



The Bondage of the Will

Martin Luther , J.I. Packer (Translator) , O.R. Johnston (Translator)

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

The Bondage of the Will

Martin Luther , J.I. Packer (Translator) , O.R. Johnston (Translator)

The Bondage of the Will Martin Luther , J.I. Packer (Translator) , O.R. Johnston (Translator)

First published in 1525, Martin Luther's "Bondage of the Will" is acknowledged by theologians as one of the great masterpieces of the Reformation. It is Luther's response to Desiderius Erasmus's "Diatribe on Free Will, " written in his direct and unique style, combining deep spirituality with humor. Luther writes powerfully about man's depravity and God's sovereignty. The crucial issue for Luther concerned what ability free will has, and to what degree it is subject to God's sovereignty. For Luther, this key issue of free will is directly connected to God's plan of salvation. Is man able to save himself, or is his salvation entirely a work of divine grace? This work is vital to understanding the primary doctrines of the Reformation and will long remain among the great theological classics of Christian history.

The Bondage of the Will Details

Date : Published December 21st 2006 by Fleming H. Revell Company (first published 1525)

ISBN : 9780800753429

Author : Martin Luther , J.I. Packer (Translator) , O.R. Johnston (Translator)

Format : Paperback 322 pages

Genre : Religion, Theology, Christian, Nonfiction, Christianity, Classics, Philosophy

 [Download The Bondage of the Will ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online The Bondage of the Will ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online The Bondage of the Will Martin Luther , J.I. Packer (Translator) , O.R. Johnston (Translator)

From Reader Review The Bondage of the Will for online ebook

Paul Rhodes says

In the chapter before the conclusion of *On the Bondage of the Will*, Luther belches out this rather shocking paragraph:

"Only observe, therefore, the simplicity of the words By the law is the knowledge of sin; and yet, these alone are of force sufficient to confound and overthrow Free-will altogether. For if it be true, that of itself, it knows not what is sin, and what is evil, as the apostle saith here, and Rom. vii. 7-8, I should not have known that concupiscence was sin, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet, how can it ever know what is righteousness and good? And if it know not what righteousness is, how can it endeavour to attain unto it? We know not the *sin in which we were born, in which we live, in which we move and exist* (emphasis mine), and which lives, moves, and reigns in us; how then should we know that righteousness which is without us, and which reigns in heaven? These works bring that miserable thing Free-will to nothing nothing at all!"

Buried in a relative clause is Luther's astonishing claim sin is the thing in which we live, move, and exist. It is hard to tell whether Luther here is simply guilty of a rhetorical excess or is really claiming that the ontological make-up of man is utterly and completely evil. If the latter, then the obvious question is how do we reconcile this claim with St. Paul's claim of precisely the opposite in Acts 17:28? Also, if man's very ontology is rooted in sin, then what of the *Imago Dei*, in which the book of Genesis tells us God created man and woman? According to Luther the *Imago peccati* has wholly supplanted it.

I claim that this is not a rhetorical excess. In his zeal to pulverize Erasmus and all his claims on behalf of Free Will, Luther is forced to deny man as a rational creature. Even if he makes the slightest acknowledgement of man's ability to reason, he has given Erasmus that tiny bit of free will that he had been arguing for all along. It is after all man's ability to reason that allows him to make free choices. To deny free will, therefore, Dr. Luther must deny reason. To deny this he must invert St. Paul's claim at Athens and thereby deny that man still retains any image of God in which God originally created him. Hence, Luther's assertion that man's ontology is not just wounded but entirely depraved is not, I argue, simply overheated polemic but the unavoidable consequence of his argument.

It is rather ironic that many Protestants will now object to Darwinian Theory because of the perception that this theory denies God's special creation of man. The founder of Protestantism staked his entire dispute with Rome on an argument that made this special creation of man by God null and void! By denying free will and by extension reason, Lutheran anthropology makes man at best no better than a brute who can only act on his basest instincts. Darwin says merely that we are descended from brutes. Protestantism says we are brutes.

