

Martin Luther And The Enslaved Will

By JOHN YOUNG

Was Martin Luther essentially a reformer who did much more good than harm? Some Catholics, including some who are very influential, answer in the affirmative. He was a major cause, they say, of reforms in the Catholic Church through his criticisms of its manifest shortcomings. He promoted the study of the Bible and made it available to ordinary Christians.

But many disturbing factors are overlooked, often in the name of ecumenism; for example, his insistence on the Bible alone as the rule of faith — a principle which has led to theological chaos. Again, despite statements to the contrary, the Catholic Church had made translations of the Bible into German and other vernacular languages before the Protestant Reformation.

However, in this article I want to look at the vitally important question of free will. Luther denied that we have free will in moral matters, and this denial is a keystone of his theology. He deals with it particularly in his treatise *On the Enslaved Will*, a work written in response to the criticism of Erasmus against Luther's view.

Luther regarded this book as one of his two most important, together with his catechism. And that judgment is easy to understand in view of the fundamental importance of the question of free will.

His contention is that, because of original sin and the power of Satan over fallen man, the human will is incapable of choosing good and rejecting evil. Luther compares our situation with a horse that has to go where the rider directs: If God is our rider we go where

God directs; if Satan is our rider we go where he directs.

"Under his [Satan's] rule the human will is no longer free nor in its own power, but is the slave of sin and of Satan, and can only will what its prince has willed" (*On the Enslaved Will*, translated as *On the Bondage of the Will*, by Packer and Johnston, p. 263).

Erasmus quotes many biblical passages where God *blames man* for sinning, and points out that this implies man has the freedom not to sin. Luther's response is that God is here showing us how helpless we are without His help. (Hardly an answer if we are not to blame!)

Luther believed that many people go to Hell. But how can this be just if they lack the power to avoid sin? Clearly the answer is that it would be a monstrous injustice for anyone to be punished eternally for something he could not have avoided. But Luther did not see this. He tries to solve the question by appealing to God's hidden will.

It is true, of course, that we can never fully understand God. But what we do understand, by reason and Revelation, cannot be contradicted by what is hidden from our knowledge: There can't be a hidden will of God in opposition to the will of God that we know. But Luther thought there is.

"... He does not will the death of a sinner — that is, in His Word; but He wills it by His inscrutable will. At present, however, we must keep in view His Word and leave alone His inscrutable will; for it is by His Word, and not by His inscrutable will, that we must be guided. In any case, who can direct himself according to a will that

is inscrutable and incomprehensible? It is enough simply to know that there is in God an inscrutable will; what, why, and within what limits It wills, it is wholly unlawful to enquire, or wish to know, or be concerned about, or touch upon; we may only fear and adore!" (pp. 170-171).

There is here the influence of William of Ockham, the fourteenth-century philosopher who claimed that the very nature of things derives from the will of God. For example, murder is wrong because God decided to will that it should be wrong. Even our love for God is good only because He wills that we should love Him. He could have willed that we should hate Him, in which case love of God would be a vice while hatred of God would be a virtue.

Actually that belief is blasphemous, although Ockham and Luther failed to see this.

Luther says explicitly: "What God wills is not right because He ought, or was bound, so to will; on the contrary, what takes place must be right, because He so wills it" (p. 209).

So Luther is able to maintain that people can be condemned to Hell despite lacking the free will to avoid sin, for God's Will is supreme and unhindered.

Not only Luther, but other early Protestants, notably John Calvin, maintained that those who go to Hell are predestined to be lost and have no choice in the matter.

In Luther's case his psychological makeup and his scruples when, as a

young priest, he struggled against temptations, help to explain his doctrine of the enslaved will. He was in danger of despair and threw himself on the mercy of God.

"... I have the comfortable certainty that I please God, not by reason of the merits of my works, but by reason of His merciful favour promised to me; so that, if I work too little, or badly, He does not impute it to me, but with fatherly compassion pardons me and makes me better" (p. 314).

This doctrine of Luther makes a true Christian humanism impossible, because it sees the human race after the fall of Adam as corrupt and enslaved. And it can prey on the mind and lead to sadness and despair.

Jacques Maritain (*Three Reformers*, p. 199) quotes Henry Denifle: "From 1530, when his doctrine had come fully into practice, there was everywhere an increase of melancholy, of gloomy sadness, of despair, of doubt of the divine grace, and of suicides."

The Catholic position, on the other hand, holds that man is essentially good, even after original sin, and that he has free will, although he has to struggle to live a virtuous life. But because of that essential goodness and free will, and aided by God's grace, he can become more fully human.

So we can appreciate goodness in the pagan religions, despite their many errors, and the wisdom to be found in Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and other great thinkers.