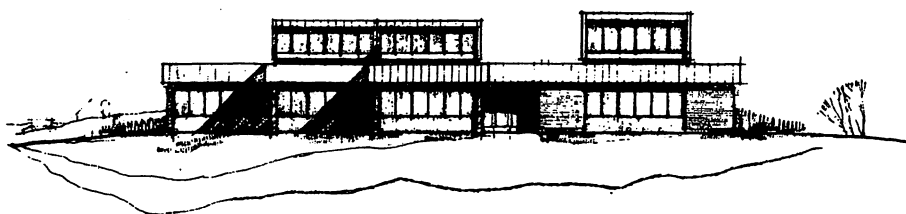


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The Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches

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by
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Editorial Notes

Our readers will find this issue of the *Journal* of particular interest. It includes, for the most part, articles by others than the faculty of the Seminary and deals with subjects which are not usually treated in our paper. We hope that the readers will find the articles worthwhile and instructive.

* * * *

In the Autumn of 1994 the Seminary was favored with two speeches by Rev. Bassam Madany, minister to the Arabs for the Back to God Hour. He spoke to the faculty and student body on the general subject of ministry to Islam. The speeches were not only interesting from the viewpoint of the information concerning this important work, but they contained valuable information on the whole subject of the methodology of foreign mission work in general.

Common in the field of missiology is the whole notion of contextualization. Rev. Madany discusses this approach to missions, subjects it to scathing criticism, and demonstrates from Scripture that such methodology is contrary to the Reformed view of mission work. His speech is, therefore, important for a correct and biblical view of missions.

His first speech appears in this issue of the *Journal*; his second speech will appear, the Lord willing, in the spring issue. We are grateful to Rev. Madany for giving us permission to publish these speeches and for preparing them in article form for publication.

A brief biography of Rev. Madany appears at the beginning of his article.

* * * *

The students in the Seminary are required to write many papers to meet the requirements of their courses. It is always a special pleasure when a paper of the students is sufficiently worthwhile to publish in the *Journal*. We have included such a paper in this issue.

The paper was authored by Fook Meng Cheah, a student from the Evangelical Reformed Churches of Singapore. Brother Cheah is in his third year of Seminary studies with us and will graduate in the Spring of 1996. After his graduation, he will return to Singapore to take up the ministry of the Word in the Evangelical Reformed Churches of Singapore.

The paper is a careful and thorough analysis of the great debate between Martin Luther and Erasmus during the time of the Protestant

Reformation in the 16th Century. The debate was crucially important for the Reformation itself, but it revolved around issues which are still pertinent for the church today. Luther represented a return to the truth of the Word of God; Erasmus represented the Humanism of the Renaissance. While for a time it seemed possible that Erasmus would join forces with the Reformation, Luther and Erasmus parted ways at last. The issue over which they parted was the issue of the free will of man vs. the sovereignty of God in salvation.

Brother Cheah gives us a careful analysis of the issues and discusses their importance by analyzing Erasmus' book, *The Freedom of the Will*, and Luther's response in his famous book, *The Bondage of the Will*.

Our readers will readily see, in reading this essay, why these issues, so fiercely fought out at the time of the Reformation, are still important for the church today.

* * * *

In the ongoing debate over the nature of Reformed Church Government, the issue of Independentism (sometimes called Congregationalism) has become a burning issue. The recent republication of *The Cambridge Platform* has brought the issue into sharp focus. Prof. David Engelsma subjects this important historical document to careful scrutiny in the light of Reformed church polity. We suggest that all our readers give careful attention to this review of Prof. Engelsma, for the principles of a Reformed system of church polity are clearly defined and it will help those who want to be Reformed in their conception of church government to understand its biblical character and genius. For those who are tempted to follow Independentism, the article will show why this form of church government is not an option for a Reformed man. Perhaps you will want to copy this review and circulate it as widely as possible. You have the permission of the *Journal* staff to make such copies if you should so choose.

* * * *

Be sure to read as well the review of the latest book by Davis Young, for the issues brought up in this book are vital for the confession and life of the church.

* * * *

We hope you will enjoy what can only be called a *special* issue of our paper. ▲

Biographical Information

Bassam Michael Madany was the Arabic Broadcast minister of the Back to God Hour, the radio ministry of the Christian Reformed Church, from mid-1958 to mid-1994. His broadcasts are still being aired daily to the Arabic-speaking world (North Africa and the Middle East), over several international radio stations.

Rev. Madany was born in Seleucia, in the province of Antioch, Syria. He received his pre-seminary education in British and French schools in the Middle East prior to and during World War II. In 1950 he came to the United States and studied at the Reformed Presbyterian Seminary in Pittsburgh, PA, graduating in May 1953. As a theological student, he served a church in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada where he met Shirley Winnifred Dann (secretary to the editor of the *Winnipeg Free Press*). After his ordination, they were married in the summer of 1953 and left for the mission field where they labored together in Latakia, NW Syria. The rise of nationalism and the restrictions placed on missionary activities, forced the Madanys to return to Canada in 1955. In 1957 they joined the Christian Reformed Church and moved to Grand Rapids, MI, where Rev. Madany took further studies at Calvin Seminary. He holds a Bachelor of Divinity degree from that institution.

In June 1958, Rev. Madany was appointed as Arabic Broadcast Minister. He pioneered Arabic radio missions and developed a Bible-based ministry which emphasizes the centrality of the Word of God in missions to Muslims. He has authored several books in Arabic for his follow-up ministry. They can be found in the homes of listeners all over the world. Mrs. Madany was involved in several aspects of his ministry and directed the follow-up department of *Saatu'l Islah*, the Arabic name of this radio mission.

For several years, Rev. Madany taught a course on Islamics during the spring session of Reformed Bible College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. His book, *The Bible and Islam*, is a fruit of these courses and is being widely used as a guide for missions to Muslims. It is now in its third printing and available at Christian bookstores. A special edition for East Africa and another one for South Africa have been published. This book has also been translated into other languages. He has contributed numerous articles and book reviews to Christian periodicals dealing with the Christian perspective on Islam.

Besides his interest in biblical and theological topics, he has specialized in Middle Eastern studies and teaches a course on Middle East history

at Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, a suburb of Chicago, IL. He is widely traveled both in the Middle East, Europe, and North America and has lectured on the Christian mission to Islam, the challenge which radical Islam poses to the Western world, and the chronic problems which beset the lives of Arabic-speaking people in the Middle East and in North Africa. ▲

Re-Thinking Missions Today

Neo-Evangelical Missiology and the Christian Mission to Islam

Bassam Madany

During the last two decades, some severe criticisms have been leveled at the missionary work which has been undertaken since the days of William Carey. We are told by these critics, for example, that missions among Muslims have been a failure. Most of the missionaries of the past, so the critics say, were not good at “cross-cultural communication.” This happened because missionaries failed to “contextualize” the Christian message.

In this paper, I refer to evangelical missionary theorists who have espoused and propagated this way of looking at the modern missionary enterprise as the *neo-evangelical* missiologists. I would like to examine their thesis about the alleged failure of missions among Muslims from three inter-related perspectives: **the historical, the theological, and the biblical perspectives.**

I — The Historical Perspective

In attempting to work out a new methodology of missions, several *neo-evangelical* missiologists base their endeavors on their own interpretation of the history of missions in the last 200 years. This is specially the case when they are re-thinking the Christian mission to Muslims. They seem to be oblivious of the fact that the Christian-Muslim encounter began almost fourteen centuries ago! The difficulties we face as we seek to reach Muslims with the gospel are embedded in history long before the rise of the Protestant

missionary enterprise. To put all the blame on the messengers of the gospel during the last 200 years not only ignores history, but dishonors the testimony of countless Christians who lived under Islam and who were not ashamed of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We must never forget these points of history: according to the Arabian prophet, 1) Christ never claimed to be the Son of God; 2) the belief in the Trinity amounted to faith in many gods; and, 3) the Messiah never died on the cross.

In the Islamic tradition, the whole system of Christian doctrine has been judged as inferior and corrupt. Islam alone is the final and complete faith. As some Muslims remind me in their letters, the preaching of the Christian faith is anachronistic. As far as Allah is concerned, *Inna deena 'inda Allahi al-Islamu*, i.e., the accepted religion with God is Islam!

Rather than to indulge in too much introspection as we survey the history of missions to Muslims during the last two centuries, we must bear in mind that, as far as Muslims are concerned, there is no need to consider seriously the claims of the Christian message. The true gospel, the Injeel, no longer exists, for the Christians have corrupted it. In any case, the Quran has superseded and supplanted the gospel. There is nothing more striking about the Muslim's attitude to other religions than his absolute conviction about the superiority and finality of his faith!

The majority of the peoples conquered by the Arab armies in the initial days of the conquest were Christian. Their Christianity was not pure. Some were Chalcedonian, while others entertained erroneous teachings concerning the two natures of Jesus Christ. But in all fairness to these Eastern Christians, we must not write them off as if they presented no Christian testimony to the invaders. Granted that they were weak in the areas of biblical anthropology and soteriology, they all confessed their faith in the triune God, the deity and sonship of Jesus Christ, His atoning death on the cross, and the complete trustworthiness and final authority of the Bible.

The writings of the Christians of the Middle East who lived during the caliphates of the Umayyads (7th and 8th centuries) and the 'Abbasids (8th-13th centuries) reveal that they did not hesitate to explain why they did not Islamize. It is very surprising to read the contents of their apologetical and polemical works. Many Christians worked in the courts of the caliphs in Damascus and later on in Baghdad. They conversed freely about points of difference between the two religions. Some neo-evangelical missiologists seem to forget that the core of the Christian message was adequately defended by the conquered Christians of the Middle East. The hardening of the attitude towards the Christian faith among Muslims happened before the conversion of the ancestors of many European and American missionaries!

Having referred briefly to the role played by the Christians of the conquered lands, we may consider the record of some of the pioneer Protestant missionaries who worked in the Arab world. I am better equipped to deal with this part of the Muslim world, since my pre-seminary education took place within the Arab world. Furthermore, my own involvement in the Muslim world has continued because of the very nature of my ministry. I have had the privilege of corresponding with thousands of Arabic-speaking listeners, both Muslim and Eastern Christian. Thus, my knowledge of Islam is neither purely academic nor archaic.

Does the historical record uphold the charge that the pioneer missionaries who labored among the Muslims were intent upon spreading their culture as well as the gospel? Let us take the history of the American University of Beirut. This institution of higher education is considered the most powerful academic institution in the entire Middle East. But it was not founded as an American cultural mission. Its original name was the Syrian Protestant College and was founded by Presbyterian missionaries in 1866. The founders planned to teach all the subjects in Arabic. The Evangelical Church which they organized was an Arabic speaking church. Its liturgy was simple, the Word of God was central, and every part of the worship service was in Arabic. When we think about the translation of the Arabic Bible, the names of some pioneer missionaries like Eli Smith and Cornelius VanDyck come to mind. Their wonderful work was accomplished with the help and cooperation of such Lebanese scholars as Yazigi and Bustani. One of these early missionaries, the Rev. George Ford, learned the language so well that he composed Arabic hymns which are still used today in the evangelical churches of the Arab world!

Of course, one should not hide the fact that some of the later missionaries did attempt to foist Western concepts on the people of the Middle East through the instrumentality of educational institutions which were modeled after Western schools. This is a part of my personal experience as I have had the privilege to study and later on to teach in Roman Catholic and Protestant mission schools. But this later development took place after the triumph of religious liberalism in Protestant missionary circles. That this was a factor in the decline of missionary work among Muslims cannot be denied. But I am puzzled by the fact that neo-evangelical missiologists do not seem to take this sad fact into account. I am referring to the impact of liberalism on missions. Why this silence? Is history a lesser authority than the newer discipline of cultural anthropology?

May we still maintain that Christian missions among Muslims have failed, when for more than a quarter of a century (between the two great wars while the Middle East was under British and French colonial rule) the gospel was seldom heard in most of the mission schools? I shall never forget many

commencement speeches which were disgusting because they contained nothing biblically Christian, just plain platitudes. No wonder that some of the graduates of mission schools joined radical movements, including the Communist parties, of their respective countries!

To sum up, a careful study of the history of Islam and the Christian presence in the Muslim world indicates that the thesis that missions to Muslims have failed and that this failure would not have taken place had the pioneer missionaries and those who followed them *contextualized* the gospel cannot be sustained. Islam from its beginnings had a built-in bias against the Christian faith. This strong anti-Christian motif has solidified across the centuries. Western culture has indeed invaded the Middle East and other Islamic countries. This took place primarily because of the triumph of Western imperialism among the followers of Islam. We cannot speak of the temporary setbacks of missions to Islam without taking into account the destructive role played by liberalism in the mission field. And finally, as we end this historical excursion, we thank God for the advent of radio missions and the awakening of many nationals to testify of their faith among their fellow citizens who follow the Muslim way. The gospel is being proclaimed without Western baggage, and equally without the novel methods of syncretistic missiologies.

II — The Theological Perspective

Neo-evangelical missiologists would like the church to embark on new ways in missions to Muslims, since they claim that the old methods of the last 200 years have been faulty. As we have noticed in Part I of this paper, a careful study of the history of the Christian-Muslim encounter during the last 1400 years does not sustain the thesis of these missiologists. The difficulties in the Christian mission to Muslims are not to be located in the alleged wrong methods of Western missionaries but in the Muslim tradition itself. From its inception, Islam has been a consciously anti-Christian faith, and its basic motifs have been anti-redemptive. So, when we continue to study the reasons for this radical shift in the attitude of some Western missiologists towards Islam, we discover that the inspiration for the call to change did not come from a re-discovery of a thoroughly biblical theology, nor from a fresh appreciation of the rich Christian tradition, but from an inordinate fascination with the new discipline of cultural anthropology. I will now dwell on this important point. In his contribution to the *Consultation on Gospel and Culture* held at Willowbank in Bermuda in January 1978, Stephen C. Neil began with these words:

Throughout history, religion and culture have been inextricably connected. There has never yet been a great religion which did not find its expression in a great culture. There has never yet been a great culture which did not have deep roots in a religion.¹

In spite of this timely observation by a veteran missionary scholar, one could not help but notice among the many papers read at the Consultation a lack of a deep interest in the theological dimensions of the problems we face in missions among Muslims. Culture was regarded as *the* important bridge which will enable us to reach the Muslims with the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is as if the 'discoveries' of cultural anthropology have provided us with a modern Aladdin's lamp which will solve all our problems. This novel attitude is in marked contrast with the approach of the pioneers. They did not merely confine their scholarly pursuits to the study of Islam, its history and its practices. They reflected theologically on Islam. One thinks, for example, of Samuel Zwemer's *The Moslem Christ*, an excellent and lucid study in the area of Islamic Christology and its implications for missions. Another classic is the monumental work of Prof. J.W. Sweetman, *Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*. This missionary scholar, who labored most of his life in India (prior to its partition in 1947), shows the extreme importance of a deep theological reflection not only on Islam but equally on Christianity in its relation to Islam.