Martin Luther was a madman.

Jonathan says

I don't know whether it is the translators' translation or Luther alone, probably both, but Luther was killer. Erasmus did not have a prayer, literally, it seems.

A powerful wit:

One who talks as you do must imagine that the living God is no more than a wild inconsequent ranter shouting from a soap-box, whose words you may interpret, receive or refute as you please, according to their observed effect on the ungodly.

An insightful heart:

I frankly confess that, for myself, even if it could be, I should not want 'free-will' to be given me, nor anything to be left in my own hands to enable me to endeavour after salvation; not merely because in face of so many dangers, and adversities, and assaults of devils, I could not stand my ground and hold fast my 'free-will'...but because, even were there no dangers, adversities, or devils, I should still be forced to labour with no guarantee of success, and to beat my fists at the air. If I lived and worked to all eternity, my conscience would never reach comfortable certainty as to how much it must do to satisfy God. Whatever work I had done, there would still be a nagging doubt as to whether it pleased God, or whether He required something more. The experience of all who seek righteousness by works proves that; and I learned it well enough myself over a period of many years, to my own great hurt. But now that God has taken my salvation out of the control of my own will, and put it under the control of His, and promised to save me, not according to my working or running, but according to His own grace and mercy, I have the comfortable certainty that He is faithful and will not lie to me, and that He is also great and powerful, so that no devils or opposition can break Him or pluck me from Him. [...] Furthermore, I have the comfortable certainty that I please God, not by reason of the merit of my works, but by reason of His merciful favour promised to me; so that, if I work too little, or badly, He does not impute it to me, but with fatherly compassion pardons me and makes me better. This is the glorying of all the saints in their God.

Luther refutes our ability to save ourselves via free-will and shows that only God is free to save by His grace in Christ Jesus, who Himself is also our reward.

Yann says

Désiré Érasme est une grande figure de l'humanisme : c'est un peu grâce à lui que j'ai commencé à lire, après que la biographie que Zweig lui a consacré me soit tombée dans les mains. J'ai apprécié son éloge de la folie, qui m'a attiré vers l'antiquité, et je me régale de ses Adages, qui ont été récemment réédités grâce à l'industrielle érudition de nos savants. Luther, je le connais par la biographie rédigée par Michelet, et le personnage m'avait vivement intéressé. La question de la volonté libre, c'est le formidable essai sur l'entendement humain de John Locke, seul auteur à trouver grâce auprès de Voltaire, qui m'y a sensibilisé. Aussi, quand j'ai découvert ce livre, une controverse sur le libre/serf arbitre, entre Érasme et Luther, je me suis mis à bouillir d'impatience de la lire.

Ce livre en comprend deux: le premier est une Diatribe sur le libre Arbitre, écrite par Érasme, dans lequel l'humaniste attaque un point particulier de la doctrine du réformateur et le second est la réponse de Luther, le serf Arbitre, dans lequel il défend son opinion.

Les Égyptiens avaient introduit cette croyance suivant laquelle l'âme perdurait après la mort, et subissait un châtement ou une récompense en fonction de ce qu'avaient été les agissements du défunt pendant sa vie. La religion des anciens grecs et romains nous parle de ce royaume d'Hadès, ces Enfers qui comprennent les Champs-Élysées où des élus coulent des jours heureux, et le Tartare où sont tourmentés les criminels, comme Tantale, Sisyphe ou Prométhée. Platon, dans sa lettre VII, recommande d'ailleurs que cette croyance du fait que l'âme soit jugée après la mort soit répandue dans le peuple, afin de le contraindre à la pratique de la vertu. C'est ainsi que les chrétiens, dont la croyance de la vie après la mort est au centre de la doctrine, adoptèrent cette opinion. Mais une controverse allait rapidement surgir : quels sont les critères suivant lesquels les hommes sont jugés après leur mort ? Ce n'est pas une question de faible importance, pour qui accorde sa foi au Christianisme.

