf. Isaiah 45:15-25)

If we see evangelism in a correct understanding of the un-free will, doesn't it affect the way we plan (or don't plan) our individual evangelism efforts? Doesn't it affect the way we do our corporate evangelism efforts? Our synodical mission efforts? Doesn't it affect the way we approach follow-up visits to our worship services?

There is no deal to close. No commitment to extract. No policies or un-attractive teachings to hide. Only a God to be proclaimed—The One True God.

Doesn't this also affect the way we talk about "relationship building"? Should we talk as if we are theologians of glory, who have an end in sight—getting them to do something? As if we are trying to get something from them, say, a confession? As if we are trying to get them to do something, say, to join the church or confess Christ as their Savior? As if we don't think mere Word of God preaching with Jesus Christ at the center of it is enough to do anything? As if it all has to have a flow chart, from first contact to the 72nd?

No. This is not a diatribe against planning in the church or in your church. No. This is not saying that the intentionalizing of our evangelistic efforts is wrong. No. This is not condemning mission boards that have to make the difficult decisions regarding funding (or de-funding) of mission fields. Lord, have mercy on the sanctified men making such decisions about the resources given for the glory of God and for the support of the kingdom work. No. This is not saying that only precisely spoken evangelism efforts are effective or that only confessional Lutheran evangelism is right.

It is saying: let's all get back to the fear of catching God at the wrong time (cf. the bells at the bottom of the high priest's robe). Let's not try to manipulate the Spirit's work. Let's think of our evangelism efforts as liberating the legalists from the laws that they are bound to, be those gods secular or religious or nationally popular or merely local. Legalism is legalism is legalism. Using the law in this way really only hinders the man on his way to righteousness. The theologies of glory that abound merely differ in how much effort or in what deeds are demanded. They are, essentially, the same, differing only in the nature of the false god and in the amount of contribution by the sinner; some need a little work by man and others need much more. They invariably, however, demand a god other than the God Who Hides Himself in Christ crucified.

I wonder if the preachers who are theologians of the cross have that much to learn about "evangelism" from those who are bound to believe, teach, and confess another spirit.

III. The effect of a correct understanding of the bondage of the will on preaching.

Let's enslave them.

Let's be practical and move the folks from bondage to freedom in Christ and also to service towards their neighbor. *A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.*

It seems tremendously helpful for the church to return to Luther's catholic teaching regarding the un-free will, especially as it affects evangelism. It has a profound effect on all our planning and, especially informs the way the church speaks to unbelievers.

But not only among unbelievers does the faithful teaching of the un-free will have an impact. All of faithful preaching of the gospel is informed and shaped by the truth of the bound will.

It means church people will recognize and embrace their new life as being enslaved in service to their neighbor, whomever God places next to them today. I'm not enslaved in order to earn my right to be a child of God—isn't that what Jesus Christ was all about?—but to meet the need of my neighbor.

So a Christian, like Christ his head, is filled and made rich by faith and should be content with this form of God which he has obtained by faith; only, as I have said, he should increase this faith until it is made perfect.⁹ For this faith is his life, his righteousness, and his salvation: it saves him and makes him acceptable, and bestows upon him all things that are Christ's, as has been said above, and as Paul asserts in Gal. 2[:20] when he says, "And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God." Although the Christian is thus free from all works, he ought in this liberty to empty himself, take upon himself the form of a servant, be made in the likeness of men, be found in human form, and to serve, help, and in every way deal with his neighbor as he sees that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with him. This he should do freely, having regard for nothing but divine approval.

He ought to think: "Although I am an unworthy and condemned man, my God has given me in Christ all the riches of righteousness and salvation without any merit on my part, out of pure, free mercy, so that from now on I need nothing except faith which believes that this is true. Why should I not therefore freely, joyfully, with all my heart, and with an eager will do all things which I know are pleasing and acceptable to such a Father who has overwhelmed me with his inestimable riches? I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me; I will do nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable, and salutary to my neighbor, since through faith I have an abundance of all good things in Christ."