When we look at the contributions of scholarly men such as W. Montgomery Watt, we cannot escape noticing that the theological approach remains very prominent. In his book, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, whole sections of the book deal with such themes as: *God's Determination of Events, The Support in Tradition for Predestinarian Views, The Distinction between Iman (faith) and Islam, God and evil, the Createdness of the Quran, The Attributes of God, The Denial of Anthropomorphism, and The Maturing of Sunnite Theology*.

We include one more reference to a recognized historian, Bernard Lewis, who taught before his retirement both at the University of London and at Princeton University. His writings on the history of the Middle East are filled with deep theological insights. In the quarterly journal *American-Arab Affairs*, the following comments appeared in a review of Lewis' latest book, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*.

In trying to account for this lack of interest in the world of Christendom,

¹ Stott, John R., Coote, Robert, ed., *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1980), p. 1.

Professor Lewis offers two principal explanations, one historical, the other theological. The second explanation (theological) for the Muslim attitude derives from the politico-religious character of Islam. For the followers of Muhammad, Islam is the final dispensation of a revealed truth. As such it logically engenders among the Muslim community a sense of ultimate fulfillment in being chosen to receive the final revelation from God through his Messenger the Prophet. As Professor Lewis suggests:

“The Muslim doctrine of successive revelations culminating in the final mission of Muhammad led the Muslim to reject Christianity as an earlier and imperfect form of something which he, himself, possessed in the final, perfect form, and to discount Christian thought and Christian civilization accordingly. After the initial impact of eastern Christianity on Islam in the earliest period, Christian influences, even from the high civilization of Byzantium, were reduced to a minimum. Later, by the time that the advance of Christendom and the retreat of Islam had created a new relationship, Islam was crystallized in its ways of thought and behavior and had become impervious to external stimuli, especially those coming from the millennial adversary in the West.”²

While theology in Islam has not played the same role that it has in Christianity, and while the Sharia (Law) is more prominent in the mind of the Muslim than Kalam (theology), we may not jump to the conclusion that Islam is a non-theological religion. For example, when Muslims attack the Christian faith, it is always done in terms of the so-called theological and doctrinal errors of this religion. Consciously or unconsciously, Muslims give theological grounds for their instant rejection of the gospel of Christianity.

In the light of all the foregoing considerations, and having noticed how even secular scholars cannot but seek to understand Islam theologically, how are we to assess the words of the Rev. John Stott in his Foreword to *Down to Earth?* Writing about the meager results of missions among 600 million Hindus of India and the 700 million Muslims of the world, he remarks:

Although different answers are given to these questions, they are basically cultural. The major challenge to the world-wide Christian mission today is whether we are willing to pay the cost of following in the footsteps of our incarnate Lord in order to contextualize the Gospel. Our failure of communication is a failure of contextualization.³

² “American-Arab Affairs,” Spring 1983, Number 4, p. 155.

³ *Op. cit.*, Stott, p. viii.

According to the Rev. Stott, we have hardly made any progress among Muslims because we have not made the right analysis which would have shown us that our problems are basically cultural! It is as if, when dealing with Muslims, it is quite easy to separate the theological from the cultural. According to the Rev. Stott, the incarnation of the Son of God has become the prototype for proper contextualization. And since we are not willing to pay the price of following in the footsteps of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we refuse to contextualize and thus we fail to communicate the good news.

These are far-reaching charges. In my readings of scholarly works produced by non-evangelical Christians or by non-Christians, I see no such one-sided emphasis on the cultural aspect of Islam. Nor do I encounter the new jargon of some Western missiologists. It pains me much that it is some of my dear brothers in the faith who are espousing these novel theories and making far-reaching statements about failure of missions to the Muslims. That we must study and learn the cultures of the people to be reached for the Lord is axiomatic and has never been doubted by any serious missionary of the gospel. The first Western missionary to Muslims, Raymond Lull, did not go to his field of labors in Tunisia before learning the Arabic language and culture. He even lobbied for the introduction of the study of Arabic in the universities of Europe. Enough has been mentioned in the first part of this paper to indicate that the pioneer missionaries excelled in learning Arabic as well as the culture of the people. None of them ever dreamed of staying for one or two terms in the mission field. Their graves in Beirut, Cairo, and elsewhere in the Middle East testify to their complete devotion to the cause of Christ. They respected the unique character of the person and mission of the Messiah and tried to model their missionary activities in the tradition of Paul and the other holy apostles, and not after an incarnational model!

Since Islam claims to be a revealed and theistic religion, are we right when we place so much emphasis on a cultural approach to Islam? As Stephen C. Neil observed when he was referring to the close relationship of history, religion, and culture: "The church entered into easy relations with that culture *only* when the religion which underlay it had ceased to be a living force." But when we consider Islam, the words just quoted gain added weight. There is hardly an aspect of Islamic life and culture which has not been infused with the Muslim faith. It is impossible to separate Islam as culture and Islam as a religious faith. Islam has shaped its own theistic worldview.

Several neo-evangelical missiologists tell us that our past efforts among Muslims and others have failed. They place the reason for our failure in the cultural area. The implication of their claims are unavoidable.

Contextualize, take this and that element from the Islamic way of worship and culture, and you will begin to succeed in your mission. Actually, this approach is very shallow and does not reckon with the theological subjects which are of great importance to Muslims. For, no matter how much we contextualize the gospel message, the stumbling block remains: according to the fundamentals of Islam there is no need for redemption from without. The Quranic doctrine of God takes care of the acknowledged need for forgiveness. Allah is both Rahman (Merciful) and Raheem (Compassionate). He forgives sins without any recourse to the death of the Messiah.

Islamic culture, as we have already noted, is totally influenced by the Muslim faith. It is impossible to divorce the two. The difficulties in missions among Muslims are real and have been with us for fourteen centuries. At this late date in history, to suggest that we shift the emphasis from the theological to the cultural is to part company with a long-standing Christian tradition. Furthermore, it offers a false hope that once the 'magic' of contextualization has been put into action, success is guaranteed!

We are now ready to view from a biblical perspective the main theme of some neo-evangelical missiologists, i.e., that Christian missions among Muslims have failed because of a lack of a proper cultural approach.

III — The Biblical Perspective

It is when we view the modern contextualization movement among the neo-evangelicals from the biblical perspective that we become very alarmed. One fails to see how the major biblical themes which deal with the mission of the church in the New Testament age have been taken into consideration. Furthermore, one notices upon the reading of the literature of the contextualization movement, the impact of the theologies of the World Council of Churches. Just as one recognizes the eclectic nature of the WCC teachings and pronouncements, so one finds the same thing occurring among the proponents of the new missiology. More emphasis on *incarnational* theology and less emphasis on preaching and proclamation. There is more preoccupation with secondary issues such as forms of worship, fasting, and the timing of baptism than a genuine desire to understand the true nature of Islam and the biblical guidelines for missions among Muslims. The spirit of the new approach, as stated earlier in this paper, is not so much the Bible as the new discipline of cultural anthropology.

In this third part of my paper, I plan to deal with two main passages of Scripture which have tremendous implications for missions to Muslims: Romans 10 and I Corinthians 1 & 2. In Romans 10, Paul deals with the main

reason for the failure of the Old Testament people of God in reaching their destiny. "They are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they do not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness" (Rom. 10:2b, 3 NIV).

Paul does not deny the general principle revealed in the Old Testament that "The man who does these things will live by them" (Lev. 18:5 NIV). The Jews of Paul's day believed that they could be saved by doing the requirements of the law. The Muslims believe that God is pleased with them when they live in accordance with the Shari'a (Law). Paul did not deny the truth which is revealed in Leviticus 18:5, but he taught that there was no such human being who could attain salvation by doing the law. God had revealed another way which was compatible with the fallen state of man. Paul does not theologize as if no doctrine of redemption had been revealed. Rather, he quotes at length from Deuteronomy 30. Moses points to a righteousness which is given to the repentant sinner by God's grace. Now the instrumentality or the means for this gift is the saving Word of God.

Personifying the "righteousness that is by faith" Paul writes: "Do not say in your heart, 'who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down) or, 'Who will descend into the deep?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? 'The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,' that is the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10: 6-9 NIV).

It is quite evident from these words of Paul that he puts the emphasis on both content and proclamation. Through this activity of the church, the saving Word of God comes so close to the hearers that it is as near to them as their own heart and mouth. Of course, the saving message must be appropriated. It must be believed and confessed. Paul is giving us in this chapter a very important teaching about missionary activity. He summarizes the teaching of this section of his Letter to the Romans by saying in verse 17: "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." Paul is dealing here with what is commonly known as the instrumental cause of our salvation. Saving faith, regardless of the cultural background of the hearer, comes into being in an atmosphere where Christ is proclaimed. This is not meant to aggrandize the role of the apostle or the messenger of the gospel. This is simply the God-ordained way of missions across the ages, in all lands and among all cultures.

When we come to the teachings of Paul in I Corinthians 1 & 2, we meet the same high regard for the doctrine of proclamation. In doing his work as an apostle and pastor and in correcting doctrinal errors, Paul called the church of Corinth back to the fundamentals of the faith. He stated his thesis

both negatively and positively. “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel — not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power” (I Cor. 1:17 NIV).

In elaborating this thesis in the remaining verses of chapters 1 and 2, Paul equally emphasized the contents of the proclamation and the appropriate method which was compatible with the message. His agenda after his conversion was simple: the preaching of the cross of Christ. Why was Paul equally concerned about the message *and* the method? He was aware of the fact that the content of the message: Jesus Christ and Him crucified, *required a methodology which gave all the glory to the triune God and not to man. The faith of the converts must be anchored in the power of God and not in the wisdom of man.*

Paul teaches us in a passionate way the importance of guarding the integrity of the Christian faith when it is being propagated. He must have been tempted to compromise in order to make the message more acceptable to the hearers. He knew very well that the basic presuppositions of the Greeks precluded any belief in the crucial doctrine of the resurrection of Christ. Furthermore, the Jewish tradition could not tolerate any teaching about a crucified Messiah. But Paul did not compromise. This is what he wrote: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God” (I Cor. 1:18 NIV).

When applying these words to the situation in the Muslim world, we must realize that the message of the cross is foolishness to the followers of Muhammad. The gospel of the cross is denied both on Quranic and doctrinal grounds. According to Islam, Allah (God) did not and could not have permitted the Messiah to be killed by the Jews. But we must recognize that Muslims throughout history have not always been totally consistent with the teachings of their faith. The legalism of Sunni (orthodox) Islam has pushed many to look for peace with God in the way of Sufism (mysticism). Also, suffering and redemption are not foreign to the minds of Shi’ite Muslims. Neither should we forget in our missionary work that Muslims are never sure about their standing with their Creator on the Day of Judgment. All these factors must be taken into consideration when we present the gospel to them as well as when we elaborate missionary principles for work among them. But the fundamental reason why we must proclaim without compromise the word of the cross is that God has ordained it to be the means of grace for the salvation of all those who put their trust in the crucified and risen Messiah.

When we reflect on the first two chapters of I Corinthians, we also notice that Paul deals with the utter failure of man to find his way in the universe by relying on his own wisdom. “For since in the wisdom of God

the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe" (I Cor. 1:21 NIV). The implication of this apostolic teaching is tremendous. In God's sovereign disposition, He has ordained that all humanly originated attempts to find Him must fail; and they cannot but fail since man's heart is totally darkened by sin. The only God-ordained way of salvation is through the preaching of the gospel. This great emphasis on proclamation may sound rather out of place in an age when dialogue is becoming very fashionable and when all kinds of gimmicks are being used to bring about conversions. And yet the words of Paul are very clear: God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. We cannot avoid the offense of the word of the cross. The contextualization which the Muslims require of us in order to make our message acceptable to them is nothing less than unconditional surrender. It is rather naive on the part of so many missiologists who are flying the banner of contextualization in missions to Muslims to think that the followers of Islam will settle for anything less than the Islamization of the Christian messenger!

Paul's concern was the necessity of being completely faithful to the received gospel. His mind was focused on the message. This does not mean that he neglected what is called today cross-cultural communication. As a native of the Mediterranean world, Paul was at home in several cultural milieus. He spoke the language of the people and gave not only the gospel message but himself with the message. He became all things to all men that he might win some. But he never compromised on the fundamentals. His main concern was always God-directed. Or as he put it in the second chapter of I Corinthians: "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony of God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power (vv. 1, 2, 4, 5).

The faith which Paul spoke about in these verses was not simply the orthodox or apostolic teaching about the Messiah. It was equally that personal faith which was evoked and created by the Holy Spirit. This is why the human instrument or channel was de-emphasized by Paul. He wanted the faith of the converts to rest not on men's wisdom, but on God's power. It was such an important subject for the apostle that he kept on discussing the crucial importance of a proper methodology. *The unique role of the Holy Spirit must be maintained in any teaching about missions.* Unless and until the Spirit of God touches the hearts of those listening to the proclamation of the gospel, the words of the missionary remain fruitless. As Paul put

it: "This is what we speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in words taught us by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (vv. 13,14).

Needless to say, the apostle ended his teaching about the importance of the message and the proper method which must deliver the message with a special emphasis on the unique role of the Holy Spirit. He alone is the author of conversion. Regardless of the cultural or ethnic background of any human being, and no matter how hard we try to bring the message to his attention, the work of the Holy Spirit remains indispensable for his or her conversion.

Today, the mission of the universal church is at the crossroads. Unlike the early years of this century, when it was rather easy to distinguish between liberal and Bible-believing and orthodox missionaries, the lines are rather blurred in our times. The Liberationists quote Scripture in order to re-interpret the meaning of salvation and clothe their ideology with the mantle of the gospel. Neo-evangelical missiologists who are specially concerned about the challenge of Islam are eager to stress that they do not want to part company with the historic Christian tradition. However, our examination of their claims from the historical, theological, and biblical perspectives has shown that their map for a successful missionary endeavor among Muslims cannot stand the test. If we follow in their footsteps, we are not showing fidelity to the tremendous missionary heritage of the ancient church or of the specifically Protestant era of missions during the last two centuries.