Le Christ n'aborde pas directement la question dans les évangiles, où il est plus occupé à améliorer le sort des hommes dans ce monde, à les ramener à la vie et à la santé plutôt qu'à les y soustraire. Ce sont plutôt dans les actes des apôtres, en particulier les écrits de Saul, ou Paul de Tarse, que l'on trouve des éléments de réponse. Il est en effet affirmé très clairement dans l'épître aux Romains qu'il suffit de croire pour être sauvé, et de ne pas croire pour être damné, peu importe les œuvres durant la vie. Cette opinion, propre à gagner plus facilement une foule de fidèles pour une religion naissante, pouvait conduire à des désordres au sein d'une religion déjà établie, et manquer de coercition. Des interprétations ont vu le jour pour nuancer ce point de vue, en particulier par chez Jérôme, traducteur de la bible en latin, et Origène, qui vont introduire cette notion de libre-arbitre. Elle sera redébatue par Augustin et Pélagie, ... mais je ne voudrais pas être trop long, et surtout je ne suis pas théologien !

Venons-en à la renaissance : Luther a vu Rome, et n'en a pas conçu une grande estime. Quand il attaque les turpitudes de l'Église, il prend appui sur une autorité supérieure : les Écritures, que l'érudition d'Érasme a fait apparaître sous une lumière nouvelle. On connaît le scandale des indulgences, mais au cœur du débat réapparaît la question du libre arbitre: Luther le nie totalement ; tout advient par une nécessité connue de Dieu, et les efforts des hommes pour le fléchir sont vains, lui seul accorde la grâce.

Dans la Diatribe, Érasme va attaquer ce qu'il identifie comme étant le nœud gordien : l'assertion de Luther qui nie totalement l'efficacité du libre arbitre dans la grâce lui semble trop radicale: d'une part, il rappelle les nombreux endroits de l'écriture qui plaident pour une interprétation plus nuancée, ensuite, il reproche à Luther de mettre sur la place publique une question difficile, qui risque de provoquer des troubles et des dissensions inutiles si elle est mal comprise : il prophétise bien! Il plaide pour une position moyenne, le libre arbitre intervenant de concert avec la grâce pour le salut. Son souci est de ramener la concorde et d'appeler Luther à plus de retenue: il montre l'exemple en prenant un ton d'abord humble, mais mais bientôt sévère, puis hautain.

La réponse de Luther aussi cinglante qu'abondante. Comment sur une question d'une telle importance, Érasme peut-il se contenter d'être aussi indécis? Luther va le reprendre de bien plus haut, et au lieu de faire preuve d'une déférence affectée ou d'un quelconque air plâtré, il va bel et bien abreuver Érasme d'insultes, d'invectives et de quolibets. Et vraiment, cette plume donne vie à ce vers du Tasse : l'indignation est la pierre sur laquelle s'aiguise la vertu! Il n'y a guère que chez Marx que j'ai vue une telle force. Alors qu'Érasme avait rassemblé une foule d'arguments issus de nombreux passages des écritures, Luther va tous les reprendre un par un, et les détruire en les rendant à leur première interprétation. Là où Érasme s'appuie sur l'autorité des pères de l'église, des siècles et des conciles, Luther s'appuie sur celle des apôtres, sur les règles de la grammaire, sur la connaissance des langues. Des troubles pourraient arriver, si ces questions sont soulevées ? Mais qu'importe! N'est ce pas qu'un détail, par rapport au sort de l'âme des chrétiens ? Est-ce là, interroge Luther, qu'il faut être prudent ?