Behold, from faith thus flow forth love and joy in the Lord, and from love a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves one's neighbor willingly and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, of praise or blame, of gain or loss. For a man does not serve that he may put men under obligations. He does not distinguish between friends

⁹This paragraph begins a long quotation which is ended by the next footnote.

and enemies or anticipate their thankfulness or unthankfulness, but he most freely and most willingly spends himself and all that he has, whether he wastes all on the thankless or whether he gains a reward. As his Father does, distributing all things to all men richly and freely, making "his sun rise on the evil and on the good" [Matt. 5:45], so also the son does all things and suffers all things with that freely bestowing joy which is his delight when through Christ he sees it in God, the dispenser of such great benefits.

Therefore, if we recognize the great and precious things which are given us, as Paul says [Rom. 5:5], our hearts will be filled by the Holy Spirit with the love which makes us free, joyful, almighty workers and conquerors over all tribulations, servants of our neighbors, and yet lords of all. For those who do not recognize the gifts bestowed upon them through Christ, however, Christ has been born in vain; they go their way with their works and shall never come to taste or feel those things. Just as our neighbor is in need and lacks that in which we abound, so we were in need before God and lacked his mercy. Hence, as our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians.

Who then can comprehend the riches and the glory of the Christian life? It can do all things and has all things and lacks nothing. It is lord over sin, death, and hell, and yet at the same time it serves, ministers to, and benefits all men. But alas in our day this life is unknown throughout the world; it is neither preached about nor sought after; we are altogether ignorant of our own name and do not know why we are Christians or bear the name of Christians. Surely we are named after Christ, not because he is absent from us, but because he dwells in us, that is, because we believe in him and are Christs one to another and do to our neighbors as Christ does to us. But in our day we are taught by the doctrine of men to seek nothing but merits, rewards, and the things that are ours; of Christ we have made only a taskmaster far harsher than Moses. . . .

. . . From what has been said, everyone can pass a safe judgment on all works and laws and make a trustworthy distinction between them and know who are the blind and ignorant pastors and who are the good and true. Any work that is not done solely for the purpose of keeping the body under control or of serving one's neighbor, as long as he asks nothing contrary to God, is not good or Christian. For this reason I greatly fear that few or no colleges, monasteries, altars, and offices of the church are really Christian in our day—nor the special fasts and prayers on certain saints' days. I fear, I say, that in all these we seek only our profit, thinking that through them our sins are purged away and that we find salvation

in them. In this way Christian liberty perishes altogether. This is a consequence of our ignorance of Christian faith and liberty.

This ignorance and suppression of liberty very many blind pastors take pains to encourage. They stir up and urge on their people in these practices by praising such works, puffing them up with their indulgences, and never teaching faith. If, however, you wish to pray, fast, or establish a foundation in the church, I advise you to be careful not to do it in order to obtain some benefit, whether temporal or eternal, for you would do injury to your faith which alone offers you all things. Your one care should be that faith may grow, whether it is trained by works or sufferings. Make your gifts freely and for no consideration, so that others may profit by them and fare well because of you and your goodness. In this way you shall be truly good and Christian. Of what benefit to you are the good works which you do not need for keeping your body under control? Your faith is sufficient for you, through which God has given you all things.

See, according to this rule the good things we have from God should flow from one to the other and be common to all, so that everyone should "put on" his neighbor and so conduct himself toward him as if he himself were in the other's place. From Christ the good things have flowed and are flowing into us. He has so "put on" us and acted for us as if he had been what we are. From us they flow on to those who have need of them so that I should lay before God my faith and my righteousness that they may cover and intercede for the sins of my neighbor which I take upon myself and so labor and serve in them as if they were my very own. That is what Christ did for us. This is true love and the genuine rule of a Christian life. Love is true and genuine where there is true and genuine faith. Hence the Apostle says of love in I Cor. 13[:5] that "it does not seek its own."

We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor. Yet he always remains in God and in his love, as Christ says in John 1[:51], "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man."

