

I

A DIATRIBE OR SERMON CONCERNING FREE WILL

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam

PREFACE: MAN AND TRUTH

Among the many difficulties encountered in Holy Scripture—and there are many of them—none presents a more perplexed labyrinth than the problem of the freedom of the will. In ancient and more recent times philosophers and theologians¹ have been vexed by it to an astonishing degree,

¹ Arguments criticizing the free will are easier to find and to present than those in its defense and explanation. Early Greek views were already varied and obscure. The *Eleatics*, *Democritus* and the *Stoics* generally opposed the freedom of the will. The *Pythagoreans*, *Socrates*, *Plato*, *Aristotle* and *Epicurus* attempted various explanations in its defense. Cf. Dom David Amand, *Fatalism et liberté dans l'antiquité grecque*, Louvain, 1945. Socrates and Plato held that the good, being identical with the true, imposes itself irresistibly on the will and the intellect, once it is clearly known and understood. Evil results from ignorance. Aristotle disagrees partly and appeals to experience. Vice is voluntary. Chance plays a role in some actions. The irresistible influence of his Prime Mover, however, makes the conception of a genuine moral freedom a difficulty for him. Epicurus advocated free will, in order to assuage man's fear caused by belief in irresistible fate.

Medieval thought developed a complex theology of the free will. Preeminent among the theologians is *St. Augustine of Hippo* who taught the freedom of the will against the Manichaeans, but the necessity of grace against the Pelagians. This two-fold apologetic gave rise later to interpretation differences, of which the Erasmus-Luther controversy is just one example. *St. Thomas Aquinas* developed some aspects of Augustine's teachings. Will is rational appetite. Free will becomes simply the elective power for choosing

but, as it seems to me, with more exertion than success on their part. Recently, Carlstadt and Eck restored interest in the problem, debating it, however, with moderation.² Soon thereafter, Martin Luther took up the whole controversy once more—and in a rather heated fashion—with his formal *Assertio* concerning the freedom of the will.³ And

different forms of desired beatitudes. How are man's future acts not necessary, despite God's infallible prevision? God does not exist in time: past and future alike are ever present. How about God's omnipotent providence? Does it infringe on man's freedom by its perfect control over all happenings? Two schools of thought among the Scholastics, both logically continuing certain of Aquinas' teachings, came to the fore. This Scholasticism irritated both Erasmus and Luther. It developed the finer points, often ignored by Erasmus and challenged by Luther's assertions. The Dominican or Thomist school saw God as removing man in accord with his free nature. Divine foreknowledge and God's providential control of the world's history are in harmony with man, who is by nature and definition a free cause. Animals are not. They are in harmony with their nature, adopting particular courses by necessity. The Jesuit or Molinist school does not think this explains freedom of the human will sufficiently. They conceive the relation of divine action to man's will to be concurrent rather than promotive, exempting God more clearly from all responsibility for man's sin.

Some of the complexity with which generations of thinkers have been grappling can be found in the Erasmus-Luther debate. In a sense it is a disorganized summary of the classical and medieval debates. Thereafter, beginning perhaps with Spinoza, a new rationalism enters the debate. Of this Erasmus is something of a precursor, exuding reasonableness on his part. For an up-to-date presentation of the entire panorama, see Mortimer J. Adler, *The Idea of Freedom: A Dialectical Examination of the Conception of Freedom* (see Bibliography).

² *Andreas Carlstadt* (1480-1541), a pioneer of the Protestant Reformation, was asked by Luther to defend his Thesis of 1517 at a public disputation ("Divine grace and human free will") at the University of Leipzig (June 27, 1519). He later came to oppose Luther as a "compromiser."

³ *Johann Maier von Eck* (1486-1543), German Catholic theologian, challenged Carlstadt to this debate. He remained foremost among those working for the overthrow of Luther.