Mais là où Luther est encore le plus habile, c'est qu'il parvient encore à étouffer son contradictoire par un véritable "baiser de la mort". S'il nie à Érasme toute autorité comme théologien, il lui rend un hommage appuyé et, je crois, sincère pour ses apports dans l'étude des textes antiques. Tout le texte de Luther fourmille

de ces adages dont Érasme à répandu l'usage. Il n'en faudra pas moins pour que prenne corps l'accusation contre Érasme, d'avoir "pondu les œufs que Luther à couvé", et que ses ouvrages si universellement loués se retrouvent à l'index. Comme l'écrit Luther à Érasme: "on ne te laisse parler que parce que tu t'élèves contre moi".

Enfin, ce qui est émouvant, au delà de la violence de cette controverse, c'est le rapport d'estime réciproque et de déception, d'amour et de haine, qui lie les deux hommes. Au fond, les deux sont de fervents chrétiens, amoureux de la vérité, passionnés par l'étude des textes dans leur pureté, attachés à la vertu. Leurs opinions ne sont pas si éloignées : tous deux accordent un pouvoir à la grâce, l'un se demandant juste si le libre arbitre n'y jouerait pas un rôle. Dans le fond, c'est une différence de méthode : l'un, pragmatique, souhaite la conciliation, l'autre, idéaliste, ne peut aller à l'encontre de la conviction que lui dicte sa conscience.

Finalement, la réforme va, comme l'avait craint Érasme, jeter l'Europe dans des troubles formidables. Luther n'aura pas moins à combattre ceux qui vont devenir les catholiques, que les "enthousiastes", ceux qui adopteront avec trop de ferveur ses doctrines. Ces malheurs vont, dans les siècles suivants, peu à peu inspirer aux Européens l'horreur du fanatisme, et faire émerger des solutions: tolérance, séparation de l'église et de l'état, et laïcité.

Douglas Wilson says

Just great. Little pieces of Erasmus flying everywhere. Also read in June of 1988.

Charles Puskas says

Empassioned defense by Luther of our human inability to win God's favor by making right choices and living an upright moral life. He is sarcastic, satirical and whimsical in his rebuttal of the learned and famous Erasmus of Rotterdam who relied heavily on the interpretations of Jerome and Origen to bolster his support for a semi-Pelagian form of synergism. Erasmus, following Duns Scotus and other medieval scholastics, argues for our human abilities, damaged from the fall of humanity, but often operable for some in terms of making right choices regarding morality, righteousness, and holiness, cooperating with God's enabling grace to find and experience God and God's benefits. Luther takes seriously the arguments of Erasmus which do not appear to be too original and opposes them earnestly by appealing to the plain meaning of Scripture, (often) avoiding what he called sophistic trope (metaphor) and medieval commentators, relying on the message of scripture alone. He looks at passages supporting the biblical doctrines of the reformation: the disobedience and sinfulness of all people who are unable to follow God's law, the gospel of God's unmerited favor for the undeserving accomplished by the death of Christ for sinners, and justification by faith alone. This title was considered to be one of Luther's favorites, along with his catechism.

Michael Cunningham says

Difficult at times, but highly rewarding. Must read again!

Geneva says

Holy crap, what a dick.

Rick Sam says

Luther is writing this as a response to Erasmus, who was a well known humanist scholar. Erasmus decided to stay within the Roman Catholic church. Erasmus wants Luther to see the ramifications of saying, "there is no free will." However, Luther forcefully counters all the polemics made by Erasmus.

He says, everything is by God and if he is omniscient, his immutable will shall prevail no matter what. I could really feel Luther's caustic words. He quotes a lot of scriptures and simply shows that it does not support free will. It only says, "What ought to be done, not what can be done."

Luther is forceful, persuasive and writes in an abrasive tone. He had struggled with sin, even though he knew Christ died for his sins, He kept confessing and confessing. He felt horrible inside as he knew that he was not good enough, he tried everything to get rid of sin. It simply did not work, it won't work. It can be fought by the Spirit of God —Romans 8:13.

Finally, It was an epiphany when he found his answer in the book of Ephesians, "By Grace you have been saved and not by works, so that no one can boast."