Enough now of freedom. As you see, it is a spiritual and true freedom and makes our hearts free from all sins, laws and commands, as Paul says, I Tim. 1[:9], "The law is not laid down for the just." It is more excellent than all other liberty, which is external, as heaven is more excellent than earth. May Christ give us this liberty both to understand and to preserve. Amen.¹⁰

¹⁰LW 31, p. 366-368; 370.

Lutherans learned to be careful to say that the man does not cooperate in conversion, but after it the new man does (FC, II, 17-19). Good. That means we make sure that we teach the un-free will clearly before conversion. But you can hear your own flesh think, "Ah, that means now we can move to the real business at hand, getting people to be godly, getting people to do the right thing, getting people to, well, be more like the people of God, now that we know the Christian CAN and does cooperate with God. Ah, NOW we can 'get deeper,' to the real job of walking the walk, being an effective church, moving to a higher level, really challenging myself, really being convicted by God to do something big, etc."

Such thinking is symptomatic of the old Adam and the fact that he is quite a strong swimmer (drowned in Holy Baptism, which is eschatologically true, but we still live on this side of the eschatological divide, so we live by faith and not by sight, right?). As if moving to the Law of God and obedience thereto is really what it's all about. As if moving to even the third use of the law is the highest point on the hierarchy of the "uses" of God's Word. You know: *walking the walk and deeds, not creeds*.

It's useful to remember that Romans 7 continues to accuse also the Christian who uses the law in its third use. And the *lex semper accusat* of the Apology, Article IV does just that—always accuses. Even in its third use. It's not as if Luther's *usus theologicus* (the mirror) stops reflecting what the human really is, when seen from below, even for the Christian. The Christian is still *sinner*, seen from below. The good news is that he is saint, seen in Christ who is proclaimed to him. 100% sinner (*lex semper accusat*) and 100% saint (Ro 5). *Simul justus et peccator*, Luther taught. Not 50/50, striving day after day to eventually get to 60/40, then 75/25, then . . . maybe, with the right amount of prayer, or striving, or, let's say, really intense Bible study, 99/1! No, it is the sinner, who, through faith, is seen by God and who is accredited with righteousness. We live by faith, not by sight. Not by ever-improving percentages in our new life in Christ. Percentages that show the world how good and godly I've now become or how glorious and triumphant our church is or how magnificent and victorious is our great pastor. *Lex semper accusat*. We have sworn to conform all our teaching to this statement, because it faithfully reflects Scripture's teaching.

This means that the main thing that both the evangelism prospect and the congregation member needs to hear is the foolishness of what is preached—Christ crucified and risen.

It means that C. F. W. Walther was right when he says that the teaching that is to predominate is not the law, but the gospel.

This means that faithful church preaching will be sacramental preaching. Sacramental preaching is that which realizes that Word and Sacrament go together, the oral Word and the visible Word. It means that it can be helpful to think of faithful biblical preaching as we think of the presence of Christ in his church in the Lord's Supper. He is really present, regardless of the faith or knowledge of the participants and regardless of the faith or knowledge of the minister. He has broken through. It is the Lord's Word that does the breaking out, not the sinner who breaks into the throne room of God. Indeed, it is the Word of God that is everything—both for the un-freed will of the unbeliever and for the new cooperating will of the one who trusts in and who is bound to Christ.

Preaching in the church that is rightly informed about the un-free will allows the *Hauptartikel*, the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, to really be the chief article by which the church stands or falls. It will not be seen as some idiosyncrasy of the Lutheran "branch" of the church, but the center against which all the rest of the articles of scriptural teaching rest. When seen against the backdrop of the un-free will, justification by faith alone (for which all the Protestants are willing to thank Luther, even as they condemn him and his ilk for not going far enough in their reforming efforts) is seen as a different gospel, compared to all the other "gospels" that conditionalize the preaching of the forgiveness of sins in Christ crucified. How can it be otherwise?