In conclusion, I would like to submit for further reflection the following theses:

1. The Christian mission to Muslims has a bright future, as long as it is carried on in the time-honored apostolic tradition, i.e., with emphasis on the centrality of the preaching of the Word of God.
2. The present situation in the Muslim world is unique. Since 1800 it has been undergoing radical changes due to the end of the isolation of its masses from the currents of world thought. It is therefore uniquely open to the impact of the Christian message.
3. The advent of mass communications is bringing the gospel to many areas of the Muslim world which had never heard its redeeming message. Young Muslims are very eager to learn about the contents of the Christian Scriptures. This provides us with a golden opportunity to present the claims of Christ.
4. The Muslim diaspora in the West presents a unique opportunity for mission work. The uniqueness of the Muslims' presence,

neither as conquerors nor as conquered, but as guest workers, students, and immigrants, is a new situation which has no parallel in history.

5. A reading of Muslim literature written by open-minded writers, and of listeners' letters who are responding to gospel proclamation, indicates that the Lord is moving by His Word and Spirit. He is creating hunger and thirst among the Muslim masses for a message which can be found only in the authentic gospel. Our hope is re-kindled and we believe that the best days for missions among Muslims are ahead of us. Muslims will be converted through Christian testimony and through the preaching of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. ▲

A Review of Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation

Fook Meng Cheah

Erasmus' Thesis

The Purpose of His Thesis

Erasmus begins his thesis admitting that among the many difficulties in theology, none is a more "tangled labyrinth" than that of free choice. Not only does he set forth his own views in his work, but he admits also that there have been varying ideas on the issue since the early days of the Christian church.

The reason why he tries his hand at untying the knots in this old issue is because it had recently resurfaced in the writings of John Eck and Luther.

He hopes that he might want once and for all make the issue more plain. He writes,

It seems good to my friends that I should try my hand and see whether, as a result of our little set-to, the truth might be made more plain.¹

This undoubtedly is a kind of arrogance. By taking Luther to task, he inevitable also takes the whole Augustinian theology to task on the issue of the freedom of the will. While he repeatedly appeals to antiquity, yet he seems to reject the greatest voice in the ancient period.

The Heart of the Issue

The scholar of Rotterdam shows himself to be worthy of the title. He does not shy away from issues, even when dealing with a controversial subject like this. He does not excuse himself but boldly faces the issue that confronts him.

The heart of the controversy is the doctrine of free will. He shows that this is indeed the precise controversy by titling his thesis *The Freedom of the Will*. To this doctrine of the will, he aims to speak.

He admitted that in this issue he had not personally decided on a conclusive position. He writes,

I admit that many different views about free choice have been handed down from the ancients about which I have, as yet, no fixed conviction, except that I think there to be a certain power of free choice.²

The subsequent development of the book shows that to be false. He does not only have a slight idea about free choice, but he decidedly chose to reject Luther's and Augustine's doctrine of the will and he goes on to develop his own ideas about it. He tells us that having considered Dr. Luther's position, he is not persuaded by it.

If he rejects the Reformation doctrine of man, what then are his ideas about man?

Before we examine his ideas, we need to go back to our previous statement about the doctrine of man. It must be understood that both Luther and Erasmus were not merely debating the subject of the will in the abstract. They were not debating the loci in dogmatics we call anthropology. What

¹ E. Gordon Rupp, P. Watson, *Luther And Erasmus: Free Will And Salvation* (The Westminster Press, 1969), p. 35. All quotations are taken from this book unless otherwise stated.

²p. 37.

is at stake is the question whether or not man in his fallen state is free and able to do good. To be more precise, they were debating about anthropology as it is related to soteriology. The question was not merely a moral one; it is a spiritual one. The question, in other words, is not just whether man is good or bad; but the question is how is man saved. Is his salvation a work of his own efforts, or is it a cooperation between his weakened will, or a work of the sovereign God apart from any contributions of man? So the question is eventually soteriological.

Erasmus saw this. He was not a blind renaissance scholar. This becomes more apparent in the later part of his work where he raises the question of the relationship between free will and grace. So the question is between particular grace and synergism, Augustinianism and Pelagianism, Dordt and Arminianism. This can also be seen in his definition of the issue. He writes:

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.³

Here Erasmus rightly connects the two issues of anthropology and soteriology. The issue has to do with whether man is able to choose to receive salvation or to reject it.

His Approach

Erasmus is very careful with his words in his work. He knows that it is first of all a historical question. History shows that men have taken opposite sides. Erasmus, being a good humanist, does not want to offend any side. When he says that he approaches the subject as a debater and an inquirer rather than a dogmatician, he wants to avoid the impression that he is taking sides in the debate. He wants to present himself as a mediator between what he deems two swinging extremes, pure free-willism and sovereign grace.

But he knows also that the issue is scriptural. As such, besides reproducing some ancient opinions, he wants also to reason from Scriptures why his view must be considered as viable, and as the only alternative to Luther's doctrine.

Thus Erasmus' method seems a very commendable one. He tries to be historical and biblical. But, as we shall see, having the right tools is not enough. When biblical data are read with the eyes of human reason, it can

³p. 47.

only lead to a disastrous consequence. Instead of arriving at a biblical doctrine, one arrives at a diabolical theology that is hostile to Christianity. Into this Erasmus has brought himself.

In the second part of the paper, we will let Luther critique his method and content.

His Doctrine of the Will

Erasmus does not claim to be on the side of Pelagius, the fourth century heretic, in this matter of the human will. He knows well enough that if his doctrine is Pelagian he could not stand against the German Reformer, for then he himself would be charged with the ancient heresy. Up to the time of the Reformation, one can almost say that there were two views of anthropology and soteriology. One either believes in salvation by works or salvation by grace. In other words one is either a Pelagian (whether pure or semi) or an Augustinian. Salvation is either by sovereign grace or by human merits.

But Erasmus does not want to be as blatant as Pelagius in his heresy. Concerning Pelagius' doctrine of man, he writes,

Pelagius, while he feared for the justice of God, ascribed too much to free choice, and those are not so far distant from him who ascribe such power to the human will that by their own natural strength they can merit, through good works, that supreme grace by which we are justified.⁴

This makes his doctrine dangerous. It is dangerous because his anthropology is subtle. One who is unfamiliar with the issue might imagine that Erasmus' idea is acceptable. After all he couched his ideas in biblical terms such as grace and faith. But by employing these terms, he is using them in a manner that is altogether hostile to the Reformation idea of free grace and *sola fidei*.

Erasmus, in rejecting Pelagianism, nevertheless also rejected Augustine's doctrine of man's will. He believes that Augustine, who once embraced the freedom of the will, was forced by the controversy to take the opposite extreme. This, he says, is exactly the case with Luther as well. Luther, like Augustine, was driven to extreme. Erasmus writes,

After his battle with Pelagius, Augustine became less just toward free choice than he had before. Luther, on the other hand, who had previously allowed something to free choice, is now carried so far in the heat of his defense as to destroy it entirely.⁵

⁴ p. 89.

⁵ p. 90.

In between these two “extremes” he finds a medium. The medium that he has created is the doctrine of synergism. Synergism is that doctrine of soteriology that ascribes salvation both to God and man. In salvation, God and man make an equal contribution. Salvation is both by merit and grace. Really Erasmus sees salvation as a cooperation. God cooperates with man, and man with God. It is a joint *venture*, a partnership. The result is that while God receives the glory, man also receives the reward for his merits. His view is best summarized by the statement made popular by John Wesley in the eighteenth century: “God helps those who help themselves.” What our renaissance scholar is in essence espousing is really an illegitimate hybrid of grace and free will.

Erasmus expresses his doctrine very clearly in his conclusion to the passages he set forth to defend free will. He writes,

And so these passages, which seem to be in conflict with one another, are easily brought into harmony if we join the striving of our will with the assistance of divine grace.⁶

But Erasmus would not deny grace. He cannot because the doctrine of grace is so clear in the Scriptures. But yet neither does he want to deny the priority of free will. So he finds himself in a dilemma, a dilemma which he refuses to admit, but which is clear in his writings. For example, he writes,

We should not arrogate anything to ourselves but attribute all things we have received to the divine grace, which called us when we were turned away, which purified us by faith, which gave us this gift, that our will might be *synergos* (a ‘fellow-worker’) with grace, although grace is itself sufficient for all things and has no need of the assistance of human will.⁷

One might think that this is orthodox language, but on the same page he adds, in speaking about Philippians 2:13, that “a good will cooperates with the action of grace.”

One might immediately ask: Is this not inconsistent?

Erasmus has a way of getting around this apparent inconsistency. He speaks of a remote cause and a secondary cause. He writes,

In each individual action two causes come together, the grace of God and the will of man: in such a way, however, that grace is the principal cause and the

⁶p. 74.

⁷p. 81.

will secondary, which can do nothing apart from the principal cause, since the principal cause is sufficient in itself. Just as fire burns by its native force, and yet the principal cause is God who acts through the fire, and this cause would of itself be sufficient, without which the fire could do nothing if he withdrew from it.⁸

Erasmus, following this statement, adds two other analogies. It is sufficient to mention the second one, which is the relationship between a father and his injured son, to see the point he is making and to see the error of his idea. In the illustration, he speaks concerning a son who has fallen and has been injured by the fall, and is offered an apple by the father. He states that the child, whose legs have been weakened by the fall, could not reach out to take hold of the apple. But the father, wanting to motivate the child to recover, desires the child to make the necessary movements toward the fruit and have it as a reward for his works. Since the child, while desiring it, could not make the movement, the father leads him to it by his hands, and thus helps him to obtain the object. The child could not have stood up if the father had not helped him to his feet. He could not have grasped the apple if the father had not assisted his feeble legs. Erasmus even adds that there would have been no apple for the child if the father had not shown one to him. This might sound as if Erasmus here is ascribing all glory to God alone. In fact, at the end of the analogy, he writes,

What then can the infant claim for itself?⁹

But he quickly adds,

And yet it (the infant) does something. But it has nothing to glory in its own powers for it owes its very self to its father.... What, then, does the child do here? It relies with *all its powers* on the one who lifts it, and it *accommodates as best it can* its feeble steps to him who leads. No doubt the father could have drawn the child against his will, and the child *could have resisted by refusing* the outstretched apple; the father could have given the apple without the child's having to run to get it, *but he preferred* to give it in this way, as this was better for the child. I will readily allow that less is due to our industry in following after eternal life than to the boy who runs to his father's hand.¹⁰

⁸ p. 90.

⁹ p. 91.

¹⁰ p. 91. Parentheses and emphasis mine.

Here in this picture is the sum of Erasmus' synergism. We shall at this point reserve our critique of Erasmus' position until we have listened to the eloquent reasoning of Luther.

Erasmus' view might be close to what Wesleyan Arminianism teaches today. He speaks of a prevailing grace, a grace that precedes man's salvation but that is not efficacious. It is a grace that God gives to all fallen sinners. That grace prepares him for salvation and gives him the ability to appropriate the salvation saving grace offers to him in the gospel. Implied here also is that saving grace is not efficacious and sovereign. It may be resisted and rejected by the sinner's free choice. The idea here is that when he accepts Christ as offered in the gospel, he receives salvation by his own decision. As such, salvation is his work. Christ could not have entered his life if he had not chosen Him. The sinner must initiate the act and cooperate with the saving grace freely offered to him. As such, salvation is first and foremost man's work! But Erasmus adds also that it is God's work, for it is God who offers the "apple" to him. Without Christ, there is no salvation. One might say that the solution is in Christ, but the decision is in man.

Wesleyan Arminianism, like Erasmus, insists on a prevailing grace. Grace must first work in the sinner's heart before the sinner can be enabled to get a grip on saving grace. But like Erasmus, Wesleyan theology insists also that man after the fall is able to desire the good and choose salvation. To use Erasmus' example, they will say that a sinner not yet regenerated can and does desire the delicious apple offered by the Father.

It is not hard to see that Erasmus' doctrine is the basis for modern decisionism in mass evangelism. Both center in the autonomy of man. Both highlight the fact that man must do something in order to be saved. Both view salvation as a cooperation between God and man. Both see in Christ's death only a possibility of salvation, not a vicarious and efficacious accomplishment of salvation.

His Refutation of Luther's Doctrine

Luther, according to Erasmus, is arrogant. On page 95 he considers Luther's doctrine as a hyperbole, an exaggerated position. Erasmus remarks that he prefers moderation.

In Part III of his book, he titles the division "Examination of Luther's Arguments." He begins with an explanation of the words "flesh" and "spirit" in Galatians 6:3 and Isaiah 40:6-8. He does this because these are the texts that Luther used to set forth the doctrine of man's total depravity. Following Jerome's lead, Erasmus takes the word "flesh" to mean not a sinful flesh, but merely a weakened flesh. By this he meant not a flesh that is earthy and possesses obvious limitations because of its confinement to space and time. He takes it to mean something quite different. The idea,

as suggested by Jerome, is that man's flesh is his morally weakened condition. He finds Luther's idea that man is totally depraved as intolerable.

It is to be noted, as we have earlier pointed out, that in refuting Luther's doctrine of man's depravity, Erasmus appeals to both history and Scripture.

When Erasmus appeals to Jerome and cites the authority of the fathers, he is showing that the church of all ages has never held to Luther's extreme. When he appeals to Scripture, he is saying to Luther that the Word of God militates against him. But is this the case?

His Defense of Free Will, Scriptural Arguments

Let us begin first with Erasmus' scriptural arguments, although this is not how he himself commences his apology. He commences the debate with reference to the early fathers, and probably did so because the authority of canonized saints seems always to have carried abundant weight among the people in those days.

The scriptural passages cited by Erasmus to set forth his case are the following: Genesis 4:6, 7; Ecclesiastes 15:14-17; Isaiah 1:19-20; Isaiah 45:20, 27; Ezekiel 18:31, 33:11.

Besides these, there are also texts which he cites to argue that God's call for us to keep the law implies not only the duty to do it but also the ability to perform it. Such texts are: Genesis 2:16, 17; Exodus 20; Jeremiah 26:4.

Other texts that he used are texts which speak of a serious call by God for sinners to repent. He thinks that such a call must necessarily imply natural ability. Such texts are: Joel 2:12; Jonah 3:8; Jeremiah 26:3.

In these texts he reasons that Scripture always speaks about salvation as "a striving after better things."¹¹

In addition, he uses those texts that speak about threats and promises for sinners who reject and obey God's commands: Exodus 32:9; Micah 6:3; Psalm 81:13.

Of all these texts, Ecclesiastes 15:14-17 seems to be the principal text that he used. It is with this text that he begins his defense and it is from this text that he derives his definition of free choice. One can see why he bases his argument strongly on this text, for here he has the elements necessary for his thesis. The elements are, a conditional "if"; a promise; an appeal; and the word "choose," which he claims presupposes ability.