On Sovereignty of God,

Luther says, "That God foreknows nothing by contingency, but that he foresees, purposes and does all things according to his immutable, eternal and infallible will. By this thunderbolt, Free-will is thrown prostrate and utterly dashed to pieces. Those, therefore, who would assert Free will, must either deny this thunderbolt, or pretend not to see it, or push it from them."

In Bondage of the Will, Luther simply settles that Everything is by God and for his Glory. Nothing can be done by Man and if it is from Man, then it will be from the flesh. Whatever your position be in this topic, I would advise to be loving, gentle, warm and friendly. It seems that within the church, there's a lot of animosity, division as a result of this. A good book, I would recommend it to all Christians.

—Deus Vult—
Gottfried

Greg says

Luther is an utter jackass when writing this book. While there may be stylistic differences between how people wrote in the 16th Century to now, there's not a whit of Christian charity show in the tone of the book. I found myself more sympathetic to Erasmus than "The Great Reformer."

Corey says

Luther: 1

"Free-will": 0

Erasmus, my friend, you have been owned.

Trice says

3/20/2011 halfway through the first part of the Discussion

Keep feeling like I'm taking it in great gulps and then realize only 30 pages have passed - this definitely takes more concentration as each sentence is full. I've ended up reading half of it out loud and for some reason it seems to be clearer this way. The parts where he focuses on the issue at hand are definitely better (more important? more informative? more grace-filled?) than the parts where he's lashing away at Erasmus, tearing him into itty bitty teeny tiny pieces, although these latter are pretty hilarious in places too. The blurb on the back of the book says something about Luther's "gentle humor" which just makes me laugh even more and wonder if the writers actually read the book, or if maybe they were trying to soften the picture of the man - "biting" - I'd go with "biting humor" guys.

1/26/2011: finished the Preface (or response to Erasmus' preface): lots of food for thought, but the 2 meatiest sections were 24 and 25 where he starts to get into the nature of God and the nature of Man, all with reference to the idea of free will. Some of his insults to Erasmus still have me laughing - things along the lines of: "You assert that assertions are bad" and the fact that he compares Erasmus' publication to a pile'o'crap (but in much better language). Let's see... the direct quote is:

[I]t seems even superfluous to reply to these your arguments, which have been indeed often refuted by me; but trodden down, and trampled under foot, by the incontrovertible Book of Philip Melancthon "Concerning Theological Questions:" [reader starts to wonder if this can be found in English] a book, in my judgment, worthy not only of being immortalized, but of being included in the ecclesiastical canon: in comparison of which, your Book is, in my estimation, so mean and vile, that I greatly feel for you for having defiled your most beautiful and ingenious language with such vile trash; and I feel an indignation against the matter also, that such unworthy stuff should be borne about in ornaments of eloquence so rare; which is as if rubbish, or dung, should be carried in vessels of gold and silver.

Does that qualify as a backhanded compliment? Your writing is beyond compare, sir... except for its content. I'm clearly not angry enough about Erasmus' writing - just can't work myself up to the level of sarcastic attack that Luther takes on and so far he hasn't really let up through 30 pages of dense-ish text, except where he goes to strong theological statement. To be fair here, though, the writer he's comparing Erasmus to he considers to be on the level of the divines, just below the authority of scripture. In a bunch of places I was wishing I could read Erasmus' diatribe to which Luther is responding here, as I wanted context for his comments. As a random aside, I was a bit surprised by how the topic jumped a bit from section to section.