The sort of "justification by faith" which assumes *free choice* maintains that the person chooses God by an active choice of the will. "Believe!" is the command. On the other hand, justification by faith which assumes an *un-free will* means that God breaks in when and where the Holy Spirit wills, as God is preached as the one who died for all. "Christ for you!" is the promise. Different spirits, indeed.

When this distinction is understood people will understand what "the difference" is in the phrase, "Lutheranism is Protestantism with a difference" (*Time* magazine, 1958).

It means the church will stop focusing on "trifles" or "irrelevancies" such as the papacy, purgatory, indulgences and the like (*Bondage of the Will*, p. 333). Instead, we'll go right to the heart of the matter by exposing the sinner's god for him and then proclaiming to him the God who is not made in the image of man—but the Incarnate One, the One Who Comes in Word & Sacrament—hidden and revealed.

It means that true church unity will be established (or not) on a different basis than that upon which it so often seems to be based—the level of trifles. True unity in the proclamation of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments (AC VII) will be seen as the "enough" required for fellowship. Dealing with the differences at

the heart of preaching Christ, such as *free choice* or an *un-free will* will be readily seen as far more seminal than the differences that sound like mere denominational squabbles, polity disagreements, and naked power struggles.

Preaching that includes the un-free will as part of its “package” will move the faithful to engage in the work of evangelism and mission work in a way that is patient. It is the hallmark of *free choice* preaching to get upset when the right deed is not being done, when disobedience continues to occur, or when the right choice isn’t being made. It is another *Geist* altogether when the un-free willer has his eyes freely and spontaneously open for a neighbor in need and then responds freely and spontaneously when asked the reason for his hope. He proclaims Christ, and he trusts that the Spirit is the One who will work and he’ll do so when and where he wills, not when the congregation needs new members to meet budgetary shortfalls or to raise the self-esteem of the church that feels unsuccessful and needs some positive momentum.

It means that the congregation will not judge its own success or failure in the same way that the world which is bound to its own gods does. “Nobody seems to notice us,” stops being a concern and, along with the passing of such an idolatrous notion, the deep need for publicity or for adulation of the high priests of a given moment and place dies.

It means that the church can and will engage in a profoundly different way of analyzing the needs of the neighbor. No more doing so in the same way as those who wish to sell more and more consumer goods. But, yes, we will feel entirely free and encourage each other to be entirely free to recognize the needs of the neighbors around us (that’s a Lutheran Christian teaching isn’t it?) Yes, some even in the church are interested in the needs of the neighbor and talk of such things as mere market analysis. Not so with the once un-free, but now freed in Christ. We, above all, know, on the basis of the revealed will of God that each of my neighbors has the wrong god and needs to be liberated from his own idiosyncratic idea of what he thinks god is and what he/she/it is up to. We know, on the basis of the revealed will of God, that Christ came for sinners—of whom I’m the worst. And we’ll find a way to proclaim Christ to him. And we won’t feel insecure if Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church, sixty miles away and in an entirely different place, chooses to meet their neighbors’ needs a bit differently than we do. Maybe we’ll even rejoice in such differences. We will have a right to wonder, however, about their love for us if they choose to not even consider the church catholic, including us, in what it does and how it does it. The preaching of Christ, especially against the backdrop of the un-free will, will be the same in the two congregations. The practices of the church in every place, however, won’t need

to be the same (Apology, XV), especially when the church has its finger on the jugular and is not engaged in "trifles."

It means we can say, "A pox on both your houses!" to the fundamentalists on the right and to those in the mainline Protestant tradition on the left, both of whom get the Word wrong. The latter proclaims a word that has nothing to do with the Scriptures as the norm of teaching for the church; the former proclaims a word that has everything to do with the Bible, but misses the unconditional gospel of the Christ who is at the center of them. We believe, teach, and confess that "Proclaim the Word" or "The Word is everything" has everything to do with the Incarnate Word in the written Word, and there is no antipathy between the two. To proclaim a supposedly liberating "Word" apart from the Scripture will be preaching a false god and can only enslave. And to proclaim a word apart from the *Logos* who tabernacled among us will invariably only enslave, not liberate. Both false extremes move from supposed freedom and end up in bondage of the law. Only in the "God preached" do we move from bondage to real Christian freedom.