⁴ Erasmus refers to *Assertio omnium articulorum D. Mart. Luth. per bullam Leonis X damnatorum* (1520) in the Weimar edition

although more than one⁴ has answered his *Assertio*, I, too, encouraged by my friends, am going to try to see whether, by the following brief discussion, the truth might not become more visible.

1) *Luther's Supposed Infallibility*

Here some will surely close their ears and exclaim, "Oh prodigy! Erasmus dares to contend with Luther, a fly with an elephant?" In order to assuage such people, I only want to state at this point, if they give me the time for it, that I have actually never sworn allegiance to the words of Luther. Nobody should therefore consider it unseemly if I should openly disagree with him, if nothing else, as one man from another. It is therefore by no means an outrage to dispute over one of his dogmas, especially not, if one, in order to discover truth, confronts Luther with calm and scholarly arguments. I certainly believe that Luther will not feel hurt if somebody differs in some instances from his opinion, because he permits himself not only to argue against the decisions of all the doctors of the church, but

of Luther's works (henceforth referred to as *W.A.*, i.e., *Weimarer Ausgabe*), *W.A.* VII, p. 91 ff. Luther himself seems to have preferred his freer German rendition, *Grund und Ursache aller Artikel D. Martin Luthers, so durch römische Bulle unrechtlich verdammte sind*, *W.A.* VII, p. 309 ff. Article 36, restating the 13th Heidelberg thesis, asserts that the free will is a mere fiction. Article 31 asserts that a pious man sins doing good works. Article 32 asserts that a good work is a mortal sin. Cf. chapter IV, footnote 5.

⁴ Among the major tracts against Luther we find, besides Eck's *Obelisci* (1518), the following: Henry VIII, *Assertio septem sacramentorum* (1521), which earned him the title Defender of the Faith; St. Thomas More, *Eruditissimi viri Gul. Rossi opus legans quo pulcherrime refutit ac refellit insanas Lutheri calumnias* (1523), written at the request of Henry VIII, in answer to Luther's reply to the royal *Assertio*; St. John Fisher, *The sermon of Iohan the bysshop of Rochester made agayn ye perversyous doctryn of Martin Luther* (1521), on which Erasmus relied heavily. Cf. chapter VI, footnote 1.

also appeals against all schools, church councils and Popes. Since he asserts this freely and openly, his friends must not hold it against me if I do likewise.

2) *Objectivity and Scepticism*

Let no one misinterpret our battle. We are not two gladiators incited against each other. I want to argue only against one of Luther's teachings, illuminating, if this be possible, in the subsequent clash of scriptural passages and arguments, the truth, the investigation of which has always been the most reputable activity of scholars. There will be no invective, and for two reasons: it does not behoove Christians so to act; and moreover, the truth, which by excessive quarreling is often lost, is discovered with greater certainty without it.

I am quite aware that I am a poor match in such a contest; I am less experienced than other men, and I have always had a deep-seated aversion to fighting. Consequently I have always preferred playing in the freer field of the muses, than fighting ironclad in close combat. In addition, so great is my dislike of assertions that I prefer the views of the sceptics wherever the inviolable authority of Scripture and the decision of the Church permit—a Church to which at all times I willingly submit my own views, whether I attain what she prescribes or not. And as a matter of fact, I prefer this natural inclination to one I can observe in certain people who are so blindly addicted to one opinion that they cannot tolerate whatever differs from it. Whatever they read in Holy Scripture, they distort to serve the opinion to which they have once and for all enslaved themselves. Their case is like that of the young man who loves a girl so much that he fancies he sees her image everywhere. Or to use a better comparison: they are like those who in the heat of battle turn everything at hand, be it a pitcher or a plate, into a missile. Are people thus affected able to form an objective judgment? Or is it not rather the result of such disputations that both con-

testants part spitting upon each other in contempt? There will always be many such people, the kind the Apostle Peter describes as, "the unlearned and the unstable," such as "distort the Scriptures to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3,16).