The several texts that he refers to from the New Testament are texts such as: Matthew 23:27; John 14:15; Matthew 5:12; 1 Corinthians 9:24, 25; 1 Timothy 6:12, etc.

¹¹ p. 56.

Looking at these texts, it seems that Erasmus makes a rash jump, for texts that have the words “if” and “reward” in them, or suggested in them, are pertinent.

Although Erasmus thinks that the whole of Scripture supports his view, he nevertheless admits that they are texts which seem to oppose free choice in man. Such texts he considers to be: Exodus 9:12; Isaiah 63:17; Romans 9:17; 9:11-13.

Of all these texts and others, he says that “there are two that stand out in particular.”¹² The two are Exodus 9:12 and Romans 9:17. Both of them have to do with God hardening Pharaoh’s heart.

Without at this moment examining his exegetical errors, we turn from his scriptural proofs to his theology. Since it is in this part of the book that he discusses his theology, we will present his theology also in the same context.

Firstly, he sees that Scripture makes a clear distinction between man before and after the Fall. He contends that man before the Fall is in no need of grace. He writes,

In man the will was so upright and free that, apart from new grace, he could continue in innocence.¹³

After the Fall, he sees man’s will as only weakened, and not totally depraved and corrupted. He writes that the will is, after the Fall, “obscured by sin, but not altogether extinguished.”

In other words, he speaks about a partial depravity after the Fall. This is clear from the language that he uses immediately following this statement. He says,

Thus, as the sin of our progenitors has passed into their descendants, so the tendency to sin has passed to all.¹⁴

This, he says, is owing to the fact that after our first parents fell, God immediately acted to forgive their sins, and by his grace has restored man to a morally able condition. By this grace man is enabled to continue to do the right, yet not without the tendency to sin. He underlines the latter and says that sin is not totally rooted out owing to the vestiges of original sin in us.

¹² p. 64.

¹³ p. 48

¹⁴ p. 49.

On the one hand he seems to say that the image of God in man is not totally extinguished, because man is still a reasonable creature. But, as he goes on, it is clear that buried inside these reasonable and moral faculties is the ability to do some good. Although it is not a saving good, nevertheless it is a good that enables him to merit salvation. He writes,

And in these things it is probable that there was a will in some way ready for the good but useless for eternal salvation without the addition of grace by faith.¹⁵

Thus, he sees not only the ability to do good in man, but also that the good he does is able to bring him a step nearer to salvation. The goodness that man does is then a stepping stone to saving faith. This is akin to the idea of a common grace that some Reformed people speak about.

Indeed Erasmus mentions common grace. More than this, to rescue him from his own dilemma, he speaks about three or even four kinds of grace. By grace he means merely a benefit freely given. As such there can be manifold ideas of grace.

Firstly, there is common grace, by which he means the common benefits God gives to all men alike.

Secondly, there is peculiar grace. This is the grace by which,

God in his mercy arouses the sinner wholly without merit to repent, yet without infusing that supreme grace which abolishes sin and makes him pleasing to God.¹⁶

This grace only assists the sinner, but never saves him. It makes him displeased with himself, and leads him to do a good that makes him a candidate for the highest grace. One may call this a preparing grace, but Erasmus calls it an operative grace, or stimulating grace.

This second grace is given to all men alike. This second grace will enable one to cooperate with the third kind of grace, which he calls cooperative grace, that will make man's salvation effective. This third grace, like all the other graces, can be refused and resisted. But when man, having being enlightened and enabled by the preparatory grace, and by his awakened will cooperates with this third grace, then his salvation is completed. Thus he writes,

The first arouses, the second promotes, the third completes.¹⁷

¹⁵ p. 49.

¹⁶ p. 52.

¹⁷ p. 53.

Free Will and God's Foreknowledge

Lastly, let us examine his solution to the problem of man's free will and God's foreknowledge.

Here again, Erasmus displays his ignorance of the issue. Really he has no answer to this relationship because he is not clear as to the precise connotation of these terms. He at first defines foreknowledge as the same as God's willing. This is good, but this purpose or willing of God is conditional upon man's free choice. Does he mean that God's purpose is then mutable? He at first seems to deny it, but since he prefers to exalt the free will in man, he eventually concedes that God's purpose is indeed dependent upon man's free will. God acts according to man's plan. He writes, concerning the case of Judas,

Thus if you look at the infallible foreknowledge of God, and his immutable will, Judas was necessarily going to turn traitor to his Lord, and yet Judas could change his intention, and certainly he had it in his powers to refuse to undertake his treacherous design.¹⁸

All that he says about God's will being immutable and infallible is just an orthodox coating for his blatant conditional theology. God's decree must turn according to man's decision.¹⁹

Erasmus hates the doctrine of reprobation. He explains away the doctrine by stating that it is a conditional decree. He even speaks about God's hatred against Esau merely as a "temporal misfortune," and adds that, in Romans 9, where Paul speaks about the Potter and the clay, he was merely using a rhetorical device to repress the wicked Jews' murmuring against God.

We close with the comment with which we started. Right tools do not always guarantee right results. Erasmus has the right tools, but he has the wrong approach. He uses too much human reasoning. He viewed Scriptures with a pair of philosophical glasses. The result is a seriously wrong view of grace. Grace is disgraced by his embarrassing doctrine of human autonomy and will. Erasmus' doctrine of free will must be eradicated root and branch. And no one in his days was able to do this task better than Dr. Luther, his uncompromising opponent.

¹⁸ p. 68

¹⁹ Interestingly, this concept of a mutable decree has been picked up recently by evangelical Arminians like Clark Pinnock, who in his new book, *The Openness of God*, promotes the idea that God's plan indeed changes according to man's decision.

Luther's Thesis

Luther's Reason For His Book

Luther in his Introduction explains why he has not responded sooner to Erasmus. He remarks that it is not because of cowardice nor any such like thing; but rather he has already dealt with the issue of free will in other writings so that he sees it unnecessary to repeat what he has taught in those other places. But, it appears that the disturbances caused by Erasmus' doctrine necessitated a reply from Luther, and so Luther replied, in the most eloquent manner.

In Luther's judgment, the book of Erasmus is worthless, low in quality; and it is the disgusting and distasteful contents that prevented him from an earlier reply. But its evasive method and dangerous doctrine has worried some of Luther's faithful friends, and, fearing what it might do to the Reformation, they urged Luther to write a reply. Luther's chief reason for writing is, as he tells us, that Christian truth is in danger in many hearts.

As such, his reason is chiefly polemical. In his book, Luther takes Erasmus to task, and systematically refutes the humanist's theology bit by bit. He begins by taking to task Erasmus' theology in his own words, showing the inconsistencies of his own language and theology. In the process Luther confesses that, in contending with Erasmus, he has become more sure about his own position. He says,

I owe you no small thanks, for you have made me far more sure of my own position by letting me see the case for free choice put forward with all the energy of so distinguished and powerful a mind.²⁰

This is striking because here we see that the truths of the Reformation were not developed in an ivory tower. Rather, truth is always developed in the crucible of real controversy. It is not developed in isolation, but is always developed on the battlefield where heresies rage in fury against the truth.

After Luther tears down Erasmus' arguments, he positively sets forth the Reformation doctrine of free will as it is found in the Scriptures. As such, his purpose is also instructional, hoping also that in this way Erasmus himself might be brought to a correct understanding of the truth. In concluding his Introduction, Luther writes,

Therefore we must pray to God that he may open my mouth and your heart, and the hearts of all men, and that he may himself be present in our midst as the master who informs both our speaking and hearing.²¹

²⁰ p. 104.

²¹ p. 104.

We bring this out because often it is said that Luther is a man who is so aggressive in his polemics that he forgets the welfare of his opponents. But here we see him defending the truth in love. His desire is that his opponent might come to a better understanding of the truth.

Luther's Approach

Luther begins his reply to Erasmus by calling attention to the importance of doctrine. Erasmus has made the statement that doctrinal assertions are not important. Erasmus' preference is a position of no position; that is, doctrinal neutrality and uncertainty. However, in the world of theology, there is no such thing as neutrality and uncertainty. Either one admits that truth is absolute and stands for it or he is against it. Luther correctly points out that Erasmus, in rejecting the doctrinal assertions in the Scriptures, is really taking sides with the Sophists. This is a lesson that must be learned. Why is it that Luther, with the other Reformers, insisted on the importance of doctrine? This is because religion is not a mere matter of opinion. God has revealed His truth in the Scriptures. The Scriptures define for us what we must believe. Luther says,

The Holy Spirit is no Skeptic, and the things He has written in our hearts are not doubts or opinions, but assertions — surer and more certain than sense and life itself.

This of course boils down to the fact that Erasmus does not subscribe to the doctrine of the sufficiency and perspicuity of Scripture. Erasmus stands in the Roman Catholic tradition of holding both Scripture and traditions as authoritative. But still, both are not enough for him. As a humanist scholar, he is compelled by his own system to include also human reason and philosophies. This precisely is Erasmus' problem. It is strange that the man who gives us the Greek New Testament should turn his mind and heart against the doctrines contained in it. In writing in defense of free will, Erasmus refused to submit himself to Scripture. And it is this that Luther first takes issue with. He writes,

Is it not enough to have submitted your judgment to Scripture? Do you submit it to the Church as well? — why, what can the Church settle that Scripture did not settle first?

Hence, Luther, when he takes the humanist to task, begins with a positive setting forth of the doctrine of Scripture. The reason why Luther does this should be obvious to all students of the Reformation. One of the Reformation's mottos is *Sola Scriptura*, that is, Scripture alone. Luther had

learned this in his debate with Eck at Leipzig and in his defense before the Roman court. Scripture must be our sole authority in matters of doctrine and life. As such, the issue between Luther and Erasmus is really between truth and error, reason and grace, and an issue of belief and unbelief.

Secondly, Luther's approach is exegetical. He says several times that the issue is an issue in hermeneutics. He accuses Erasmus of twisting Scripture, and wresting the Word to his own destruction.

This however is not Erasmus' method. Erasmus is man-centered both in his theology and in his method. When appealing to the authority of the fathers, Erasmus shows that he is more interested in man's commentaries than in scriptural authority. Erasmus' man-centeredness can also be seen in his purpose in his work. For in his work he aims to arrive at moderation. He wants to please man, and this has led him to develop a theology that is utterly man-centered.

Erasmus even remarked that Scripture has not dealt at length with the issue of free choice and seems to have left the issue open. He admits that Scripture is obscure about the matter. Erasmus in fact makes a strange classification of matters between that which may be known and that which may not be known.

The first are those things that are reserved to be known only in heaven.

The second are those things which God has willed that we should be completely ignorant of. An example of this is the hour of Judgment.

The third are those things which God has willed that we should contemplate, such as the distinctions between the two natures of Christ.

The fourth are those things which God has willed to be plainly evident. Examples are the precepts for the good life.

The fifth are those things that even when made known are not suitable to be made known to men.

His purpose in such a classification is so that he may excuse himself from taking a stand in doctrinal issues. Since Scripture is obscure about the issue, therefore we should not be so dogmatic about it. He himself confesses that he detests doctrinal assertions, and admits that he prefers the opinions of the Skeptics and church councils to those who assert a strong opinion in doctrines.²² It seems that Erasmus wants to make those who make strong doctrinal assertions to appear to be ultra-fundamentalists who go around beating others with a theological club.

Luther rejects Erasmus' moderation. He insists on definite doctrinal assertions. This is because Scripture is itself clear. Here again we are back to the issue of Scripture. This doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture is denied by Erasmus. Erasmus with his five classifications of scriptural

²² p. 37.

knowledge really is making the Scriptures an unclear book. Luther is annoyed with this, and immediately counteracts it by giving a list of helps how one may elicit the true sense of Scripture. The first rule he lays down is the most fundamental principle in hermeneutics, that is, Scripture interprets Scripture. Secondly, he insists that the way to know the Scriptures is to have our minds opened by Christ. Along with this, too, he asserts that the Spirit is required for the understanding of the Scriptures. Not only is the truth of the Word made clear in our hearts by the Spirit, but Luther also says that truths are made known in the preaching. The former he calls internal clarity, the latter he calls external clarity.²³ Luther's main critique of Erasmus' method is that Erasmus omits both of these principles in interpretation. He fails to interpret Scripture from Scripture; he lacks a spiritual mind; and therefore both his approach and theology are really Christless. Luther's critique of Erasmus' message is this:

Christianity as you describe it includes this among other things: that we should strive with all our might.... These words of yours, devoid of Christ, devoid of the Spirit, are colder than ice, so that they ever tarnish the beauty of your eloquence.²⁴

With regard to the issue of free choice, Luther insists (p. 169) that the Scriptures are clear on the issue. Since this is the case, then the doctrine of man's total depravity ought to be preached and taught. He writes,

Consequently, if the dogma of free choice is obscure or ambiguous, it does not belong to Christians or the Scriptures, and it should be abandoned and reckoned among those fables which Paul condemns Christians for wrangling about. If, however, it does belong to Christians and the Scriptures, it ought to be clear, open, and evident, exactly like all the other clear and evident articles of faith.²⁵

How Luther Sees the Issue

As we have seen in the preceding paragraph, in contrast with Erasmus' method, Luther's method is biblical, exegetical, and also theological. Not only does he deal with the issue in connection with soteriology, but also he deals with it in relation to theology. He sees here that the glory and the honor of God are at stake. What Luther really wants to do is to set

²³ Luther mentions the perspicuity of Scriptures twice. He especially discusses at length what he means by internal and external clarity in pages 158-161.

²⁴ p. 114.

²⁵ p. 163.

forth the sovereignty of God over against the autonomy of man. As such it is Luther who really deals with the issue. Erasmus, owing to his humanism, evades altogether, perhaps only with some passing and slight remark, the sovereignty of God. He is not able to deal with such a high doctrine for he has no doctrine of Scripture and no idea of theology. So at the heart of the issue is more than just our salvation, but especially the honor of God. Luther's contention is that we must let God be God!

