

## Martin Luther's Understanding of the Person Between Autonomy and Theonomy

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At the Diet at Worms (1521), Martin Luther asserted that he would not recant unless convinced "by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason", and that "it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience."<sup>1</sup> This means Luther appealed to reason, though not autonomous reason in the modern sense. On the other hand he also called reason a whore who goes to the one who pays best. In *The Bondage of the Will* of 1525 Luther even stated that a person can neither go to God nor side with the devil; rather, both fight over him, and he is either driven by the devil or guided by God. What do we make of these assertions? And how does Luther understand a human being with regard to that person's will?

### 1. Luther's Continuous Caution against Free Will in Humans

Bernhard Lohse states: "Since the 1515/16 Romans lecture, and for the rest of his life, Luther polemicized in the harshest manner against assigning fallen humanity a free will."<sup>2</sup> In the *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518, theological theses 13-15 explicitly deal with free will. Luther states in thesis 13: "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."<sup>3</sup> At least theologically speaking, a human person after the fall – and this means today – can only sin. In thesis 14 Luther then expounds: "Free will, after the fall, has power to do good only in a passive capacity, but can always do evil in an active capacity." For Luther, free will is dead, an actuality no longer. Thesis 15 adds: "Nor could free will remain in a state of innocence, much less do good, in an active capacity, but only in its passive capacity." Luther wraps up his argument by saying in thesis 16: "The person who believes that he can obtain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he

<sup>1</sup> "Luther at the Diet of Worms," in *LW* 32:112.

<sup>2</sup> Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology. Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. and ed. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 256.

<sup>3</sup> For this and the following quotes see Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), in *LW* 31:40.

becomes doubly guilty." If a human being operates according to his or her own means, he or she always falls far short of God's expectations.

Luther provides clarification of this point in his 1521 *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles of Dr. Martin Luther which were Unjustly Condemned by the Roman Bull*, a response to the papal bull *Exurge Domine*. With reference to Psalm 143:2, Luther asks rhetorically why a person would want to flee from God's judgment. He responds: "If a work were actually altogether good and without sin, it would not flee God's just judgment. The defect, then, must of necessity be in the work, which is not pure. It is for this reason that no man living is justified in God's sight, and all men need his mercy, even in their good works."<sup>4</sup> We are always at God's mercy since we cannot live up to God's precepts. In Article 36 of the same writing, Luther states again: "*Since the fall of Adam, or after actual sin, free will exists only in name, and when it does what it can, it commits sin.*"<sup>5</sup> He then explains that "it is a profound and blind error to teach that the will is by nature free and can, without grace, turn to the spirit, seek grace, and desire it."<sup>6</sup> A human person cannot turn to God and can likewise do nothing to escape from sin. Luther teaches nothing new here; in addition to frequent references to Scripture, he also relies continuously on Augustine (as a good Augustinian would do). Yet the question remains: do things change when grace enters the picture?

In his writing *Against Latomus*, Luther distinguishes between the spiritual mind and the carnal flesh with reference to Rom 7, stating that "the mind is freed from sin, but the flesh is sold under sin."<sup>7</sup> One and the same person is in two different relationships: "under grace, he is spiritual, but under the law, carnal." The grace of Jesus Christ makes the person spiritual and places him or her under grace, whereas sin makes that same person carnal. Given the presence of grace, however, sin cannot place that person under the wrath of God: "So sin is

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles* (1521), *LW* 32:84.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther, *Defense*, *LW* 32:92.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, *Defense*, *LW* 32:93.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, *Against Latomus* (1521), *LW* 32:246, fort his and the following quote.

truly sin, but because grace and the gifts are within me, it is not imputed; nor on account of its innocence – as if it were not harmful – but because grace and the gift reign within me."<sup>8</sup>

We are confronted here with the paradoxical assertion that a person is sinner and sanctified at the same time. Wilfried Joest explains: "Luther thinks of an act of life and conduct of a person in which the human self is not the actor, but is carried and taken along. His understanding of a person is – as an understanding of a believing person in its relationship to God – thoroughly eccentric."<sup>9</sup> The divine grace operative in a human being makes that one righteous before God. In other words, righteousness is imputed to this person. But does this not imply that a human being actually has no free will whatsoever? When we consult Luther's writing against Erasmus, we get some more insight into this matter.