3) *Having an Open Mind*

For these reasons then, I must confess that I have not yet formed a definite opinion on any of the numerous traditional views regarding the freedom of the will; all I am willing to assert is that the will enjoys some power of freedom. My reading of Martin Luther's *Assertion* was quite unprejudiced, except that I felt towards him a favor such as a lawyer feels towards a hard pressed defendant. Though Luther's argument is defended with every means at his disposal and presented with great verve, I must honestly confess that he has not yet convinced me.

If someone wishes to declare me slow-witted or ignorant on account of all this, I would not want to argue the point, provided it is permitted for intellectually weaker persons to argue with better endowed ones for the sake of learning. Moreover, Luther himself attributed very little to erudition, but a great deal to the Spirit who instills at times in the intellectually weak what he denies to the wise. This I am saying to those who loudly proclaim that Luther has more learning in his little finger than Erasmus in his entire body—which I am not now going to refute. As hostile as those people wish to be in this affair, they will have to admit that my case shall not be weakened by the judgment of a few foolhardy people, if I concede to Luther in this disputation that he should not be burdened with the preceding judgment of doctors, councils, scholars, popes and emperors. Even if I have understood what Luther discusses, it is altogether possible that I am mistaken. Therefore, I merely want to analyze and not to judge, to inquire and not to dogmatize. I am ready to learn from anyone who advances something more accurate or more reliable, though I would

rather persuade mediocre minds not to argue too stubbornly on such matters. It harms Christian concord more than it helps piety.

4) *Difficulties in the Scripture*

Holy Scripture contains secrets into which God does not want us to penetrate too deeply, because if we attempt to do so, increasing darkness envelopes us, so that we might come to recognize in this manner both the unfathomable majesty of divine wisdom and the feebleness of the human mind. Pomponius Mela, for instance, speaks of a certain Corycian grotto⁵ which at first entices intruders by its charm, and later frightens them and fills them with terror because of the majesty of the indwelling divinity. Consequently, when we have reached such a point, I think it prudent and more pious to exclaim with Paul, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways!" (Romans 11,33), and with Isaiah, "Who hath forwarded the spirit of the Lord? Or who hath been his counselor?" (Isaiah 40,13), rather than to try to explain what surpasses the measure of the human mind. Much will have to wait for that time when we shall see no longer in a mirror and in an enigma, but shall contemplate in its glory the unveiled face of the Lord.

5) *Essence of Christian Piety*

In my opinion the implications of the freedom of the will in Holy Scripture are as follows: if we are on the road to piety, we should continue to improve eagerly and forget what lies behind us; if we have become involved in sin, we should make every effort to extricate ourselves, to accept the remedy of penance, and to solicit the mercy of

⁵ Pomponius Mela, Spanish geographer in the first century AD and author of an early universal geography, *De situ orbis*. The Corycian Cave, or "cave of myth," is a stalactite grotto on the southern slope of Mt. Parnassus, near Delphi, Greece, and played a role in Greek mythology.

the Lord, without which neither the human will nor its striving is effective; for all evil let us consider ourselves responsible, but let us ascribe all good to Divine Benevolence alone, for to It we owe even what we are; and in all things must we believe that whatever delightful or sad happens to us during life, God has caused it for our salvation, and that no injustice can come from Him who is by nature just, even if something should befall us which we deem undeserved; nobody should despair of forgiveness by a God who is by nature most merciful. In my opinion, it used to be sufficient for Christian piety to cling to these truths.

6) *Man's Limited Capacity to Know*

Men were not wont to intrude upon these concealed, even superfluous questions with irreligious curiosity, namely, whether God's foreknowledge is contingent; whether our will can contribute anything to our eternal salvation, or whether it simply undergoes the action of operative grace; whether everything we do, good or evil, is done out of mere necessity, or whether we are rather in a state of passive acceptance. Some things God wishes to remain totally unknown to us, such as the day of our death and the day of the last judgment. "It is not for you to know the times or dates which the Father has fixed by his own power" (Acts 1,7). Or, "But of the day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Mark 13,32).