Of the doctrine of sovereignty, there must be no compromise. In response to Erasmus' accommodating view, Luther says,

What I am after is to me something serious, necessary, and indeed eternal, something of such a kind and such importance that it ought to be asserted and defended to the death, even if the whole world had not only to be thrown into strife and confusion, but actually to return to total chaos and be reduced to nothingness. If you do not understand this or are not concerned about it, then mind your own affairs and let those understand and be concerned about it on whom God has laid the charge.²⁶

Refutation of Erasmus' Doctrine

Erasmus' Idea of Free Will Refuted

Luther begins his refutation of Erasmus' arguments in support of free choice in part III of the book.²⁷

He commences with a critique of the definition of free choice given by Erasmus. Luther calls his definition a "bare definition," a definition that is narrow and that does not truly set forth the idea that is represented by the term. Thus Luther contends that at the outset there is a problem with the term that is used, for, as he says,

There is a conflict between the definition of the name and the definition of the object, because the term signifies one thing and the object is understood as another.²⁸

In Luther's opinion no man has real free choice. For by free choice is meant,

²⁶ p. 128.

²⁷ However, in the preceding two parts, where Luther takes Erasmus' Preface and Introduction to task, there are also some excellent attacks against Erasmus' doctrine. There will be opportunity in the next part of the paper to return to some of these earlier points made by Luther.

²⁸ p. 170.

That which can do and does, in relation to God, whatever it pleases, uninhibited by any law or any sovereign authority.²⁹

As such, free choice properly belongs to no one but God alone, for God alone is free to do what He desires to be done. Luther argues that because man is under subjection to God, he cannot be said to act freely on his own, just as a slave cannot be free because he is under the sovereign authority of his master. Luther suggests to Erasmus that perhaps he can consider the terms "veritable choice," or "mutable choice," but not "free choice," for this is a misrepresentation of what man truly is. As such, Luther insists that the term free choice ought to be dropped altogether in the study of man, since such a thing as free choice does not exist in him.

By free choice, Luther understands Erasmus to refer to man's ability to do that which is good toward salvation. Luther elaborates on Erasmus' phrase "power of human will by which man is able," and adds that what he means is,

A capacity or faculty or ability or aptitude for willing, unwilling, selecting, neglecting, approving, rejecting, and whatever other actions of the will there are.³⁰

When Erasmus adds that this free choice of man is able to "apply itself" to things which are eternal, Luther sees in this an added emphasis by his foe to underline the fact that the will itself produces the willing and the unwilling, and itself acts as an independent power free from external forces. This necessarily means that, for Erasmus, the preaching of the gospel is a mere presentation which itself does nothing to the hearer. It is up to the hearer himself to act independently of grace to accept or reject the gospel.

Luther astutely observes that when Erasmus defines free choice as an independent faculty that is able to apply itself to salvation, he inevitably says that when a hearer wills salvation, then he is able to perform it. This is logically the case, as Luther shows,

For if you can will or unwill anything, you must to some extent be able to perform something by that will, even if someone else prevents you from completing it.³¹

If Erasmus affirms this, which he must if he is to hold his position consistently, then he inevitably denies grace and the Holy Spirit, and even

²⁹ p. 170.

³⁰ p. 171.

³¹ p. 173.

the cross. But since Erasmus does not entirely attribute the whole of salvation to free will but also to grace, then he really is espousing a half-baked free-will theology. Luther himself, I am sure, finds this confusing, and ridicules such an idea of free will and says that in a way Erasmus is more confusing than Pelagius and even outdoes him, for he does not want to assert that salvation is wholly of man.

Erasmus' definition is therefore unacceptable. For couched in those words that free choice is able to apply itself to salvation is a doctrine of salvation apart from grace. Luther points out to his foe that,

You, however, make free choice equally potent in both directions, in that it is able by its own power, without grace, both to apply itself to the good and to turn away from the good. You do not realize how much you attribute to it by this pronoun "itself" — its very own self! — when you say it can "apply itself"; for this means that you completely exclude the Holy Spirit with all his power, as superfluous and unnecessary. Your definition is to be condemned....³²

Erasmus' Texts Examined

Since Erasmus appeals to certain texts to support his claim, Luther takes those texts cited by him and gives to them a correct interpretation. It is not possible for us to examine all the texts that Luther has dealt with. We shall take a close look only at those texts which Erasmus himself thinks strongly support his case.

The first text that Erasmus took was Ecclesiastes 15:14-17. We earlier made note that Erasmus relies heavily on this text. Luther himself thinks so also, for this is the first text that he seeks to explain.

He first makes the general remark that the text refers to the creation of man, and thus says nothing at all about free choice. This is clear not only from the explicit phrase, "God made man from the beginning," but also from the expression, "And left him in the hand of his own counsel." This latter phrase points to man's appointed task of exercising dominion over the brute creation. As such the text refers to man before the Fall. In that state of innocence, Luther points out, man was able to exercise a dominion and thus exercise a free choice. He writes,

For in that state, man was able to deal with things according to his own choice, in that they were subjected to him; and this is called man's counsel, as distinct from God's counsel.³³

³² p. 175.

³³ p. 182.

Secondly, Luther points out that, even in Paradise, God added commandments and precepts to his duty, thus limiting his dominion when he forbids him to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is at this point that Luther carefully explains what is implied in the precepts and commandments given to man. He takes his strides carefully here, for he tells us that,

It is therefore at this point, "If thou wilt," that the question of free choice arises.³⁴

It is such expressions containing "ifs" that Erasmus rashly and madly holds to in defense of his position. As we have already noted, Erasmus imagines that a command necessitates the ability to perform the duty, for God cannot command man to do something which he is not able to do.

But Luther contends that there is nothing in such conditional expressions that implies free choice. Luther argues from grammar first of all. He says that verbs in the subjunctive mood assert nothing.³⁵ If the writer of Ecclesiastes would want to assert free will, he would have written otherwise, and say probably something to this effect, "Man can keep the commandment of God," or "Man has the power to keep the commandment." In other words, he would have used the indicative mood rather than the subjunctive mood.

Secondly, Luther shows that such commandments are given not to show our ability, but rather to show precisely the opposite, that man is not able to keep the law. He explains with an illustration,

How often do parents have a game with their children by telling them to come to them, or to do this or that, simply for the sake of showing them how unable they are, and compelling them to call for the help of the parent's hands!³⁶

The reason for God giving the law, he says, is that human nature is so blind that it does not know its own powers, or rather diseases, and so proud as to imagine that it knows and can do everything; and for this pride and blindness God has no readier remedy than the propounding of his law....³⁷

Luther insists that man without grace and without the Spirit is not able to keep the law.³⁸ Such expressions in the imperative are really designed to

³⁴ p. 183.

³⁵ p. 183. Luther argues using the Latin Vulgate.

³⁶ p. 184.

³⁷ p. 185.

³⁸ p. 187.

show precisely this truth of total depravity,³⁹ and that outside of grace man is really helpless.

Following his clarification of this text in Ecclesiastes, Luther goes on to explain other Old Testament passages that contain the imperative mood. One such text also appealed to by Erasmus is Deuteronomy 30:15, 19, "I have set before your face the way of life and of death. Choose what is good." Luther's explanation to this and to all such texts is that such precepts only set forth what man ought to do and not what he is able to do. He writes,

The words quoted are imperatives, and only say what ought to be done; for Moses does not say, "Thou hast the strength or power to choose," but, "Choose, keep, do!" He issues commandments about doing, but does not describe man's ability to do.⁴⁰

From these texts, Luther, thirdly, points out the basic fault in Erasmus' interpretation. In all such texts, Erasmus takes what is the imperative to be the indicative. He says to the Rotterdam scholar,

...as soon as you get hold of an imperative verb you take it as implying the indicative, as if once a thing is commanded it must forthwith necessarily be done or be possible to do.⁴¹

This distinction between what is expressed in the imperative and what is expressed by the indicative is important. Arminianism errs precisely also at this same point, asserting that God cannot require from man what he cannot do. Luther grieves at such an error, and complains that even "grammarians and street urchins" know the difference in what is expressed by these two moods. He says,

Even grammarians and street urchins know, that by verbs of the imperative mood nothing else is signified but what ought to be done. What is done, or can be done, must be expressed by indicative verbs.⁴²

Fourthly, Luther points out that Erasmus fails to distinguish between Law and Gospel. Taking the words from Jeremiah and Zechariah that say, "If you return, I will restore you," and "Return to me, and I will return to you," Luther shows the distinction between what is legal and what is

³⁹ In using the term "total depravity" in this paper, we are referring to that doctrine of anthropology set forth by the Synod of Dordt 1618-1619.

⁴⁰ p. 191.

⁴¹ p. 190.

⁴² p. 190.

evangelical. The word "return" in its legal use is an expression of a command in which God exacts from us our duty to repent and to return to him. But the word "return" may also have an evangelical usage, and in this sense is an expression not of a command, but of an expression of a divine comfort and promise, "by which nothing is demanded from us, but the grace of God is offered us."⁴³ Like the first, it does not imply what man is able to do, but shows rather that God Himself promises to do something to a returning sinner. Belonging to this second use is also the text in Ezekiel 18:23,32, "I desire not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn and live." Here Luther sets forth his idea of the offer of the gospel. In the light of the well-meant offer controversy that rages in Reformed circles these days, it is striking that Luther remarks, in his comments about the above text, that,

The word of grace does not come except to those who feel their sin and are troubled and tempted to despair.... Here for instance, "I desire not the death of a sinner" explicitly names death and the sinner, that is, the evil that is felt as well as the person who feels it.⁴⁴

Far from being the case that this text in Ezekiel sets forth free choice, it shows rather that man who lies outside of God's grace, lies only in death, and that "free choice by itself can only go from bad to worse and fall down into hell."⁴⁵ In order that man may enjoy the favor of God, he must return by the way of legal repentance. Only those who see their sins and feel the burden of death see the need for mercy. This means that we must walk according to what the law tells us we must do. For it is only through the law that we recognize our transgressions, that is, our inability to perform our duty, so that we despair of ourselves and flee to God for grace. This then means that free will is hoax. The law tells us what we cannot do, not what we can do!

From the Old Testament, Luther moves on to the New Testament. In responding to Erasmus' use of Matthew 19:17, 21, Luke 9:23, John 14:15, and such like verses that have the conditional particle "if" in them, Luther, fifthly, raises the whole question of merits in the Christian life. Here he highlights another fundamental flaw in Erasmus' hermeneutics, that is, he fails to distinguish what belongs to the Old Testament and what belongs to the New Testament. Luther remarks that to the old dispensation belongs threats and punishments; but to the new dispensation belongs promises and

⁴³ p. 197.

⁴⁴ p. 199.

⁴⁵ p. 200.

exhortations. The point he is making is that the New Testament texts on conditions and exhortations are designed to

... stir up those who are already justified and have obtained mercy, so that they may be active in the fruits of the freely given righteousness of the Spirit, and may exercise love by good works and bravely bear the cross and all other tribulations of the world.⁴⁶

An example is that Erasmus, on the basis of Matthew 5:12 (“rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven”), sets forth the doctrine of free choice, ignoring the fact that the admonition was given to the early apostles, who were men who already were recipients of grace and were justified.

The problem, as Luther sees it, is that Erasmus has no doctrine of renewal and regeneration. In the words of Luther, he “discusses free choice precisely as it is without grace.”

Luther makes a fake distinction at first with regards to the idea of rewards, and speaks as if there are two kinds of rewards. Since there are no such things as rewards of merit, because there is none worthy of any rewards, therefore when the Bible speaks about rewards in connection with a condition, it speaks of them as rewards of consequence. This is clear from such passages as II Chronicles 15:7, Romans 2:6, 7. Hell and judgment, life and favor are all rewards of consequence depending whether one is in grace or outside of grace. And this, Luther adds, depends on election. Citing Matthew 25:34, Luther says

How can they merit that which is already theirs and is prepared for them before they are born?⁴⁷

Luther powerfully brings his argument to a logical conclusion, saying that

It is settled then that merit is not proved from reward, at any rate in the Scriptures; and also that free choice is not proved from merit.⁴⁸

Besides refuting Erasmus' arguments from those texts that he used to defend free choice, Luther also replies to Erasmus' exegesis of those texts that his opponents used to argue against free choice. There are two texts that

⁴⁶ p. 211.

⁴⁷ p. 213.

⁴⁸ p. 215.

Erasmus especially brought out. One is from Exodus 9:12, the other is from Malachi 1:2. Both of these texts are used by Paul in Romans 9:11-21.

The issue here is not hard. Luther points out that the problem with Erasmus is that he has a God that is different from the God of the Bible. Erasmus' God is a non-decreeing God who is not sovereign over all affairs. After all, as Luther points out, Erasmus believes that men are

... saved by and damned without God's knowledge, since he has not determined by his certain election who are saved and who are damned ... but he has left it to them to decide whether they want to be saved or damned.⁴⁹

The idea of God's sovereignty in these texts leads Luther to discuss the question of God's sovereignty and evil. Luther's answer to the apparent problem is very simple. He says that God uses wicked men as they already are. The picture he drew to help the reader to understand this is the picture he paints of a horse that is crippled. The rider who sits on and controls the direction of the horse does his riding in correspondence to the condition of the horse. When God, he says, works through evil men,

Evil things are done, but God can not be said to do evilly although he does evil through evil men, because one who is himself good cannot act evilly, yet he uses evil instruments that cannot escape the sway and motion of his omnipotence. It is the fault, therefore, of the instruments, which God does not allow to be idle, that evil is done, with God himself setting them in motion.⁵⁰

In Pharaoh's case, when God comes to him with His command to let His people go, Luther says that God is confronting him with an object that he naturally hates, so that Pharaoh in accordance with the wickedness of his own will hates and opposes what is commanded of him. Thus, the command only fans the fire of hatred which already resides in him. Pharaoh, thus, instead of letting God's people go becomes more hardened in his heart. Luther then takes the word "I will harden Pharaoh's heart" to mean "I will act so that Pharaoh's heart may be hardened."⁵¹ That God uses the evil in man's heart to accomplish His will shows that free choice can do nothing but evil.

Turning to the case of Jacob and Esau, Luther says that the sense in the text is very plain. Paul, in quoting the words from Malachi, aims to set

⁴⁹ p. 228.

⁵⁰ p. 233.

⁵¹ p. 235.

forth the truth that the rewards of the two brothers are decreed before they are born. Erasmus tries to get around this clear and certain text by saying that, in Malachi, the hatred that is spoken of against Esau is a mere temporal misfortune, and that the hatred is only directed at some people. Luther, having answered these objections, eventually begs his opponent not to evade the question at hand, but to face the issue, that is, “by what merit or what work they attain to their faith by which they are grafted in or to unbelief by which they are cut off?” Luther’s answer to the question is,

Paul teaches that it comes about by no work of ours, but solely by the love and hate of God.⁵²

The same thing is true in the illustration of the Potter and the clay. Clearly set forth in this picture is the absolute sovereignty of God. The vessels do not prepare and make themselves, but the master makes them, some to honor and some to dishonor.