## 2. The Issue of Human Free Will according to *De Servo Arbitrio*

In his article on the *Free Will*, Erasmus had stated: "By free choice in this place we mean a power of the human will by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from them."<sup>10</sup> This means that a human being has a free choice, not just in earthly things but also in things that pertain to salvation. For Erasmus, a person can either accept or reject salvation, or even more, a person can strive to attain salvation. Of course, such a concept of free choice was abhorrent to Luther, and he clearly stated in *The Bondage of the Will* "that free choice properly belongs to no one but God alone."<sup>11</sup> But then he conceded to Erasmus that perhaps he might "rightly attribute some measure of choice to man, but to attribute free choice to him in relation to divine things is too much." Luther allows here some measure of free choice or autonomy in a human being. What he means by this autonomy becomes clear a few sentences later: "For you would not call a slave free, who acts under the sovereign authority of his master; and still less rightly we can call a man or angel

<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther, *Against Latomus*, LW 32:249.

<sup>9</sup> Wilfried Joest, *Ontologie der Person bei Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 269.

<sup>10</sup> According to Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), LW 33:102f.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, LW 33:103, for this and the following two quotes.

free, when they live under the absolute sovereignty of God (not to mention sin and death) in such a way that they cannot subsist for a moment by their own strength." Luther refers here to God as the creator and sustainer who at every moment has everything in his hands, an overarching authoritative power out of which things and persons receive their power to live. There is therefore a theonomy which, whether given allegiance or not, enables the whole created order including humanity to survive and thrive. Within those bounds human persons can order their own things. This set of circumstances implies a limited form of autonomy.

But Erasmus advocates more than this kind of limited authority: he asserts that we have a free will towards salvation. Here Luther counters with the difficult and even dangerous notion of divine foreordination.

[Divine foreordination is] that hidden and awful will of God whereby he ordains by his own counsel which and what sort of persons he wills to be recipients and partakers of his preached and offered mercy. This will is not to be inquired into, but reverently adored, as by far the most awe-inspiring secret of the Divine Majesty, reserved for himself alone and forbidden to us. ... To the extent, therefore, that God hides himself and wills to be unknown to us, it is no business of ours. For here the saying truly applies, 'Things above us are no business of ours.' ... God must therefore be left to himself in his own majesty, for in this regard we have nothing to do with him, nor has he willed that we should have anything to do with him. But we have something to do with him insofar as he is clothed and sat forth in his Word, through which he offered himself to us. ... In this regard we say, the good God does not deplore the death of his people which he works in them, but he deplores the death which he finds in his people and desires to remove from them. For it is this that God as he is preached is concerned with. ... But God hidden in his majesty neither deplores nor takes away death, but works life, death, and all in all. For there he has not bound himself by his word, but has kept himself free over all things.<sup>12</sup>

Luther chides Erasmus that he does not distinguish between the God preached and the God hidden or between the word of God and God himself.

Indeed, Luther is correct that we should concern ourselves only with the *deus revelatus*, the revealed God. What is not revealed is only accessible through speculation and thereby ambiguous. The non-revealed mystery of God, the *deus absconditus*, should at the most be adored. Bernhard Lohse comments here that "Luther comes close to splitting the

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, LW 33:139f.

concept of God in two", though Lohse does not believe that Luther crosses that boundary.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Luther does not talk about two kinds of Gods; yet he does two things. On the one hand, he tells Erasmus that the only way we know anything about God is through the revealed word where we encounter the Gospel of God's grace. On the other hand, there is the hidden God shrouded in mystery to whom we should not turn or investigate about him. Nevertheless, Luther becomes inconsistent at this point. While admitting that there is only one power in this world, the one God, he then speaks of this hidden side of God. The one God who determines life and death must also be the God who is behind the death of the sinner. In some ways Luther adopts Augustine's verdict that we all deserve death on account of our sinfulness, but in his unfathomable goodness God has elected some toward grace.