In other instances God wishes that we investigate by venerating Him in mystic silence. Therefore Holy Scripture contains numerous passages which have puzzled many, without ever anyone succeeding in completely clarifying them. For example, there is the question of the distinction of the persons in God; the union of the divine and human natures in Christ; the problem of irremissible sin.⁶

Other things He wanted us to know with the utmost

⁶ Mark 3, 29.

clarity, as for example, the precepts for a morally good life. This is obviously the word of God which one does not have to fetch down from high heaven, or a distant sea, but which one rather finds near at hand, namely in our mouths and in our hearts.⁷ This indeed must be learned well by all. The remaining is better committed to God. It is more devout to adore the unknown than to investigate the unexplorable. How many quarrels have arisen from investigations into the distinction of persons in the Holy Trinity, the manner of procession of the Holy Spirit, the virgin birth? What disturbances have been caused in the world by the fierce contentions concerning the conception of the virgin mother of God? What are the results of these laborious investigations except that we experience a great loss of concord, and love each other less, while we wish to know too much?

Besides, there are certain kinds of truth which, even though they could be known, would nonetheless be unwisely offered for indiscriminate consideration. Perhaps what the sophists used to say about God, that, given his nature, he is present as much in the cavity of a beetle as in heaven, has some truth to it (I blush to reproduce their actual shameful remark).⁸ It would be unprofitable to discuss this matter publicly. Furthermore, the assertion that there are three gods, even if it can be truly stated dialectically, would certainly cause great offense, if presented to the untutored masses. Were I certain—which is not the case—that confession, as we have it now, was neither instituted by Christ, nor could ever have been invented by man, and consequently nobody could require it, and that furthermore no satisfaction is needed for offenses committed, I would nonetheless fear to publicize such an opinion, because, from what I can see, most men are prone to moral turpitude. Now, obligatory confession restrains or at least moderates this propensity.⁹ There exist certain sicknesses of the body

⁷ Deuteronomy 30, 11-14 and Romans 10, 6-8.

⁸ Luther, as well as Erasmus, criticized some Scholastics as "sophists," i.e., those well versed in specious reasoning and arguments.
⁹ Luther strongly criticized confession.

which it is the lesser evil to bear than to remove, as for example, if we had to bathe in the warm blood of slaughtered children in order to remove leprosy. There are, indeed, errors which it is better to ignore, than to eliminate. Paul has differentiated between the permissible and the expedient.¹⁰ The truth may be spoken but it does not serve everyone at all times and under all circumstances. If I were certain that a wrong decision or definition had been reached at a synod, it would be permissible but not expedient to speak the truth concerning it. Wicked men should not thus be offered an occasion to disdain the authority of the Fathers, especially when they have conscientiously and scrupulously made decisions. I would prefer to say that at the time of the decision they acted on the evidence they had, and later practical exigencies persuade us to modify their judgments.

7) *Unsuitableness of Luther's Teachings*

Let us assume the truth of what Wycliffe¹¹ has taught and Luther has asserted, namely, that everything we do happens not on account of our free will, but out of sheer necessity. What could be more useless than to publish this paradox to the world? Secondly, let us assume that it is true, as Augustine has written somewhere, that God causes both good and evil in us,¹² and that he rewards us for his good works wrought in us and punishes us for the evil deeds done in us. What a loophole the publication of this opinion would open to godlessness among innumerable people? In particular: mankind is lazy, indolent, malicious, and, in addition, incorrigibly prone to every impious outrage. How many weak ones would continue in their perpetual and

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 2, 1-6. Erasmus prefers throughout using the Latin for "expedient," rather than the word "prudential."

¹¹ John Wycliffe (1330-1384), one of the early influential English reformers tried, as a philosophical realist, to explain predestination and free will.