It seems like un-free will thinking and preaching will necessitate, or at least, will encourage the church to wrestle with *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus*. And it won't primarily be a "Battle over the Bible" again, but over where God is revealed. Primarily in the Scriptures? No. In the Christ in the Scriptures, yes. It means we confessional Lutherans will, in our own minds, at least, stop thinking of ourselves as so close to those other people who hold to the Scriptures as inspired. It means that we'll be in a far better position to point out the needed distinctions between gospel preachers who understand the bondage of the will and "gospel" preachers who maintain a free will. The difference, again, is Christ—God preached and revealed; not just that "we're the ones who still hold that the Bible is God's Word and the rest of the world doesn't."

Christian freedom talk will not immediately go to the *Mitteldinge* and to endless, more often than not, fruitless discussions of "What if. . ." The talk of Christian freedom will end in Christ, the end of the law for those who believe. Such talk will stay away from "trifles" and stay centered in Christ, faith in whom could make Luther say to Melancthon, "*Pecca fortiter.*" Only a liberated-in-Christ radical like Luther could say such a remarkable thing. And only in start-in-bondage-and-end-in-freedom-in-Christ preaching can one answer the charge of "Blasphemy!" rightly.

Where preaching and church life are informed and shaped by un-free will teaching, it seems that the worship wars that affect so many don't have to be. Lines don't need to be drawn between old and new,

traditional and contemporary, or between KJV and NIV. The lines fall between authentic catholic and pretend catholic, between faithful and conservative (preserving good and orthodox tradition) or unfaithful and novel (new *doctrine*), between the eternal God and a new one.

It seems that, if a 501(c)3 charity were to come up with an identity for itself so that the members of the group actually know who they are and what their church has to offer, “freedom,” particularly in the American context, would be a useful word to display prominently. It seems that a Bible class that treated the theme “freedom in all the wrong places” would rapidly get to the heart of the matter of “What does this church teach?” and “What do they say they stand for?” Such an approach seems entirely catholic and faithful and seems far more useful in the 21st century than “We’re a Bible-believing church,” as true as that statement can be. It seems that such an emphasis startles in all the right places—how impotent man is and how omnipotent and mysterious God is and how our life is under God and in Christ.

It seems that this kind of teaching and emphasis would also be easily taught and is unavoidable if the Lutheran church actually taught the original BIC, the catechism. It is, along with the *Bondage of the Will*, the only writing that Luther thought was worth saving. It—the catechism of Dr. Martin Luther—forces you to stick your nose in it—this business of the God Hidden and Revealed over against man who is bound to his own glorious ideas of deity. This Hidden God is almighty. He is not a little god who either can’t stop planes from flying into buildings or who is so easy for me to understand that I can scold him for it. This God at the center of our “I believe” statement is truly God and man who did the redemption work entirely on his own, without any help from me. (It’s interesting that in Luther’s “Great Confession” of 1528, he puts the un-free will teaching into the Second Article of the Creed.¹¹ The aforementioned BWK is right when he also says that the opposite of Romanism and the American Evangelical camp in its style and teaching is “the Small Catechism’s faithful summary of the Scriptures in the Third Article’s explanation.” With more than a bit of sarcasm and with more than a little swipe at so-called original thinkers who bleat along with the rest of the theological crowd, he says, “Might want to think ‘outside the box,’ truly be courageous, and try that for a change.”¹² Strong tonic, indeed. And useful. Especially for those Lutheran churches, pastors, and missionaries who are wondering what courageous and countercultural, yet relevant and faithful “hook” can be found upon which we can build “our” church. The church could do a lot worse than drop Luther’s catechetical bombs, over and

¹¹LW 37, p. 360.