He admits that such a doctrine is unpleasant, and is often regarded as even cruel. But because Scripture teaches it, it is true. It is reason that insists otherwise.

Sixthly, Luther rebuts Erasmus’ concept of “flesh” in the Bible. Erasmus had earlier tried to disprove Luther’s anti-free choice doctrine when he expounded the idea of “flesh” in Genesis 6:3 as corrupted flesh. Erasmus responded by saying that flesh in the text means only weakness and not total corruption. Again Luther puts up a strong case for his position. He shows from several texts that flesh must mean depraved mankind. He puts forth such biblical proofs as Genesis 6:5; Genesis 8:21, etc. Luther’s exegetical capabilities shine again when he shows that wherever flesh in the Bible is treated as in opposition to spirit, one can be sure that flesh in that context means everything that is contrary to the Spirit.⁵³

Erasmus tries to get around the problem by saying that man is a trichotomy, composed of a spirit, a soul, and a body. By body, Erasmus means flesh, and says that this bodily part of man is carnal and fleshy, that is sensual. But he contends that the soul and the spirit, the immaterial part of man, is good and sound and is capable of striving after good virtues. Luther, on the other hand, shows that all of these components make up the flesh of man. This flesh is carnal and thus hostile and opposed to God, thus ungodly. The problem with Erasmus’ view here is that it of necessity means that Christ came only to die for that part of man which is bad and corrupted, and it makes Christ a partial Savior!

⁵² p. 254.

⁵³ p. 265.

In his interpretation of these texts, Luther shows how incompetent Erasmus is in dealing with Holy Scripture. In fact Luther calls him a perverter of Scripture.⁵⁴ He criticizes Erasmus for appealing to ancient fathers like Jerome and Origen. Luther considers this appeal to ancient authorities as of no weight at all. Luther remarked that they themselves were incompetent exegetes because of their allegorizing hermeneutics. Luther was not interested in historical opinions. He could have cited the opinions of Augustine or Wycliffe, of whom he says they agree with him. But Luther's method is always to make a conscious effort to return to Scripture. He sees this lacking in Erasmus and in fact rebukes him for his excessive appeals to Jerome and the Church fathers.

Where is that promise by which we bound ourselves to conduct our debate on the basis of the Scriptures themselves, not of men's commentaries?⁵⁵

Since his method is humanistic, his theology is consequently also man-centered. In the final analysis, the battle between Luther and Erasmus is between two sources of knowledge, Scripture or man. As such, the issue is a belief in Scripture or a denial of it. This is always the character of heresy. In setting up the teachings of man, it inevitably denies the sufficiency and authority of Scripture and end in unbelief!

Luther's Doctrine Set Forth

Luther's Statement Concerning Fallen Man

Man, in Luther's view, has a very miserable life. This is not only because he is corrupted by sin and depraved in nature, but also because his will is in bondage, and is therefore unable to do anything which is spiritually good. In addition, Luther points out that his corruption has so blinded him that he is even unaware of his own corruption. In refuting Erasmus, he writes,

Scripture, however, lays it down that man is corrupt and captive, and what is more, that he portrays a proud contempt of ignorance of his corruption and captivity.⁵⁶

Luther makes a big point about man's ignorance of his own depravity. In a remarkable insight into man's psychology and his spirituality, Luther remarks that unregenerate fallen man likes to imagine himself to be a free creature. This, of course, he adds, is what the devil has done to him. The

⁵⁴ p. 263.

⁵⁵ p. 267.

⁵⁶ p. 185.

devil has so blinded him that he is made to think that he is well and alive without God. For when man becomes aware of his misery, the devil knows that his plan will be defeated; for then man at once will begin to seek for deliverance and refuge in God. Luther, once again appealing to Scriptures, writes,

Scripture, however, represents man as one who is not only bound, wretched, captive, sick and dead, but in addition to his other miseries is afflicted, through the agency of Satan his prince, with this misery of blindness, so that he believes himself to be free, happy, unfettered, able, well and alive.⁵⁷

Sin and Man's Free Will

Luther's doctrine of the will can be found especially near the end of the book where he launches a final attack against Erasmus. Having begun his critique of his enemy with Scripture, Luther is not about to give up the matter. In his final section, Luther again does some serious exegesis, and shows from the writings of the apostle Paul and the apostle John that Erasmus' doctrine of free will is a fallacy.

Most of Luther's argument from the apostle Paul's epistles are taken from the book of Romans. This is interesting because it shows how important a place the epistle plays in the work of the sixteenth century Reformation.

From the epistle of Romans, Luther declares first the doctrine of man's depravity. Quoting from Paul, he declares together with the apostle that the wrath of God is directed against all men. According to Luther, all men without exception are sinners. Taking his cue from Romans 1:18, Luther explains that for man to be a sinner means that he is ungodly and unrighteous. And because of his hostility and wickedness, God shows his wrath against all mankind. There are three important truths regarding man and free will that Luther brings out from this text. The first is that all are without exception sinners. Secondly, he defines sin as basically ungodliness and wickedness. Thirdly, he points out that man's wickedness brings out the wrath of God. Fourthly, he adds that the best of men are "ungodly, wicked and deserving of the wrath of God."⁵⁸ This is unlike Erasmus and many other evangelical leaders today who are afraid to make the slightest mention of God's wrath for fear that they might offend men. Lastly, he points out that because everyone is given to such wickedness, there is no possibility that man is able freely to will and do that which is good. He concludes his exegesis of this text with these remarks,

⁵⁷ p. 193.

⁵⁸ p. 294.

Therefore, Paul in this passage lumps all men together in a single mass, and concludes that, so far from being able to will or do anything good, they are all ungodly, wicked, and ignorant of righteousness and faith.⁵⁹

He argues that this fact of man's deplorable condition is plain before all, so that there is none one who can deny this universal truth. But since his opponent is so blind to this truth, Luther sprinkles several other passages from Romans to let the truth become more apparent to Erasmus. He quotes from Romans 2:9ff., 3:19, but especially 3:10ff. Concerning the last text, he challenges Erasmus,

Here give me a suitable interpretation if you can! Invent troops, allege that the words are obscure and ambiguous, and defend free choice against these damning sentences if your dare!⁶⁰

For Luther, total depravity must necessarily mean total inability. Again, commenting on Romans 3:10, which speaks the truth that depravity is in every man, he concludes,

So you see that free choice is completely abolished by this passage, and nothing good or virtuous is left in man, since he is flatly stated to be unrighteous, ignorant of God, a despiser of God, turned aside from sin, and worthless in the sight of God.⁶¹

Luther, unlike Erasmus and many evangelicals, was not afraid to face the question of God's wrath. In fact, as he shows, the doctrine of God's wrath is crucial to the understanding of man's free will. For he explains that, since all men are without exception under the wrath of God, all men are totally depraved.

Man's Will and Justification

Luther sees that Erasmus' view is an attack on the Reformation truth that man is justified by faith alone apart from works. Speaking again from Romans, he shows from 3:20 that by the works of the law no man is justified before God. He rejects Jerome's interpretation that the law here in this text refers merely to the ceremonial laws. Referring to Galatians 3:10, Luther asserts that the law referred to is the valid and authoritative moral law. He points out that one of the functions of this law is to show the sinner his sins and misery, that is, to show us our inability. And since this is the case, the

⁵⁹ p. 295.

⁶⁰ p. 298.

⁶¹ p. 300.

law can only show us our sins and cannot deliver us out of them. It is hence ridiculous for Erasmus to assert that man may by his free will obey the law and thus cooperate with God to obtain salvation. Luther insists that Romans 3:21-25 is clear, the “righteousness of God is apart from the law.”

Justification is out of God’s free grace. Grace, Luther says, is the opposite of works. Commenting on Paul’s doctrine of justification by grace through faith, he says that there is no such thing as merit, but all who are justified are justified freely. Erasmus boasted in the meritorious nature of good works and remarked that there is a reward according to works. But Luther says,

For when he (Paul) asserts that justification is freely bestowed on all who are justified, he leaves no one to work, to earn or prepare himself; and he leaves no work that can be called congruous or condign; and thus by a single stroke of this thunderbolt he shatters both the Pelagians with their total merit, and the Sophists with their little scrap of merit. Free justification allows of no workers, because there is an obvious contradiction between “freely given” and “earned by some sort of work.”⁶²

Given all that he has said about free will, Luther’s concluding word should not come as a surprise to us.

Hence, free choice is nothing but a slave of sin, death, and Satan, not doing and not capable of doing or attempting to do anything but evil.⁶³

Concluding Remarks

The modern churchman is afraid of theological debates. Today, dialogue is a more acceptable term, for it is a more peaceful term. Debates, they say, create tension and are divisive and as such never contribute to the understanding of the issue. They are never positive and beneficial. But the Reformers and Luther think otherwise. Theological debates, whether spoken or written, are inevitable and necessary. The one reason is that heresies exist and the gospel truth needs to be defended. What can one learn from dialogues? They contribute nothing to the development of the truth, condemn no errors, and defend no truths. Instead they breed an air of tolerance for teachings that contradict the Word of God. The only thing perhaps that speakers learn from these dialogues is that they are to forget that they are enemies of the truth. All ideas lead to God.

But, according to Luther, all ideas do not lead to God.

⁶² p. 311.

⁶³ p. 317.

For, in the first place, Erasmus is a humanist. He approaches the issue from reason and philosophy and not Scripture. In places where he quotes Scripture, he twists them to say what they do not mean. As a humanist, his concern is with what man is able to do. God's glory, according to him, is seen in His cooperation with man's ability. This is contradictory to Reformation and biblical teachings, which say precisely the opposite; that is, in the words of Jonathan Edwards, God is glorified in man's dependence.

Secondly, there are only two religions in the world — a religion of works and a religion of grace. To the first belongs Pelagius, Arminius, and Erasmus. These all have a common feature in their theology. They all believe, together with the Roman Catholics, that man's works are meritorious in nature. While the Catholics and the Pelagians make the good works something explicit and external, the other two subtly add that works are not always something visible, but are often invisible. Faith as the activity of believing, for example, is not always seen. But as it is the first movement in the heart towards God, Erasmus says, it is man's work. Man first acts, then God reacts. Faith, which is something that man can produce from his partially corrupted nature, first says yes to God before God can save him. He fails to see that even faith itself is a gift from God, and is therefore a gift of grace.

But the gospel of grace affirms the opposite. God first acts, then man reacts. This reaction is a positive response, a necessary response, and a response that results in conversion. This is because the grace that comes to the sinner is a grace that actively and powerfully converts and transforms. This is the gospel that Luther says the Bible teaches.

As such, denying the gospel of grace is really denying the gospel. Erasmus' gospel is powerless and Christless. Luther writes,

Choose then which you please. If you grant that the Scriptures speak antithetically, you will be able to say nothing about free choice but what is contrary to Christ, namely that error, death, Satan, and all evils reign in it. If you do not grant that they speak antithetically, then you enervate the Scriptures, so that they lose their point and fail to prove that Christ is necessary. Hence, inasmuch as you maintain free choice, you cancel out Christ and ruin the entire Scripture. Moreover, although verbally you may make a show of confessing Christ, yet in reality and in your heart you deny him. Or if the power of free choice is not wholly in error or damnable, but sees and wills what is virtuous and good and what pertains to salvation, then it is in sound health and has no need of Christ the physician (Matt. 9:12), nor has Christ redeemed that part of man; for what need of light and life is there where there is light and life?⁶⁴

⁶⁴ p. 323.

If there is one credit that we can give to Erasmus, it is to his credit that he alone hits the core issue in the Reformation. Luther writes,

Moreover, I praise and commend you highly for this also, that unlike all the rest you alone have attacked the real issue, the essence of the matter in dispute, and have not wearied me with irrelevancies about the papacy, purgatory, indulgences, and such like trifles (for trifles they are rather than basic issues), with which almost everyone hitherto has gone hunting for me without success.⁶⁵

Looking at Luther, we note that his defense is scriptural and exegetical. He does this only because he, like the other Reformers after him, sees that the only way to reform the church is to bring the Scriptures back to the church and the people. This of course accounts for the success of the Protestant Reformation. The change was brought about by a rediscovery of the authority of the Word and the teachings of the Word. If the debate on free will is to be settled, it must be settled from the basis of the Word of God, and not on the basis of the writings of man.

Luther's doctrine of man may appear to be harsh and unpleasant to many modern men. It should not surprise us that many today will even opt to go with Erasmus' idea. For, after all, he praises man, and gives him due recognition for all that he does.

Finally, Luther's teaching on the subject can be found in a concise but yet precise form in his Smalcald Articles.

In the Section on Sin, Luther writes,

What the scholastic theologians taught concerning this article (sin) is therefore nothing but error and stupidity, namely,

1. That after the fall of Adam the natural powers of man have remained whole and uncorrupted, and that man by nature possesses a right understanding and a good will, as the philosophers teach.

2. Again, that man has a free will, either to do good and refrain from evil or refrain from good and do evil.

3. Again, that man is able by his natural powers to observe and keep all the commandments of God.

4. Again, that man is able by his natural powers to love God above all things and his neighbor as himself.

5. Again, if man does what he can, God is certain to grant him his grace.

6. Again, when man goes to the sacraments there is no need of a good intention to do what he ought, but it is enough that he does not have an evil

⁶⁵ p. 333.

intention to commit sin, for such is the goodness of man's nature and such is the power of the sacraments.

7. That it cannot be proved from the Scriptures that the Holy Spirit and his gifts are necessary for the performance of a good work.⁶⁶

With respect to these teachings, Luther's condemnation of them is something with which all Protestant churches must agree.

Having followed this Reformation debate closely, one might be forced to ask the question, "Is there a need for such a debate again at this present time?"

The answer is yes and no. No, because the debate has been won for us already. Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Dordt, and Westminster have eloquently repudiated free-willism. Erasmus' theology has been decisively condemned and rejected in history. Yet there is in a sense a need to renew the debate; for many are ignorant of history and the issues that the church has fought for with its life and blood. Free-willism still prevails. Just as it was the issue in Luther's day, the issue today is still free-willism. Finneyism and decisionism are still the diet of many people all over the Christian scene. The invitation system has deceived many and sells short the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yes, there is still the need to sound the trumpet from the rooftop and shout it in the market place. Michael Horton pleads in his new book, *Putting Amazing Back Into Grace*, to do just that, that is, to emphasize that grace powerfully saves. A debate again? A resounding Yes! ▲

⁶⁶ Luther, Martin, The Smalcald Articles, from *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, edited by Timothy Lull. (Fortress Press, 1989), p. 516-517.

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The Cambridge Platform: A Reformed Option?