¹² Erasmus was admittedly not well versed in Augustinian theology and philosophy.

laborious battle against their own flesh? What wicked fellow would henceforth try to better his conduct? Who could love with all his heart a God who fires a hell with eternal pain, in order to punish there poor mankind for his own evil deeds, as if God enjoyed human distress? Most people would react as they are sketched above. People are universally ignorant and carnal-minded. They tend towards unbelief, wickedness and blasphemy. There is no sense in pouring oil upon the fire.

Thus Paul, the prudent disburser of the divine word, frequently consults charity and prefers to pursue what serves the neighbor, rather than what is permissible. Among the mature he speaks with the wisdom he possesses. But before the weak he displays no other knowledge but that of Jesus Christ, the crucified.¹³ Holy Scripture knows how to adjust its language to our human condition. In it are passages where God is angry, grieved, indignant, furious; where he threatens and hates. Again in other places he has mercy, he regrets, he changes his intentions. This does not mean that such changes really take place in the nature of God. These are rather modes of expression, benefitting our weakmindedness and dullness. The same prudence should, I believe, adorn all who have taken up preaching the divine word. Some things can be noxious, because like wine for the feverish, they are not fitting. Hence such matters might be treated in discourses among the educated or also in theological schools, although it is not expedient even there I think unless done with caution. Definitely, it seems to me, it is not only unsuitable, but truly pernicious to carry on such disputations when everybody can listen.

In short, one should be persuaded to waste neither time nor ingenuity in such labyrinths; neither to refute nor to endorse Luther's teachings. Perhaps I deserve the reproach of having been too verbose in this preface. But all of it appears more important than the disputation proper.

¹³ 1 Corinthians 2, 1-6.

II

INTRODUCTION: OBJECTIVE CRITERION FOR TRUTH

SINCE Luther recognizes no authority of any author, however approved, except that of the canonical books, I gladly accept this diminution of labor. Both among the Greeks and the Latins exist innumerable thinkers who deal explicitly or cursorily with the freedom of the will. It would have been a formidable task to gather all the quotations for and against free will; to explain every passage as well as to refute it. This irksome exertion would have been wasted on Luther and his friends, particularly since they not only hold different opinions, but also contradict themselves extensively.

8) *Authority of the Church Fathers*

Nevertheless I wish to remind the reader, if he thinks we are holding the scale to Luther's, with our scriptural passages and firm reasoning, that he now visualize in addition the entire long list of most erudite men who have enjoyed the approval of many centuries up to the present day, and among whom most have distinguished themselves by an admirable knowledge of Scripture, and commended themselves by their piety. Some gave their lives as testimony to the teachings of Christ which they had defended in their writings. Such among the Greeks are: Origen, Basil, Chrysostom, Cyril, John Damascene and Theophylactus; among the Latins: Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius, Hilary, Jerome and Augustine. I could also mention Thomas

Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Durandus of Saint-Pourçain, John Capreolus, Gabriel Biel, Giles of Rome, Gregory of Rimini and Alexander of Hales.¹ Their powerful and subtle argumentation, in my opinion, nobody can completely disdain, not to speak of the authoritative decisions of many universities, councils and popes.

From Apostolic times to this day no author has hitherto completely denied the freedom of the will, save Manichaeus and John Wycliffe alone.² Lorenzo Valla's authority, who

¹ *Origen* (185-254) was one of the most prolific writers of the early Church. His interests in Platonism and in giving philosophy a recognized place in the creeds of the Church made him a controversial figure. Erasmus was particularly influenced by his scriptural commentaries.