Reasons Luther is so fired up about the topic of free will:

For, if I know not how much I can do myself, how far my ability extends, and what I can do

God-wards; I shall be equally uncertain and ignorant how much God is to do, how far his ability is to extend, and what he is to do toward me: whereas it is "God that worketh all in all." But if I know not the distinction between our working and the power of God, I know not God Himself. And if I know not God, I cannot worship Him, praise Him, give Him thanks, nor serve Him; for I shall not know how much I ought to ascribe unto myself, and how much unto God. It is necessary, therefore, to hold the most certain distinction, between the power of God and our power, the working of God and our working, if we would live in his fear. (Sect. 7)

[F]or if these things be not known there can be neither faith, nor any worship of God: nay, not to know them, is to be in reality ignorant of God, with which ignorance salvation, it is well known, cannot consist. For if you doubt, or disdain to know that God foreknows and wills all things, not contingently, but necessarily and immutably, how can you believe confidently, trust to, and depend upon his promises? For when he promises, it is necessary that you should be certain that he knows, is able, and willing to perform what he promises; otherwise, you will neither hold Him true nor faithful; which is unbelief, the greatest of wickedness, and a denying of the Most High God! (Sect.12)

He also discusses the need to hold to and proclaim all truth, no matter how difficult it may seem or how the results of its revelation would seem to hold danger - God called for all of His Gospel to be revealed and we cannot keep some back for fear of people turning to sin or for fear of how earthly authorities might react.

"There are two causes which require such things [as free will and predestination] to be preached. The first is, the humbling of our pride, and the knowledge of the grace of God. The second is, Christian faith itself" (Sect. 24).

NOTE: I'm reading a translation from 1823 so the language and the punctuation don't exactly match modern expectations. This actually taught me a small something, as the translator, Henry Cole, talks in his own extremely brief Preface about 'inverted commas' and 'double commas' when talking about single and double quotation marks signifying inclusion of Erasmus' words or thoughts.

Ken says

Luther's, *The Bondage of the Will*, is a doctrinal treatise first arguing against Erasmus' doctrine of free will, and then arguing for the Bible doctrine of the will's bondage. Luther argues that, counter to Erasmus' view, man is not able to freely choose Christ for his salvation. Man is enslaved in his sin and unable to act in any way towards his own salvation. Apart from divinely initiated grace, man is incapable of not only meriting salvation through his works, but of even choosing God. Luther's style leaves little doubt as to what he believes. He argues boldly with passion and logic, first detailing the holes in Erasmus' argument, before presenting a comprehensive response detailing Luther's understanding of the bondage of the will. Luther is direct and to the point. He doesn't pull any punches. And he begins his argument by defending this approach. While Erasmus is critical of Luther for being overly bold in his assertions, Luther counters by stating that a true Christian delights in making assertions. Mockingly, Luther points out the problem of asserting one should make no assertions. The flow of his argument in chapter one begins with arguing that though Scripture can be read, discussed, quoted and even memorized it cannot be truly understood apart from the Spirit revealing the meaning. Then, responding to Erasmus' charge that this subject is at best unnecessary

and superfluous, and at worst incomprehensible, Luther charges that is indeed of great importance to know whether or not our salvation is contingent on our will or God's.

Continuing deeper into this thought Luther then argues that God foreknows nothing contingently or depending on man's choice as open theists assert today. Instead God plans and purposes all things according to his free will independent of man's will. Further, Luther argues that if you take any other position the very promises of God are imperiled because if God's will is dependant on what man chooses how could we trust that what He promises will come to pass. Luther concludes his first salvo with a passionate discourse responding to Erasmus' argument that even if total depravity and election are true as Luther teaches they are liable to be misunderstood and create harmful results to the church. Luther responds that there are manifold benefits to his teaching including a humbling of man's pride, a deepening understanding and appreciation for the grace of God, and a more accurate understanding of true Christian faith. Additionally, Luther argues that God does not force men's wills to do evil, but that man willingly chooses sin over God and cannot choose anything else owing to his depravity unless God saves him. Luther then does not object to men having wills at all, only the term "free will" which seems to indicate a far more grandiose and powerful state of being than the Bible or observation indicate.

Luther begins his second part by arguing that even those who argue for free-will do not practice it in their relationship with God. He uses prayer as an example of this that men when praying come, not boasting of their free choice of God, but come in self-despair crying for his grace to save them. Luther then argues that if free will and the mind alone are able to discover salvation of their own strength, why didn't the ancient Greeks who were certainly great minds and pursued truth with all that was in them, discover the true Gospel of Jesus Christ? Yet not one of them did. Their will, their search for truth, and their great minds availed them nothing towards the discovery of The Truth – Jesus Christ.