The same overarching power of God is addressed again by Luther with the example of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. There Luther states that the Pharaoh could "neither resist the motion of his [God's] omnipotence nor lay aside its own badness."<sup>14</sup> God's overarching will drives the evil person toward an evil decision with which the evil person willingly complies. Luther asserts then against Erasmus "that free choice can do nothing but evil." He means, of course, free choice without divine grace.

Luther even goes one step further. He first admits that it is very difficult – if not impossible – to maintain both God's foreknowledge and human freedom simultaneously. But then he concludes, as he says, by "irrefutable logic that we have not been made by ourselves, nor do we live or perform any action by ourselves, but by his omnipotence. ... He knew in advance that we should be the sort of people we are, and now makes, moves, and governs us as such. ... Thus God's foreknowledge and omnipotence are diametrically opposed to our free choice, for either God can be mistaken in foreknowing and also err in action (which is impossible), or we must act and be acted upon in accordance with his foreknowledge and activity."<sup>15</sup> With reference to God's omnipotence, Luther cites 1 Cor. 12:6, where Paul states

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<sup>13</sup> Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 165, and cf. *ibid.*, 166.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, LW 33:180, for this and the following quote.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, LW 33:188f.

that God works all in all. Bernhard Lohse is certainly correct that at least "in a few passages Luther approximated the deterministic view that even in external things of life humans have no freedom but are controlled by God."<sup>16</sup>

According to Luther, God's foreknowledge does not exclude human willfulness or human freedom. For instance, regarding Judas and his betrayal of Jesus, Luther states that the decisive question is not "whether Judas became a traitor involuntarily or voluntarily, but whether at a time preordained by God it was bound infallibly to happen that Judas by an act of his will should betray Christ."<sup>17</sup> We see here the overarching foreknowledge of God which knows exactly how things will happen, and we also see that nothing would subsist without God. Humans have a will to make decisions, the outcomes of which God already knows. With this severely limited concept of the will in mind, Luther distinguishes between two kinds of righteousness. There is first "the righteousness of works, or moral and civil righteousness" which does not justify us in God's sight. Then there is the righteousness of faith which does not depend on any works and which by God's favorable regard is based on grace alone.<sup>18</sup> In the first instance humans have a certain free will, but in the second there is no free will. Why is Luther so adamant against a free choice in matters of salvation? He explains that if salvation depends to any degree on oneself, then amid all the adversities and perils of this world salvation would always be uncertain. Yet he continues, "yet even if there were no perils or adversities or demons, I should nevertheless have to labor under the perpetual uncertainty and to fight as one beating the air."<sup>19</sup> Because of our limited powers the certainty of salvation would never be assured. We would simply never know whether we have done enough. Does this mean, however, that we can simply leave everything up to God and lean back in our chairs? Luther would certainly not agree, because this theonomy endows us with true autonomy.

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<sup>16</sup> Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luthers Theology*, 167.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, LW 33:193.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, LW 33:270f.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, LW 33:288.

### 3. Theonomy Leads to Autonomy According to Luther

It is clear for Luther that a human being is different from an animal or a tree. A human being has a certain autonomy whereby s/he "is capable of being taken hold of by the Spirit and imbued with the grace of God."<sup>20</sup> Luther calls this "a disposing quality or passive attitude." Harry McSorley can therefore rightly say that Luther "leaves no place in his theology for a personal decision of faith."<sup>21</sup> According to Luther, such a personal decision by which I decide to take God seriously would make salvation dependent on me. Therefore it would lead to uncertainty, something which Luther wants to avoid. Yet the "disposing quality", similar to the Lutheran practice of infant baptism, restricts us to the position of condoner, whereas God is the actor. In this way humans are "activated" by God, as Luther explains in his *Lectures on Galatians*: "Therefore faith always justifies and makes alive ... it neither is nor remains idle or without love."<sup>22</sup>

With God's help, i.e., empowered by God's grace, we are on the road to salvation. Luther can then say: "This life, therefore, is not godliness, but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed."<sup>23</sup> As Wilfried Joest states, there seems to be a strange contradiction between the statement of Christians being sinners and saints at the same time and this notion of being on the way toward salvation.<sup>24</sup> But as Luther shows in the next paragraph, we are still sinners, still falling shy of perfection, even if we move in its direction. Fulfilment is simply not possible in

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<sup>20</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, LW 33:67.