St. Basil the Great (330?-379-?), early Church Father, as was *St. John Chrysostom* (344?-407). *St. Cyril* (315?-386?), bishop of Jerusalem. *St. John of Damascus* (675-749), theologian and doctor of the Eastern Church. *Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus* (160?-230?), ecclesiastical writer and creator of Christian Latin literature, was one of the most original and controversial Christian writers. He influenced Erasmus. *St. Cyprian* (200-258), African bishop; *St. Hilary* (died 367), bishop of Poitiers, France; *St. Ambrose of Milan* (339-397), Latin Church Father. *St. Jerome* (340-420) is best known for his classical translation of the Old, and revision of the New Testament, known as the *Vulgate Bible*. *St. Augustine of Hippo* (354-430), bishop and Church Father. *St. Thomas Aquinas* (1225-1274), theologian and philosopher, called the Angelic Doctor. *Duns Scotus* (1265?-1308?), medieval theologian at Oxford and Cologne. *Durandus of Saint-Pourçain* (d. 1332), philosopher and theologian with a vast literary production, known as Doctor resolutissimus. *John Capreolus* (d. 1444), theologian, called Prince of Thomists. *Gabriel Biel* (d. 1495), German scholastic philosopher, influenced Luther and Melancthon. *Giles of Rome* (1245-1316), Italian theologian and philosopher, called Doctor fundatissimus. *Alexander of Hales* (d. 1245), English philosopher and theologian.

² *Manichaeus*, Mani or Manes (his followers are called *Manichaeans*) was a Gnostic teacher (d. 273), preaching an eclectic creed composed of wild fancies and some Hebrew, Buddhist, and Christian concepts, centering around the realms of light and darkness, good and evil. Augustine was for nine years a Manichaean, preceding his conversion to Christianity.

almost seems to agree with them, has little weight among theologians.³ Manichaeus' teaching has always been sharply rejected by all the world. Yet, it is questionable whether it would not serve better than Wycliffe's. The former explains good and evil by the two natures in man, but in such a way that we owe the good acts to God on account of his creation, and because we can, despite the power of darkness, implore the creator for help. This can help us to sin less and to do good more readily. If everything reduces itself to pure necessity, where does Wycliffe leave us any room for prayer or our own striving?

To return to what I have been saying before. Once the reader of my disputation recognizes that my fighting equipment is equal to that of the adversary, let him decide for himself, whether to attribute more to the decisions of all the many scholars, orthodox faithful, saints, martyrs, theologians of ancient and more recent times; of all the universities, as well as of the many councils, bishops and popes, or more to the private opinions of one or two men. I don't want to make the number of voices or the rank of the speakers decide an issue, as is customary in human assemblies. I know it happens frequently that the better party is voted down by the majority. I know what the majority esteems is not always the best. I know, when investigating truth, there is no harm in adding to the diligence of one's predecessors. I admit that it is right that the sole authority of Holy Scripture surpasses the voices of all mortals.

But we are not involved in a controversy regarding Scripture. The same Scripture is being loved and revered by both parties. Our battle concerns the sense of Scripture. If

³ *Lorenzo Valla* (1405-1457) was foremost among Italian Humanists. He, too, wrote a dialogue on free will. See Cassirer et al., *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, University of Chicago Press, 1948 pp. 147-182. Both Erasmus and Luther claimed him. In a sense Valla anticipated Erasmus, Ulrich von Hutten, and Luther in his philosophical, critical and exegetical works. (*Ibid.*, p. 154). Erasmus edited Valla's *Annotaciones in Novum Testamentum*, critical of the Vulgate's version.

ingenuity and erudition contribute anything to scriptural interpretation, what could be more acute and perspicacious than the Greek mind? How about wide scriptural reading? Nor have the Latins been wanting in either. If they were by nature less fruitful than the Greeks, they equaled them in industriousness and accepted their helpful inheritance. If, on the other hand, one looks more to a virtuous course of life than to erudition, it is obvious which men stand on the side of free will. Let us set aside what the lawyers call an odious comparison. I do not wish to compare some heralds of this new gospel with the older ones.

9) *Inspiration by the Holy Spirit*

At this point someone may object: what is the need of an interpreter when Scripture itself is quite clear? If it is really so clear, why have all the excellent people here acted like blind men for so many centuries, especially in so important a matter as my opponents hold it to be? If nothing were dark in Scripture, what need for prophecy was there even during apostolic times? This was the gift of the Spirit. Now, it is questionable whether this charismatic gift has ceased, like the power to heal and the gift of tongues did cease. If it did not cease, one has to ask, to whom was it transferred? If this talent and grace of prophecy have been transferred to everybody, any interpretation becomes highly problematical; if to nobody, we would still not have an assured interpretation, since even scholars are toiling with obscurities; if to the successors of the Apostles, then they will object that many of them completely lacked the apostolic spirit. And yet, other things being equal, we can presume with greater probability that God communicated His Spirit to those who have been ordained, just as one considers it more probable that grace will flow to the baptized, rather than to the non-baptized.