¹²BWK, p. 63.

over, as the BIC. I'm referring to the Enchiridion, not the brown or blue catechisms. And it makes it a lot simpler later, when it comes time for joining the congregation and asking the prospective member, "Do you believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" And, "Do you believe that the teaching of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, as you have learned to know it from Luther's Small Catechism, is faithful and true to the Word of God?"

Is this practical enough?

Our preaching, if it's Lutheran preaching, which assumes the bound will, will necessarily never stray too far from Luther's, "We should fear and love God that . . .," his phrase which consciously seeks to tie one's deeds down here on this earth to my neighbor and then also are to be tied, as in a hoop, to one's trust in God ("We should fear and love God that . . .") It will help to explode theological thunder on the heads of those who think that stealing from the government is OK. Or that ripping on my new president for whom I maybe didn't vote and against whom I think I have a right to carp has nothing to do with God. It will show how willing the sinner/saint is to remake himself in God's way, even in his everyday, simple, "non-religious" actions.

It will make the worshiper sing with new gusto, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Restore unto me the joy of your salvation and uphold me with your free spirit." The worshiper is helpless sinner/hope-filled saint.

It will help us—this emphasis on what little (nothing!) the man has to offer to God and how bound he is to himself and his own ideas of God—to see the biggest theme of all with more clarity in both Old and New Testament: that Yahweh chose to cut a covenant with Israel and, eventually, provide salvation for the nations. This is something he was choosing to reveal in his own way and his own time. Yahweh reveals not merely information to be obeyed by people who wanted to be God's people, but a covenant that delivers salvation. This is at the heart of tabernacle/temple worship. The truth that the *glory of the LORD* meets its ultimate fulfillment in the babe at the virgin's breast—as God Incarnate—is not something that man would naturally invent for his god. Nor is it something that the bound will could ever invent or could ever freely take as its own. It needs to be revealed by no less than God himself in order to free the damned sinner from his own small ideas of who God is and what he's up to.

Preaching informed and shaped by the truth of the un-free will helps us see the most outstanding event of the Hebrew Scriptures and of Israel's history—redemption from bondage in Egypt—in the light of the One who said he was in the center of those Scriptures. No more revisionist history is allowed for Israel, as if somehow their story of

bondage and freedom has anything to do with the political liberation, the sexual liberation, or any other law-based liberation of anyone. No. It meets its fulfillment in the God/Man, the true Son of Israel who freed his people from their sins to live under God with a free conscience and a new heart bent toward his neighbor in love.

Practically speaking, a faithful consideration of the un-free will moves the church to stop thinking that it is doing faithful Christian discipline when it deals with mere “trifles” rather than getting to the heart of the matter. Excommunications will not focus on specific sins, as if the church is aiming to create a holy body already down here on this earth. No. Excommunication has to be seen as an act of love toward the one who is persistently showing himself to be an unbeliever, in the face of the one true God, no less.

It seems that the 21st century Lutheran church, which once upon a time went out of its way to prove its catholicity, can and should vigorously reclaim Luther’s “Katie von Bora,” as he affectionately referred to the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians, and restore its liberty to the center of the church’s life. We can and should rejoice in the true Christian freedom that marks faithful Lutheranism and not feel compelled to think that our identity is in the trifles or, worse yet, in the law. No, it is the false teachers of the varied *free-choice*-based theologies of glory, who divide the church with their false teaching of false freedoms.

Lutherans will see that this ground-shaking teaching is at the heart of any ecumenical effort—properly speaking. (And it will quickly get to the heart of the matter with anyone who thinks that the Evangelicals and the Lutherans are the same, except for “a little bit different view of the sacraments.”) You’ve heard it: “Sure, Luther on the *th commandment is good, but I want to go ‘deeper.’” And on we go to Christian bookstores and Evangelical commentaries for more “practical” applications. . . . It sounds OK because it’s biblical. It uses all the same words—sin, grace, redeemer, forgiveness, Trinity, gospel, law. But the Law’s uses are different at key pivot points. What starts in freedom ends in bondage.