Part three begins with Luther taking issue with Erasmus' definition of free will namely that man "may apply himself to those things that lead to eternal salvation..." Luther again declares that while certainly man has a will, calling it and defining it as free when it is actually a slave is a misnomer of the worst kind. He allows that calling man's will a vertible-will or mutable-will would be more accurate. Luther then argues that no man apart from the Spirit of God ever understands much less longs for or believes in the salvation of Jesus Christ. Next, Luther takes up Erasmus' argument that God would not command individuals to do something they could not do. Luther argues that God does in fact command men to do what they are unable to do with the express purpose of revealing to man his inability. He uses the example of a doctor telling a patient, who is in denial over his illness, to do something that he is physically incapable of doing to prove his weakness and need of treatment. So the law is not given because man is able to keep it or do it on his own, but to reveal to man his proud heart, sickness and need of a Savior. Continuing with this thought, Luther then argues that biblical statements that begin with "if you are willing" and the like serve not show man his ability, as Erasmus argues, but his duty. The commands of Scripture serve not to show man what he can do with the proper amount of effort, but what he ought to do, but cannot owing to his sinful flesh.

In Luther's last section against Erasmus' view, Luther points out where Erasmus has stretch the allowable understanding of Scripture. For example Luther points to Erasmus stating that the command to believe on Christ means "you can believe on Christ." Or when Scripture says Pharaoh's heart was hardened it only means "give an occasion of hardening, by not correcting the sinner at once." These distortions are required according to Luther because of Erasmus' insistence on free-will. Luther then addresses the issue of God being contaminated by evil if he is sovereign. If God is sovereign and man incapable of choosing righteousness, is not then God culpable for the evil in the world? Yet by faith, Luther argues, we should trust the goodness of God, understanding that though God works evil through evil men, it is man's own bent towards evil not God's forcing of evil upon them that produces this evil, and even this is used by God for his glory and our salvation. Luther then shows the audacity of trying to harmonize a wholly free human will with a free will of God and to deny the freedom of God's will if it conflicts with man's. He also states that though we cannot make it all work together, we cannot and must not deny that if God is omnipotent and if God is omniscient the doctrine of free-will is utterly destroyed. Indeed, all of Paul's argument in Romans 9 is futile if God as the potter is not sovereign above man (the clay) and his will. Luther concludes his argument against Erasmus by stating he holds nothing personally against Erasmus, but is arguing so stridently because the cause of Christ is jeopardized by Erasmus' argument.

Luther's concludes his book with a positive statement of the doctrine of the bondage of the will. The basics of this argument are as follows. 1) The bible states all are sinners. No one escapes this designation. All are guilty. 2) All men according to scripture are dominated or controlled by sin, unable and unwilling even were they able to escape the corruption of sin. 3) The perfect law of God is out of reach for every man. 4) The law was given, not because man is able to do it, but to show man his sin and need and thus point him to Christ alone for his righteousness. 5) Man's works and ability's are totally denied as a basis for acceptance with God. Faith alone in Christ alone given by the grace of God alone is man's only hope for salvation. Towards the end of his book Luther states that he is glad that salvation is not by his will, for if it were he could never be certain of his of salvation. But as God saves by His mercy and His grace apart from our own ability or works, we can place our trust fully on the grace of God for our salvation and eternal happiness.

Luther clearly is reacting against the claims of Erasmus. His writing is passionate and poignant. There is not a hint of political correctness in his writing. He says exactly what he thinks. Today, we often consider passion compelling, but often not logical. Like the sports fan, who says his team is the greatest though they have lost every game, we may appreciate his passion, but think him deluded by his passion. This is not the case with Luther. Though he clearly argues from a passionate, gut level, he marries his passion perfectly with reason and Biblical analysis. His view is well informed by Scripture and he repeatedly argues compellingly for God's sovereignty and man's bondage. Luther's prose is intelligent, but not out of reach for the layman. His passionate rather than academic treatment of his subject creates an easy to read and compelling case for the bondage of man's will.