Let us admit that the possibility actually exists for the Spirit to reveal to a simple layman what is not revealed to many scholars, since indeed Christ thanks His Father for

revealing to little ones,⁴ that is, those simple and foolish in the eyes of this world,⁵ what He concealed from the wise and prudent ones, that is, the scribes, pharisees, and philosophers. Dominic and Francis might have been such fools, if they could have followed their own spirit. But since St. Paul during his own lifetime, when the gift of the Spirit was alive, had already to order His verification, that is, whether His manifestation really came from God,⁶ what shall happen during our worldly times? How can we judge the Spirit? According to erudition? On both sides we find scribes. According to conduct? On both sides there are sinners. True, on one side stands the entire choir of saints who steadfastly held to the freedom of the will. They state the truth, but they were human. Yet I am comparing men to men, instead of men to God.

If it is objected: what can large numbers contribute to an understanding of the Spirit? I answer: what can a small number of people? If they object: what can a bishop's miter contribute to an understanding of Holy Scripture? I answer: what can a hood and cowl? If they say: what can philosophical understanding contribute? I answer: what can ignorance? If they say: what can a congregated synod, in which perhaps nobody is inspired by the Spirit, contribute to an understanding of Scripture? I answer: what can the private gathering of a few contribute, none of whom probably has the Spirit?

10) *Miracles and Exemplary Life*

Paul exclaims, "Do you seek a proof of the Christ who speaks in me?" (2 Corinthians 13,3). Apostles were believed only if their doctrines were accompanied by miracles. But nowadays anybody demands faith from others by affirming his having the evangelical spirit. The apostles had to rout vipers, heal the sick, raise the dead, confer the gift of

⁴ Matthew 11, 25.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 1, 27.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 12, 3; words are actually taken from 1 John 4, 1.

tongues by the laying on of hands. Only thus were they believed and hardly even thus, since they taught paradoxes. Nowadays certain people present even greater paradoxes⁷ to common opinion! Nonetheless, none of them has come forward who could heal just one lame horse. If at least some of them would demonstrate, not quite a miracle, but yet the sincerity and simplicity of an apostolic life, it could take the place of the missing miracle amongst us more slow-witted people.

I do not want to accuse Luther, whom I don't know personally, but whose writings have made a mixed impression on me. I am addressing this to others who are better known to me and who interrupt us by saying, "They were simply men," every time we advance an interpretation by an orthodox elder for the purpose of understanding a controversial passage. When we ask, what are the marks of a true scriptural interpretation, since both sides are represented only by human beings, their answer is "The mark of the Holy Spirit." If you ask why the Holy Spirit should have forsaken the side which is also distinguished by miracles, and be found rather amongst them, they answer as if during all these hundreds of years there had been no Gospel in the world. If one misses among them a conduct of life commensurate with the Spirit, they answer that they are saved by faith and not by works. If one misses miracles, they say these have stopped long ago and are no longer needed, since now the light of Scripture shines so wonderfully. If one contests that Scripture is clear in our case, otherwise so many excellent men would also have been blind, one has moved in a full cycle to the beginning of the argument.

11) *Infallible Church*

Let us assume that he who has the Spirit is sure of the meaning of Scripture. How can I also possess the certainty which the other pretends to have? What can I do when

⁷ Luther called his 1517 theses "theological paradoxes."

several persons claim different interpretations, but each one swears to have the Spirit? Moreover, since the Spirit does not inspire the same person with everything, some who have the Spirit may be mistaken on a point.