Lutherans are saying something that isn’t always readily apparent or understood when it’s said—but it’s “where the rubber meets the road.” It’s what really matters. And to think of “preaching” and “evangelism” as “where the rubber meets the road” is saying something profound.

Luther doesn’t come off as such a bad man at Marburg, when seen in this light. Lutherans don’t seem so stingy regarding church fellowship when seen in this light. It is a matter of telling false prophets that they are dividing the church by false teaching that seeks to give God away cheaply and to do so on the basis of what?—free choice? The

gospel in such schemes is conditionalized. God, in such schemes, is tamed. Man, in such schemes, is glorified for what he can do, should do, will do, and then does. *Christus pro nobis*, in such schemes, disappears. The Word of God proclaimed, in such schemes, becomes information upon which you are to act. Word proclamation, in such schemes, becomes boring, repetitious, and leads to burnout and enslavement. The church, in such schemes, becomes just another sociological entity whose rules we can change, and at whose heart is, of course, *facere quod in se est*—the duty to do one's best—and the hope that God does not deny grace for such hard work.

The truth about the un-free will shapes and informs the teaching of the means of grace as just that, and not as manipulative tools that we "use." The teaching of the un-free will makes us get away from the "gospel" of what man is supposed to do, on the one hand, and away from the "gospel" of an idea of a Sovereign God, whose will over against me I cannot know, to a lively and living preaching of the living and enduring Word of God, that alone gives what it says, that alone creates the church and sustains the church's life. Robert Kolb says there is a "peculiar ("Protestantism with a difference . . .") intertwining of the message and the method that developed out of Luther's confidence in God's action in the Word of God made flesh (Jn 1:14) and the Word as means of grace."¹³

In the shadow of un-free will teaching, it seems that the church thinks about it better when we hear the confessors say that the church is where the gospel is purely taught and sacraments rightly distributed. It seems less tempting to think of ourselves as primarily a sociological entity or to become so troubled—in the church down here on this earth—by budget shortfalls or stupid decisions or pastoral scandals. There will be plenty of manure, but the church will continue to prevail where Christ is preached to free the sinners up for a certain relationship with "Our Father in heaven."

It also will seem less tempting for us at this conference to aspire to be merely "leaders," as if the followers are to be told how to behave, rather than as servants who proclaim a master. Should that thinking surprise us in the theology of glory scheme? No. But isn't it far more fulfilling and faithful (and true) to think of ourselves as involved in the ministry of the killing and life-giving Word of God?

With preaching duly shaped by understanding the un-free will and the need for God to be revealed and delivered in his way—through Word and Sacrament—enthusiasm (God-within-ism) can't be coddled and can more easily be diagnosed. God preached is, by definition, *extra nos*.

¹³Kolb, p. 273.

**IV. Why is this idea strange and difficult?
Lutheran freedom in American *Free Choice* waters?
Sink or swim?**

We began this paper in America, and it seems helpful to return there, since that's where we live, move and have our being. Mark Noll, now a professor at Notre Dame, writes on American Protestantism and what ails it.

Among the most important elements of historic Lutheranism is the Augustinian conception of human nature. Given the great liberal American confidence in the human ability to shape the political future, the great confidence springing from the Enlightenment in mastering human motivation, and the great confidence of American revivalists in discerning spiritual ends and means, Augustinianism had little chance. In America, it was simply too much to believe that *sinfulness*, an ineluctable bent of character, was a greater problem than *sins*, the freely chosen acts of the will. The result was that American Protestants lost something important from the Reformation's understanding of the labyrinthine depths of human evil and the majestic power of God's grace in Christ, themes that were foundational to Martin Luther's witness.