Brent McCulley says

An attractive unabridged translation of Martin Luther's magnum opus, "Bondage of the Will" stands out as a theological gemstone packaged into 250+ pages of Luther's diatribe at its best. Written as a response to the Catholic theologian Erasmus of Rotterdam's defense of freedom of the will, Luther sets out on one mission only: destroy any inclination of free-will. His weapon of choice? The scriptures alone, for they speaks for themselves; sharper than a double-edged sword, Luther smashes any effort by Erasmus to prove that man is an autonomous agent capable of any inclination of self-determination. Luther can be summed up as follows:

"For if God be in us, Satan is from us, and it is present with us to will nothing but good. But if God be not in us, Satan is in us, and it is present with us to will evil only" (102).

Our will is enslaved to sin, only set free by the efficacious gift of God's repentance, faith, mercy, and ultimately grace. Throughout this work, Luther shows off his skill as a prolific exegete and systematic theologian. Ultimately, the scripture speaks for itself: Praise be to God for His long-suffering, mercy, and grace on His elected remnant!

A personal note: This book changed my life. As someone who was struggling with the concept of self-determination, original sin, election, and predestination, I finally hit the ceiling one day when I realized the true implication of these doctrines, if they were true. I was leading a college Bible study at the time, and I didn't know what to do except pray and seek answers. The answer came through Luther's "Bondage of the Will" which ultimately set me free. After realizing my salvation had nothing to do with my own volition in any sense of a human's capacity to 'will,' I became very upset by and by, but moreover, God thereupon softened my heart forthwith. I knew that God had chosen to save me, among all the other saints as well, for no reason other than His good sovereign will. I remember crying in the street thanking and praising God, but still being very distraught over all those who would not be saved. God answered with one statement: 'Now go tell them; go preach the gospel.' I've never been the same since.

-Brent McCulley (10/6/13)

Amber Standridge says

Excellent engagement with the various passages used by Erasmus to support the Catholic view of free will in salvation. Also, very helpful images throughout to explain the arguments. One image I found particularly helpful: Erasmus posited that God would not give man a command (for instance, to believe unto salvation) without also giving him the ability to comply. Luther counters with the image of a man who is bound from head to toe in chains but who believes himself unencumbered -- One might command the bound man to lift his arms so that the bound man, although unable to lift his arms, would become aware of his chains.

Similarly, in our sinful condition we remain blind to our sin and deceived, but God uses the law to make us conscious of sin. "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin." Romans 3:20 I gave the book only a 3.5 because I've read a number of "unwieldy tomes" and found it particularly difficult to access. Luther begins and continues for the great majority of the book countering Erasmus's arguments, spends a great deal of time spewing combative language, and only near the end of the book actually lays out the arguments in support of his position in a clear format.

Jay Miklovic says

This book was very difficult to get through because so much was packed in each sentence. While reading this book I found myself on a number of occasions reading less than a page in a sitting. With that said, this book was worth the effort.

Luther absolutely obliterates Erasmus, and he is anything but cordial in doing so. This book is laden with sarcasm, insult, and downright nastiness at times. This book is as intense as a polemic could be. While I typically tire of fundamentalist polemics, this book carried with it something so much deeper than contemporary fundamentalist bickering. As you come to conclusion of this book you see Luther's heart in the entire matter. Erasmus and his Diatribe, were a convenient foil to a much greater issue in the mind of Luther. Luther's obliteration of Erasmus was really an obliteration of even the slightest notion that someone would contribute anything to the grace of God in salvation.

I highly recommend this book, but have a few pots of coffee and a bottle of painkillers with you because your mind is going to be tired and hurting as you plod through it.