(A Review Article)

David J. Engelsma

The Reformed Tract Publication Committee has recently published *The Cambridge Platform: A New Edition of the Historic Puritan Congregational Church Order* (ed. Darrell Todd Maurina, Lawrence, MI, 3rd corrected printing, 1993). This is the first reprinting of an important Congregational church order in modern typography. Darrell Todd Maurina has edited the text by comparing several modern printings of the *Cambridge Platform* (hereafter *CP*), so that he is confident that this is “the most accurate of all the editions as well as the most readily useable by nonspecialists” (p. xiv). This edition contains the biblical basis of all the articles, written out in full.

In a 14-page preface, the editor gives the history of the *CP*. He also points out the differences between Congregational and Presbyterian church polities. The second part of this 57-page booklet consists of the *CP* itself.

Congregational Church Order

The *CP* is the book of church order drawn up in New England in 1648 by leaders of the Congregational churches. It represented their deliberate rejection of the Presbyterian polity that had recently been set forth in the Westminster Assembly’s Westminster Confession of Faith (1648) and “Form of Presbyterian Church Government” (1645). The full title was *The Cambridge Platform: A Platform of Church Discipline Gathered Out of the Word of God; and agreed upon by the Elders and Messengers of the Churches Assembled in the Synod at Cambridge in New England to be presented to the Churches and General Court for their consideration and acceptance in the Lord*.

In 17 chapters, each of which consists of several articles, the *CP* treats of the various aspects of the government, order, and discipline of the church. The opening chapters are devoted to Congregational ecclesiology. That the New England Congregationalists of that day were Calvinistic in doctrine is evident from their agreement with Westminster that the catholic church is

“the whole company of those that are elected, redeemed, and in time effectually called” and that the members of the visible church include the children of the saints (2.1; 3.2.2). They did not long remain so.

It is the differences of Congregational church polity from Presbyterian polity that concern Reformed believers today, as they are the reason for this publication of the *CP*.

Rule by the Congregation

Although editor Maurina makes a valiant effort in the preface to forestall the criticism, the *CP* is Congregational in the sense that it gives such power to a majority of the congregation as to compromise fatally Christ’s government of the local church by a body of elders. The *CP* recognizes, and even prefers, the office of ruling elder in the church. But it allows for churches without elders:

In such churches where there are Elders, imposition of hands in ordination is to be performed by those Elders.

In such churches where there are no Elders, imposition of hands may be performed by some of the brethren orderly chosen by the church thereunto.

Nevertheless in such churches where there are no Elders, and the church so desire, we see not why imposition of hands may not be performed by the Elders of other churches (9.3, 4, 5).

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that, as Maurina laments, many Congregational churches rejected ruling elders: “By the late 1700’s ... among the Baptists and Congregationalists, both of whom shared nearly identical forms of church polity in New England, ruling elders almost entirely died out” (p. xi). In fact, Congregationalism was debating this fundamental aspect of biblical church government within a few years of the adoption of the *CP*: “In the late 1600’s, an extended debate began over the propriety of the office of ruling elder” (p. xi). Some modern conservative Congregational churches, presumably adhering to the *CP*, still lack ruling elders (p. xii).

Where there are elders, the *CP* strikes a mortal blow at their authority by giving to the congregation, that is, to one over half of the membership, the right to depose their elders.

And if the church have power to choose their officers and ministers, then in case of manifest unworthiness and delinquency they have power also to depose them (8.7).

In case an Elder offend incorrigibly, the matter so requiring, as the church had power to call him to office, so they have power according to order (the

counsel of other churches where it may be had, directing thereto) to remove him from his office ... (10.6).

The context of both of these articles makes plain that by “church” is meant the congregation. The congregation has power to depose its elders. Maurina acknowledges that, regarding the question whether “the congregation have any recourse when its elders abuse their rule,” “the more common position ... was that the congregation had the right in extreme cases to remove their elders” (p. x). What the implementation of this alleged power of the congregation would mean in the life of a church — members of the congregation going about to depose their elders — is horrifying to a Reformed mind. And who determines that a particular situation warranting this uproar is an “extreme case”?

The *CP* goes so far as to assert that “a company of professed believers ecclesiastically confederate” is a church “before they have officers, and without them” (10.2). This is the assertion that the offices are not necessary for the existence of the instituted church. In a line that recurs in various contexts in Congregational polity, the offices are said to be necessary only for the well-being of the church, not for her being.

Though officers be not absolutely necessary to the simple being of churches, when they be called, yet ordinarily to their calling they are, and to their well-being ... (6.2).

In light of this disparagement of the offices, particularly the office of ruling elder, the description by the *CP* of the government of the church as resembling a democracy is ominous.

This government of the church is a mixed government.... In respect of Christ, the Head and King of the church, and the sovereign power residing in Him, and exercised by Him, it is a monarchy; in respect of the body or brotherhood of the church, and power from Christ granted unto them, it resembles a democracy; in respect of the Presbytery and power committed to them, it is an aristocracy (10.3).

Editor Maurina is quick to offer a mitigating footnote, calling attention to the use of the word “resembles,” rather than the word “is.” This defensive footnote notwithstanding, the fact is that Reformed, or Presbyterian, church government in no wise is, or resembles, a democracy. To say so is to cater to modern Western political thought. It is also to encourage in the church a spirit of individualism that invariably rebels against Christ’s rule by the elders. In addition, the immediate context of the description is one in which the *CP* is giving such power to the congregation as enables them to exist

without elders and as authorizes them to depose the elders they may have.

That the real power over the local church, according to the *CP*, resides in the majority of the congregation, not in the eldership, is evident from the fact that the Congregational churches resolved differences between the eldership and the congregation by the rule that “if the majority of the brethren don’t consent, the elders can’t proceed to act” (p. xi).

The *CP*, therefore, is a thoroughly Congregational document, in the first place, in that it locates authority over the local church in the majority of the congregation. Although speaking respectfully of the office of elder, it effectively denies that Christ rules the local church through a body of elders.

Independency

The *CP* is also, and more obviously, Congregational in that it repudiates the authority of major assemblies over the local church. This is stated in chapter 16, “Of Synods.” The language of the *CP* is misleading. Apparently, the Congregational church order recognizes synods and their importance. This becomes the occasion for editor Maurina triumphantly to dismiss the notion of Presbyterians that “Congregationalists hate synods” as a “misunderstanding” (pp. ix, x).

Whether or no Congregationalists hate synods, they do reject them. For the “synods” of the *CP* have no authority over the local church. The *CP* states this clearly: It does not belong to synods to “exercise ... any ... act of church authority or jurisdiction” (16.4). An assembly lacking all “church authority or jurisdiction” is not a Presbyterian, or Reformed, synod. The *CP* may call its toothless get-together a “synod,” and even praise it as an “ordinance of Christ,” but one could as well call a papier-mache likeness of the king of the beasts a lion.

The *CP* errs seriously when, having denied to Congregationalist “synods” all ecclesiastical authority, it adds, “which that presidential Synod did forbear.” The meaning, evidently, is that the Jerusalem Synod of Acts 15 did not exercise any church authority or jurisdiction over the local churches. Acts 16:4 proves otherwise. The decisions of the Jerusalem Synod were binding upon every local church: “they (Paul and Silas) delivered them (the local churches) the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem.”

The decisions of the synod were binding dogmas (such is the Greek translated “decrees”). They were made binding dogmas by the ordaining activity of the synod. Neither did the local church have the option to disregard the decisions nor did she have to ratify the decisions in order to

make them binding upon herself. Each church simply received the decisions as settled and binding by virtue of the authority of the synod acting in accordance with the Word of God within the union of churches. Paul and Silas did not recommend the decisions to the churches for consideration and ratification, but delivered them to the churches to be kept.

By its repudiation of authoritative synods — real synods — Congregationalism shows itself to be inherently independentistic. The Congregationalists of the *CP* did not, understandably, like the name: “The term ‘Independent’ we approve not” (2.5). Exactly this, nevertheless, is Congregationalism’s weakness. It is also Congregationalism’s sin. The Congregational church is independent with regard to the other manifestations of Christ’s body. It is independent with regard to the Head of the church Himself, for Christ exercises His care and supervision over His churches, in part, by the multitude of counselors in an authoritative synod.

“Woe to Him that is Alone when He Falleth”

The repudiation of synods, that is, major assemblies, by the *CP* becomes a fatal weakness for the Congregational church that suffers troubles. There is no appeal by an aggrieved member against the decision of his consistory. There is no recourse for a minister abused by his consistory. There is no help for a consistory tyrannized by a lordly minister. These are some of the “perils of independency.”

In a passage remarkable for its candor, Maurina, ardent advocate of Congregationalism though he is, admits the helplessness of the Congregational church troubled by division. He should be quoted in this amazing admission:

Of more impact was the question of what to do when the elders and congregation disagreed about a church act and could not come to agreement. Fifty years after the Cambridge Platform was adopted, the question was still a live issue (p. xi).

For 50 years after the adoption of its church order, Congregationalism could not decide the simple, basic question, “What is the right way to settle a dispute between the eldership and a group in the congregation that opposes the eldership?” One cannot help asking, “During those 50 years in which Congregational leaders were pondering this question, how many congregations destroyed themselves?”

When finally a solution was found, it proved to be no solution at all: “if the majority of the brethren don’t consent, the elders can’t proceed to act: if the elders can’t consent, the fraternity can’t proceed” (p. xi). This is mere

deadlock. Every experienced officebearer knows what happens in a congregation that is deadlocked in a controversy.

To their credit, the Congregationalists recognized that deadlock is unsatisfactory. Their last word, therefore, to the divided church was, "... in which case, it is proper to seek council" (p. xi). In the end, however grudgingly, the Congregationalists were forced to pay tribute to Presbyterianism: "seek council." For a main purpose of the Presbyterian synod is the help of a church that is threatened by schism.

But even at this point — the point of desperation — Congregationalism, true to itself, fails. For the decision of the body from which the troubled church seeks "council" is mere advice, to be accepted or rejected as the local church pleases. Invariably, the party that is condemned will ignore the advice, especially since it has been taught not to regard the body that gives the advice as exercising the authority of Christ the King. The result is either that the deadlock continues or that the congregation blows up.

Mr. Maurina is wrong, therefore, when he advertises this new edition of the *CP* by suggesting that "Presbyterian readers of the Cambridge Platform are likely to find their stereotypes of Congregationalism to be severely challenged" (p. ix). On the contrary, Presbyterian and Reformed readers of the *CP* will find their sober assessments of Congregationalism solidly confirmed. Congregationalism denies the Kingship of Christ over the church in its two basic respects: rule over the congregation by a body of elders and authority over the united congregations in prescribed areas by an authoritative synod.

A Reformed Option?

Enthusiastic Congregationalist Maurina has a practical purpose with the republishing of the *CP*:

The aim of this edition is to present the Savoy Declaration and Cambridge Platform, not as museum pieces of Puritan history, but as living, vital options for Reformed Christians of anti-synodical and fully Congregational inclinations (p. ii).

He pitches it toward those who have recently seceded from the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). They are receptive. One of the most discouraging developments in Reformed circles is that the CRC seceders are energetically creating a new church order in the place of that of Dordt, patterning it in the crucial articles after the Congregational *CP*. One of the sorriest sights is Reformed ministers, long-in-the-tooth in Reformed church polity, waving the *CP* as their church political banner.

The *CP* differs radically from the Reformed church polity of Article 30 of the Belgic Confession, concerning the government of the congregation by elders, and from the Reformed church polity of the Westminster Confession of Faith, 31.3, concerning the authority of synod in the federation of churches.

It is not a Reformed option, but another system of church government.

Cambridge lies over against Dordt and the London of the Westminster Assembly.

And not only in church polity. ▲

Book Reviews

The Biblical Flood: A Case Study of the Church's Response to Extrabiblical Evidence, by Davis A. Young. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995. Pp. xiii + 327. \$19.99 (paper). [Reviewed by Prof. David J. Engelsma.]

What his colleague Howard Van Till did to the revelation of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 by his book *The Fourth Day*, Calvin College professor of geology Davis A. Young has now done to the revelation of the flood in Genesis 6-9. In the book *The Biblical Flood*, Young denies that there ever was a universal flood that destroyed all humans and animals that were outside Noah's ark.

In addition to the wealth of geological evidence opposing the possibility of a global deluge, a variety of biogeographical evidence also counts conclusively against

such an event.... There is no evidence whatsoever to indicate that human or animal populations were ever disrupted by a catastrophic global flood at any point in the past. Indeed, all the evidence indicates continuous occupation by these populations of points around the globe into the exceedingly distant past (p. 311).

The reference of Scripture in Genesis 6-9 is merely to a local flooding in the Tigris and Euphrates River valleys.

The flood account uses hyperbolic language to describe an event that devastated or disrupted Mesopotamian civilization — that is to say, the whole world of the Semites (p. 312).

The reason for the rejection of Scripture's teaching of a universal flood is the alleged testimony of science. This is the "extrabiblical

evidence" of the book's title. Young advances his rejection of the flood of Genesis by means of a thorough study of scientists' increasingly vocal insistence that a universal flood never occurred, indeed, is an impossibility, and of theologians' corresponding surrender of the church's faith concerning the flood of Genesis 6-9.

The justification for allowing science to set aside Scripture (Young prefers to speak of science's forcing the church to "re-interpret" Scripture) is that science is God's general revelation. General revelation is the authority by which holy Scripture must be judged.

When so many scientists of such a diverse array of worldviews are able to achieve a virtual consensus regarding a given body of evidence, we had better pay attention. When for the past two centuries thousands of geologists from around the world, including numerous Bible-believing Christians, insist from a lifetime of experience in looking at fossiliferous rocks that those rocks are extremely old and had nothing to do with a global deluge, then the church must listen (p. 310).

Reformed theology has also stressed the value and importance of God's general revelation of himself through his creation (p. xi).

The scientific evidence that Young appeals to is largely geological. The rocks do not prove a universal flood. On the contrary, they

conclusively oppose the possibility of a global deluge (see Young's summary of this "extrabiblical evidence" on pp. 309-312).

The book is an attack on Scripture — its clarity, its reliability, its authority, and, thus, its inspiration by God the Holy Spirit. Scripture teaches the wonder in history of a flood of water that covered the entire world of that time, destroying all men and animals except the eight souls and the animals that were in the ark. At this point, the reader of this review ought to re-read Genesis 6-9.

Davis Young resists the Word of God, not only in Genesis 6-9 but also in the New Testament. For the New Testament affirms the flood as a universal deluge, thus underscoring the historicity of Genesis 6-9. Upon this awesome historical event, the New Testament bases significant doctrine.