<sup>21</sup> Harry J. McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong? An Ecumenical-Theological Study of Luther's Major Work, The Bondage of the Will* (New York: Newman Press, 1969), 369.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:272, in his comments on Gal 3:12.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Luther, *Defense*, 32:24.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Wilfried Joest, *Ontologie der Person*, 266.

this life. Luther explains this in a sermon of 1518/19 concerning the two kinds of righteousness.

[An alien righteousness is] instilled in us without our works by grace alone ... Christ daily drives out the old Adam more and more in accordance with the extent to which faith and knowledge of Christ grow. For alien righteousness is not instilled all at once, but it begins, makes progress, and is finally perfected at the end through death.

The second kind of righteousness is our proper righteousness, not because we alone work it, but because we work with that first and alien righteousness. This is that manner of life spent profitably in good works. ... This righteousness is the product of the righteousness of the first type, actually its fruit and consequence. [Galatians 5:22].<sup>25</sup>

We could put it in different terms, saying that a growing theonomy results into a growing autonomy of profitably doing good works. The more we are in conformity with God, the more we become agents of our own life rather than victims of our own doing.

To explicate this point, Luther wrote his treatise *The Freedom of a Christian* in 1520. He starts with a seemingly paradoxical statement: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."<sup>26</sup> Luther explains that human beings have a twofold nature, a spiritual inner nature in which a Christian is a new person, and a bodily outward nature in which the Christian is still of the old carnal character. According to the inner nature, a Christian has become righteous through grace and is therefore free from sin and eternal condemnation.

This newly-gained status is not static but ever seeks to express itself. Therefore Luther affirms: "One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom."<sup>27</sup> Holding fast to Christ through faith, the Christian is united with Christ. Sin, death, and damnation are driven out of the soul, and that which is Christ's – grace, life, and salvation – are bestowed in their place. Since we are not simply holy and perfectly spiritual beings but still have the old creation within us, Luther cautions that "we only begin to make

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<sup>25</sup> Martin Luther, "Two Kinds of Righteousness" (Sermon), *LW* 31:299f.

<sup>26</sup> Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), *LW* 31:344.

<sup>27</sup> Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, *LW* 31:345.

some progress in that we shall be perfected in the future life."<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, a person is never idle, especially not a Christian; and gradually the old, outward self is increasingly brought into conformity with the inner being. The works that result from this transformation are born out of spontaneous love in obedience to God.

Since a person on this earth does not live simply for himself or herself but also lives for and with others, a Christian brings the old being into subjection in such a way that s/he "may the more sincerely and freely serve others. ... He cannot ever in this life be idle and without works toward his neighbors."<sup>29</sup> The transformation that Christians experience in themselves also transforms their approach to other people, and – I would venture to say beyond Luther – also to the whole of creation. Luther states in conclusion: "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."<sup>30</sup>

We encounter here again Luther's view of the correlation between theonomy and autonomy. Since we are theonomous and live in conformity with God, we are autonomous in appropriately dealing with the neighbor. Of course, we could add that persons who are not theonomous but, as Luther would say, in bondage to sin or enslaved to Satan, would also be autonomous in their dealings with the neighbor. Yet their works would be marked by an ambivalence of motive. Nevertheless, through the limited autonomy that God grants every living being, such persons could deal with their neighbor either positively or negatively, subservient as they are to the forces of negativity. Virtuous lives are indeed a possibility for all people. But only by being in conformity with God's will can human actions be unambiguously good. Luther remains aware that we are still on the way to perfection, and therefore even Christians are not beyond failure and subsequent reproach. So what exactly is

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<sup>28</sup> Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31:358.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, LW, 31:364.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31:371.

the advantage that Christians enjoy in theonomous living? For one thing, they are assured that in spite of human shortcomings, everything – whether worldly or heavenly – will come out all right in the end. Christians are thus saved from the burden of having to save the world. They are then free to engage constructively in the necessities of daily life.