A related casualty was the Reformation conviction about the objectivity of salvation. Particularly with the American confidence in human willpower, it has been difficult to retain historic emphases on the objective work of God in salvation. The American tendency has been to preserve the importance of preaching, Bible reading, the ordinances, and Christian fellowship, but to interpret these activities as occasions for human action. That *God* saves in *God*, that *God* gives himself in the Lord's Supper, that *God* announces his word in the sermon, that *God* is the best interpreter of his written Word—these early convictions, which no one shared better than Martin Luther, have been consistently obscured by the American stress on human capacity.¹⁴

Perhaps most importantly, characteristically American Christianity has gone its way without any check from what might be called the Lutheran gift for ambiguity. Americans have much more easily followed the Calvinist tendency to seek cultural transformation according to the then-prevailing religious vision. Or some Protestants have turned in the opposite direction and pretended to abandon the world. Rarely have American Christians considered Luther's tension with culture, which saw him committed to Christian activity, but always with the sharpest reservations. The paradoxes of Lutheranism—*simul justus et peccator*, law and gospel as two sides of the same thing, the theology of the cross—have not

¹⁴Noll, p. 20.

flourished in America or among American Protestants, for whom relations with the world are more simply yea or nay.

*Whether Lutherans are in a position to offer such gifts from their own tradition to Americans more generally would seem to depend on two matters: on how much genuine Lutheranism is left in American Lutheranism, and on whether Lutherans can bring this Lutheranism to bear. [Italics added.]*¹⁵

Conclusion

If the faithful teaching of the *Bondage of the Will* is so “jugular,” where has it been?

Good question. Why did *De Servo Arbitrio* teaching “remain in comparative obscurity for a quarter-millennium in the Lutheran circles? Why were the Calvinists the ones who cited it more prominently and favorably than Lutherans? Why is it that Kolb says, “Many of Luther’s partisans throughout four centuries have not known what to do with his treatment of the bondage of human choice”? Kolb suggests two factors: 1) many 19th and 20th century scholars didn’t understand what Luther was up to in refuting Erasmus, using the scholarly rules of his day or his pastoral concern for God’s people. And 2) the lack of understanding indicates how even great minds find themselves trapped within their own presuppositions.¹⁶

Luther gave no answer to the question of evil other than to confront “the theodical challenge simply with trust in Christ.”¹⁷

With his life at stake, here in time and there in eternity, a thirty-seven year-old monk stood up and said, “My conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus I cannot and will not recant, for going against my conscience is neither safe nor salutary. I can do no other, here I stand, God help me. Amen.” This was not one man taking his stand against the world, proving himself to be right. This wasn’t the little guy stickin’ it to the Man. It was not merely a matter of speaking truth to power; it was simply one “captivated” by and to the lively Word of God that had given Luther certainty of salvation *coram deo*. Compare that way of speaking with today’s American “sharing my faith,” which really means, “Here’s my opinion on the God question.” As if evangelism prospects or church members should care about your opinion in the matters of God. Luther’s way of speaking is symptomatic of a different spirit than the prevailing winds. It is one that is powerful and liberating, surprising, even as it is captivating.

¹⁵Noll, p. 21.

¹⁶Kolb, p. 9.

¹⁷Kolb, p. 53.

God bless such lively speech, such lively preaching today, for the glory of God and for the liberation of the neighbors we are privileged to serve.

*Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice,
With exultation springing,
And, with united heart and voice
And holy rapture singing,
Proclaim the wonders God has done,
How his right arm the vict'ry won.
How dearly it has cost him!*

*Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay;
Death brooded darkly o'er me.
Sin was my torment night and day;
In sin my mother bore me.
Yet deep and deeper still I fell;
Life had become a living hell,
So firmly sin possessed me.
(Die Suend' hatt' mich besessen.)*

*My own good works availed me naught,
No merit they attaining;
My will against God's judgment fought,
(Der frei' Will' hasste Gott's Gericht)
No hope for me remaining.
My fears increased till sheer despair
Left naught but death to be my share
And hell to be my sentence.*

*But God beheld my wretched state
Before the world's foundation,
And, mindful of his mercies great,
He planned my soul's salvation.
A Father's heart he turned to me,
Sought my redemption fervently;
He gave his dearest treasure.*

*He spoke to his beloved Son,
"Tis time to have compassion. . . .*

*To me he spoke, "Hold fast to me—
I am your rock and castle. . . . (CW, 377)*

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