This then I want to reply to those who discard without hesitation the old interpretation of sacred books, and instead submit their own, as if an oracle had proclaimed it. Finally, even though Christ's Spirit might permit His people to be in error in an unimportant question on which man's salvation does not depend, no one could believe that this Spirit has deliberately overlooked error in His Church for 1300 years, and that He did not deem one of all the pious and saintly Church Fathers worthy enough to be inspired, with what, they contend, is the very essence of all evangelical teaching.

12) *Plea for Gentle Listening*

But now, in order finally to conclude, let the others decide what they wish to assume for themselves. I for my part do not arrogate to myself doctrine, nor sanctity, nor do I depend on my intellect. I simply want to offer with earnestness what moves my soul. If someone undertakes to teach me, I would not consciously oppose truth. If my opponents, however, prefer to slander me, although I dispute truthfully and without slander, rather than quarrel, then everyone will miss the Spirit of the Gospels among those who continuously speak of it. Paul exhorts, "But him who is weak in faith, receive" (Romans 14,1). Christ will not extinguish a smoking wick.⁸ The Apostle Peter says, "Be ready always with an answer to everyone who asks a reason for the hope that is in you. Yet, do so with gladness and fear" (1 Peter 3,15-16). If my opponents respond, "Erasmus is like an old wine-skin⁹ unable to hold the new wine which they offer to the world," and if their self-confidence is so great, they at least ought to consider us as Christ did

⁸ Matthew 12, 20.

⁹ Matthew 9, 17.

Nicodemus,¹⁰ and as the Apostles did Gamaliel.¹¹ The Lord did not repel the former, who, though ignorant, was desirous of learning. Nor did the Apostles spurn Gamaliel who desired to suspend his judgment until the nature of the matter would show by what spirit it was being led.

13) *Definition of Free Will*

I have completed half of this work. To those whom I have convinced, as I intended, that it were better not to cavil and quibble about such questions, especially not before the common people, I will not have to present the further proof to which I shall now proceed, hoping that truth will prevail everywhere, which will perhaps sparkle from a comparison of scriptural passages like fire struck from flint. Nobody can deny that Sacred Scripture contains many passages stating the obvious freedom of the human will. On the other hand, there are some passages which seem to deny the former. Yet, it is certain that Scripture cannot contradict itself, since all passages are inspired by the same Spirit. Therefore, we shall first examine those passages which confirm our view and then we shall try to dispose of those that seem to be opposed.

By freedom of the will we understand in this connection the power of the human will whereby man can apply to or turn away from that which leads unto eternal salvation.

¹⁰ John 3.

¹¹ Acts 5, 34.

III

OLD TESTAMENT PROOFS SUPPORTING THE FREE WILL

14) *Ecclesiasticus 15: Choose Good or Evil*

Those who take a free will for granted usually quote Ecclesiasticus 15, 14-18:

God made man from the beginning, and left him in the hand of his own counsel. He added his commandment and precepts. If thou wilt keep the commandments and perform acceptable fidelity forever, they shall preserve thee. He hath set water and fire before thee; stretch forth thy hand to which thou wilt. Before man is life and death, good and evil, that which he shall choose shall be given him.

I do not expect that anybody will question the authority of this book because it was of old not contained in the Hebraic canon, as Jerome indicates. The Church of Christ has received it into her canon with great unanimity. Incidentally, I do not quite see why the Hebrews decided to exclude it from their canon, while at the same time including Solomon's Proverbs and the Canticle of Canticles. Whoever has read attentively can readily guess why the Jews excluded from their canon the last two books of Esdras, the story of Susanna and of the dragon Bel, attached to the book of Daniel, as well as the books Judith and Esther and a few others. They numbered these among the apocrypha.¹ But in Ecclesiasticus certainly nothing disturbs the reader.

¹ *Apocrypha*, a term used to describe that body of religious literature closely associated with the Old and New Testament, but regarded as noncanonical Jewish or Christian scriptures.