In Matthew 24:37-39, our Lord Himself accepts Genesis' account of the flood as historical. He explains it as a type of the destruction of all the wicked at the end.

In I Peter 3:19-21, the apostle asserts a real Noah, a real ark, and a real flood by which only eight souls were saved in the ark. This historical flood was a "figure" of the washing of baptism.

In II Peter 2:5 and 3:5, 6, the apostle clearly teaches that the Noahic flood destroyed the entire old world (the "world that then was"). God saved only Noah and his house (see also Heb. 11:7). II Peter 3:5, 6

brings up this historical, universal flood as the refutation of the scoffers who challenge the reality of Christ's coming and as the type of the destruction of the present world with all its ungodly inhabitants in the Day of Christ.

The book is an attack upon the right, Reformed interpretation of the Bible. Scripture no longer interprets Scripture. Scripture is now interpreted by science. This is not a whit less serious than the rejection outright of the Bible's clarity, reliability, and authority, that is, its inspiration. What good is it to profess Scripture's inspiration when its meaning is determined, not by itself but by alien authorities, in this case a horde of mainly unregenerated scientists?

Young claims to be urging, not a rejection of Genesis 6-9 but a "re-interpretation" of the passage. The claim is false. Denial of a flood that covered all the earth of that time, in favor of a local overflow of some river or other, is not re-interpretation of Genesis 7:19, 20 but flat contradiction of it. Denial of a flood that destroyed all humans and animals except those in the ark, in favor of a local catastrophe that destroyed only those in the immediate area, is not re-interpretation of Genesis 7:21-23 but flat contradiction of it.

Even as regards the plea for re-interpretation, Young errs. First, he is mistaken when he identifies human analysis of rocks and other physical phenomena with God's general revelation. To put it bluntly,

Davis Young's reading of the rock strata is not general revelation.

Second, genuine general revelation — God's making Himself known in His creation — is not an authority over Scripture, or even an authority on a par with Scripture. The ungodly, it must be remembered, including the ungodly scientist, always holds under in unrighteousness, and can only hold under in unrighteousness, the truth that God makes known to him in creation (Rom. 1:18ff.). Seeing creation, he writes learned books in defense of evolution. Knowing the cataclysm of the universal flood, he argues strenuously that all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation (II Pet. 3:4-6). Ungodly scientists are as unreliable in their witness against the Bible's testimony to a universal flood as the men of Romans 1:18ff. are unreliable in their witness against the existence and nature of the true God. The truth of the biblical flood condemns the ungodly scientist and warns him of the coming judgment of universal fire. Of course he suppresses this truth.

Even as regards the godly, general revelation does not control Scripture. The godly do not interpret Scripture in the light and according to the standard of general revelation. Much less do they interpret Scripture in the light of a general revelation that is completely divorced from the truth of Scripture. Rather, they interpret Scripture in the light and according to the stan-

dard of Scripture. Every passage of Scripture is interpreted according to the "rule of faith." Believers know and understand general revelation only in the light of and in accordance with Scripture. Davis Young may not interpret Genesis 6-9 in accordance with the prevailing opinions of unbelieving scientists, or even in the light of general revelation. But he must explain his rocks, as well as all the other data, in the light of and in accordance with the teaching of Genesis 6-9.

The book is an attack on the historicity of Genesis 1-11. What the Spirit breathed forth in Genesis 6-9 never actually happened. It never actually happened as described in the passage. There never was the Noah of Genesis 6-9. There never was the ark of those chapters. There never was the wonder of the entering into the ark of the animals "two and two... as God had commanded Noah" (Gen. 7:9). There never was the heart-shrinking judgment, but also the heart-warming deliverance, of the purging water, when "all the fountains of the great deep (were) broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened" (Gen. 7:11). There could never have been, therefore, the offering of sacrifices by the non-existent Noah, or the giving of the cosmic covenant with its rainbow-sign by God (Gen. 8:20-9:17).

The passage is a myth.

The book is an attack on faith. As the Heidelberg Catechism states in Q. 21, true faith holds for truth all that God has revealed to us in His

Word. It holds for truth all that God has revealed in His Word *because* it is revealed in His Word. God's Word is self-authenticating to faith. Therefore, faith cannot be moved to doubt or deny anything that God has revealed in His Word by any evidence, argument, ridicule, or pressure from any quarter whatever.

Young does not understand faith. He piles up his scientific proofs and authorities against the biblical revelation of a universal flood and, apparently sincerely, asks, "When will these naive, credulous fundamentalists concede?"

Leaving aside now the unkind description of the Reformed believer as a naive fundamentalist, the answer is, "Never!" For faith holds for truth all that God has revealed in His Word.

Faith believes absurd things, e.g., that Jonah the prophet was three days in the belly of the great fish, just as Christ was three days in the grave.

Faith believes impossible things, e.g., that dead Abraham and barren Sarah had a son, just as the Messiah was a sprout out of the stump of Jesse. Indeed, faith holds for truth an event the impossibility of which makes belief of a universal flood with all its details mere child's play in comparison: the incarnation of God.

Faith believes the account of the universal flood *only* because it is revealed as truth in the inspired Scriptures. Just as extrabiblical evidence does not dissuade faith, so also extrabiblical scientific evidence

in favor of the universal flood is no part of the foundation of faith. Nor does faith try to prove the universal flood to others on the ground of alleged evidence in the rocks. In this connection, Young makes a legitimate criticism of some defenders of the literal understanding of the biblical flood:

Significantly, the literalist flood geology school has not rejected extrabiblical data. Indeed, the literalists have depended more heavily on extrabiblical physical substantiation of biblical statements than have other Christians (pp. 244, 245).

One might expect that those who endorse a strict literalistic interpretation of the flood narrative ... would be inclined simply to reject the relevance of extrabiblical data, given the fact that such data seem clearly and overwhelmingly to deny that such a planet-altering flood ever took place. One might expect that such individuals would instead make appeals solely to the Word of God as the complete and final authority in all such matters and that they would denounce extrabiblical evidence as superfluous and misleading. And yet the proponents of flood geology have moved in the opposite direction, not only showing a substantial interest in extrabiblical evidence but actually elevating it to the status of apologetic proof (p. 264).

It is one thing to point out, as Whitcomb and Morris helpfully did

in their *The Genesis Flood*, that there is a great deal of evidence in the present form of the earth corroborating the Bible's testimony to the flood. It is another thing to make this evidence even a part of faith's foundation, or to use this evidence as proof to convince the doubters.

From the science department of Calvin College have come, in quick succession, two violent assaults upon the foundation of the Christian faith in Genesis 1-11. Howard Van Till demolished the historicity of the creation-account. Now Davis Young has undermined the historicity of the account of the flood. Still to come are an attack on the origin of the nations in the account of Babel in Genesis 11 and, finally, the rejection of the historicity of the account of the fall in Genesis 3.

It will be instructive to pay careful attention to the reviews that *The Biblical Flood* receives in the magazines and journals of reputedly conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches and seminaries. Likewise, it will be instructive to take note of the response to the book by supposedly conservative and even Calvinistic colleges. Will there be a clear, sharp, unambiguous condemnation of the book from any of these institutions? Or will there be, at best, a telling silence? The unbelief concerning Genesis 1-11 that is a mark of theological modernism is now widespread in churches, seminaries, and colleges that have a name for evangelical and Reformed ortho-

doxy. If the theologians and professors do not themselves teach the mythical nature of the events in the opening chapters of the Bible, they are tolerant of the teaching. There will be no defense of the faith from them.

Young's appeal to highly regarded Reformed Old Testament scholars, G. Ch. Aalders and O. T. Allis, in support of his explanation of the Genesis flood is erroneous (pp. 293, 294). Young states that Aalders was "agnostic about the extent of the deluge," although Young admits that Aalders leaned toward universality. The esteemed Dutch Reformed Old Testament scholar was "charitable to local flood views."

This is misrepresentation of Aalders' position.

Aalders' understanding of the flood is found in his commentary, *Genesis, Volume I* (tr. William Heynen, Zondervan, 1981). Aalders does indeed allow for the possibility of the flooding only of "the then-known world and the then-populated part of the earth" (p. 192). But he allows for this possibility only if it is understood that this flooding of "the then-known world" was "the annihilation of all people and animals" (p. 192). Aalders is not "charitable to local flood views" that leave any people and animals that were not in the ark alive. Aalders is not charitable to the local flood view of Davis Young. Aalders is dogmatic:

On the basis of the biblical text it is conclusive ... that the Deluge

was extensive enough to annihilate all human and animal life existing at that time, with the natural exception of water creatures (7:22) (p. 193).

The conclusion of Aalders concerning the historicity of the Genesis account of the flood is devastating to Young's *The Biblical Flood*:

That the Bible intends to present the Deluge as a historical event cannot be questioned. Questions regarding the historicity of the Deluge cannot be based on an exegesis of Scripture. Every honest exegete must acknowledge that the narrative is presented as history. The issue, then, is determined by one's view of Scripture. Is the testimony of Scripture trustworthy beyond question, or, do we have the freedom to critically evaluate the biblical record? In this connection it should be observed that other references in Scripture also consistently treat the Deluge as an actual event in history. We can point to passages such as Isaiah 54:9; Matthew 24:37-39; Luke 17:26-27; Hebrews 11:7; 2 Peter 2:5; 3:6; and probably also Job 22:15-18 (p. 194).

"Is the testimony of Scripture trustworthy beyond question?"

"Or, do we have the freedom to critically evaluate the biblical record?"

These are the questions that decide the issue for the Reformed believer and for the Reformed church.

Similarly groundless and misleading is Young's appeal to O. T. Allis: "(he) leaned toward universality without insisting on it" (p. 293). As was the case with Aalders, it is true that Allis thought that "it cannot be asserted that the account definitely declares the Flood to have been universal." Allis insisted, however, that the flood, whatever its extent, destroyed the entire human race with the exception of the eight who were in the ark: "That it (the flood — DJE) involved the destruction of the human race could not be more plainly asserted than in vii.21-3" (*God Spake by Moses: An Exposition of the Pentateuch*, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1951, p. 24).

Evidently, the reason why Aalders and Allis grudgingly conceded that the flood might not have been universal was their mistaken notion that the form of the earth at the time of the flood was the same as it is now. They had difficulty, e.g., with the idea that the water of the flood covered 29,000-foot mountains. Aalders struggles with the question whether he must prove that "the waters of the Flood rose 15 feet above Mt. Everest or Mt. McKinley" (*Genesis*, pp. 192, 193).

Davis Young makes the same mistake and happily employs it to ridicule the defenders of the universal flood. Again and again, he points out the impossibility of animals traveling to the ark from all parts of the earth *as we now know it*, e.g., kangaroos hopping and swimming from Australia (pp. 38, 124, 231, 342).

II Peter 3:5, 6 teaches that the form of the earth before the flood was radically different from its present form. It was a different world. That world perished. The passage strongly suggests that the form of that old world was one land-mass rising out of the surrounding waters: "the earth standing out of the water and in the water." This helps to understand that the various kinds of animals could, by the providential power of their Creator, travel to the ark and that the waters could cover all of the earth that protruded above the seas at that time. Nor is there any necessity to suppose mountains of 20,000 feet in that old, perished world.

In any case, it is risky business to make concessions to theories that contradict the plain teaching of Scripture, because of our limited knowledge.

It is far riskier to hold up to ridicule the mind that holds for truth all that God has revealed in His Word, specifically, the historicity of the account of the universal flood in Genesis 6-9. ▲

Towards a Feminist Christology: Jesus of Nazareth, European Women, and the Christological Crisis, by Julie M. Hopkins. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995. 134 pp. \$15 (paper). (Reviewed by David J. Engelsma)

This book is only for those of strong stomach. The contents are

grievous heresy and gross blasphemy. Julie M. Hopkins explicitly repudiates every cardinal Christian doctrine: Scripture; trinity; incarnation; sin; atonement; and resurrection, among them. Witness her attack on the cross:

The sense of guilt ... is a Western obsession. In my opinion, the fact that guilt is an inheritance of Latin moral dualism does not justify a penal and substitutionary doctrine of atonement. It is morally abhorrent to claim that God the Father demanded the self-sacrifice of his only Son to balance the scales of justice. A god who punishes through pain, despair and violent death is not a god of love but a sadist and despot (p. 50).

Intriguing is the raving against Calvinism that immediately follows this assault on the cross:

The message of Calvinism, that we are morally helpless to resist sin but nevertheless justifiably damned unless predestined to the Elect (and nobody can be sure who are the Elect) was and continues to be a recipe for depression and self-hatred (p. 50).

Intriguing also is her reference at this point to the study, *Hulpeloos maar schuldig* (Kampen: Kok, 1987), by Aleid Schilder.

Hopkins rejects genuine Christianity out of her idolatrous feminist faith: biblical, creedal Christianity is patriarchal oppression of women.

Having rejected revealed Christianity, she exerts herself to recast the "message of the Bible," particularly Jesus of Nazareth, in the feminist mold.

It is only possible to bring women into the centre of an incarnational christology if the traditional categories are gender reversible; if, in other words, we may speak of the Divine incarnated in a female body, "truly God and truly female" or as the Dutch feminist theologian Anne-Claire Mulder argues, we may speak of the female flesh becoming Word/Logos (p. 85).

Ah yes, the female is god.

Why bother with such a book?

There are two reasons why an orthodox pastor or elder might read it. First, it expresses an assault on the faith within the nominal church. Hopkins fancies herself a Christian still. She is a lecturer at the (Reformed) Free University of Amsterdam. The book is published by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company of Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Second, the work makes plain the nature of feminism. The movement as such has its origin in unbelief, proceeds according to the standard of the world, and has its goal in the subversion of Christianity in its entirety. Every officebearer and every church should know this when they take the first, small, fatal, feminist step. ▲

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In October the Seminary sponsored a Conference on Reformed Church Government. The four speeches, given by the faculty of the Seminary and Dr. Morton Smith (professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology in Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Greenville, South Carolina), are available on audio cassette and VHS video cassette. The four lectures were:

*The Biblical Basis
of Reformed Church Government,*
by Prof. Robert Decker;
The Autonomy of the Local Church,
by Prof. Herman Hanko;
*The Hodge-Thornwell Debate
Over Church Polity in the 1800s,*
by Dr. Morton Smith;
The Authority of the Major Assemblies,
by Prof. David Engelsma.

The prices (which include postage) are \$3.00 for each of the audio cassettes and \$6.00 for each of the video cassettes.

They may be ordered by contacting the Protestant Reformed Seminary.