

# The Origins and Consequences of Original Sin in Luther's *Bondage of the Will*

Cameron A. MacKenzie

I wonder if we haven't made too much out of Luther's remark to Wolfgang Capito that except for *The Bondage of the Will* and the *Catechism*, he acknowledged none of his other books as really his.<sup>1</sup> This is often understood as Luther's identifying these two works as his best.<sup>2</sup> But there is something rather strange about that assessment, and I am doubtful that many of us would agree. Certainly one can make the case for the *Catechism* (either *Large* or *Small*), but I am less confident regarding *The Bondage of the Will*. For if our admiration for Luther derives from his recovery of the Gospel and his persistent proclamation and application of this chief article of the Christian religion, then *The Bondage of the Will* is something of a disappointment. One reason for this is undoubtedly the fact that it is a response to Erasmus's *Diatribes Concerning Free Will*,<sup>3</sup> for that means that Luther directs his work largely to answering the arguments of the other.

---

<sup>1</sup>"Regarding [the plan] to collect my writings in volumes, I am quite cool and not at all eager about it because, roused by a Saturnian hunger, I would rather see them all devoured. For I acknowledge none of them to be really a book of mine, except perhaps the one *On the Bound Will* and the *Catechism*." Martin Luther to Wolfgang Capito, July 9, 1537. LW 50:172-173 (WABr 8:99.5-8). LW = Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., *Luther's Works*, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986). WA = *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vols. 1- (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883- ).

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, trans., "Introduction," *Martin Luther on The Bondage of the Will* (n.p.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1957), 40; Philip S. Watson, trans., "Introduction," *The Bondage of the Will*, LW 33:5; and Timothy F. Lull, "Luther's Writings," in Donald K. McKim, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 44.

<sup>3</sup>Johannes von Walter, ed., *De Libero Arbitrio Diatribe Sive Collatio per Desiderium Erasmus Roterodamum* (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1910). For his part, Erasmus was responding to Luther's *Assertio omnium articulorum M. Lutheri per bullam Leonis X novissimam damnatorum* (WA 7:94-151), especially Article 36, "Since the fall of Adam, or after actual sin, free will exists only in name, and when it does what it can it commits sin." This article, in turn, was taken from the thirteenth thesis of the Heidelberg Theses (WA 1:353-374; LW 31:39-70). See Harry J. McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong?* (New York: Newman Press, 1969), 251-273, 277-279, and Heinrich Roos, "Die Quellen der Bulle 'Exsurge Domine'" in Johann Auer and Hermann Volk, eds., *Theologie in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Michael Schmaus zum sechzigsten Geburtstag*. (München: Karl Zink Verlag, 1957), 909-926.

---

*Dr. Cameron A. MacKenzie is Professor of Historical Theology and Chairman of the Department of Historical Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, IN. This article was originally presented at a convocation of professors of theology of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, which met in Dallas, TX, March 4-5, 2005.*

But even so, it is difficult for the contemporary Lutheran to designate as Luther's best a book that is much more about sin than it is about forgiveness. True, one can find Gospel in this work,<sup>4</sup> and Luther concludes his argumentation on an evangelical note<sup>5</sup>; but its theme is hardly the grace of God—the sovereignty of God is more like it—and its emphasis is on man's plight as a sinner rather than on his prospects as a child of God.<sup>6</sup>

But for a conference devoted to the human condition under the Law, *The Bondage of the Will* is certainly an appropriate source for Luther's thinking on the subject, and in the time allotted, we will focus especially on "the origins and consequences of original sin" as Luther discusses them in *The Bondage of the Will*. Since the question of "origins" is the more challenging of the two in this work, let's begin with the latter—the conse-

---

For the historical background to the controversy between Luther and Erasmus, see Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521-1532* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 213-238, and Léon-E. Halkin, *Erasmus: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 146-159. For a more detailed account, see Karl Zickendraht, *Der Streit zwischen Erasmus und Luther über die Willensfreiheit* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1909)

<sup>4</sup>For example, "In the New Testament, the gospel is preached and this is just the word that offers the Spirit and grace for the remission of sins which was procured for us by Christ crucified. It is all entirely free, given by the mercy of God the Father alone as he shows His favour towards us, who are unworthy, and who deserve condemnation." In this paper, English quotations are from the Packer and Johnston translation (abbreviated P&J). Parenthetical references are to volume 18 of the Weimar Edition of Luther's works. The quotation in this note is from P&J, 180 (WA 18:692.20-693.1). See also P&J, 71 (606.24-28), 111 (642.2-6), 162 (679.30-36), 166 (682.14-20), 167-168 (683.11-27), 176 (689.22-28), 187 (697.36-698.3), 244-245 (737.10-738.17), 276 (758.37-759.2), 287 (766.30-31), 290 (768.10-12), 292 (769.32-35). For an "evangelical" reading of *Bondage*, see Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1962), 122-126.

<sup>5</sup>"And, finally, if we believe that Christ redeemed men by His blood, we are forced to confess that all of man was lost; otherwise, we make Christ either wholly superfluous or else the redeemer of the least valuable part of man only; which is blasphemy, and sacrilege." P&J, 318 (WA 18:786.17-20). But note that even here, the Gospel is used as a proof of man's sinfulness. See also P&J, 312 (782.21-24). This is very similar to what Luther says in the Smalcald Articles (3.1.11). In fact, Part 3, Article 1, "Sin," of these articles repeats many of Luther's conclusions from *The Bondage of the Will*.

<sup>6</sup>The literature on *The Bondage of the Will* is extensive. There are fine introductions in Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 160-168; Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953), 259-285; Walter von Loewenich, "Gott und Mensch in humanistischer und reformatorischer Schau: Eine Einführung in Luthers Schrift *De servo arbitrio*" in *Humanitas-Christianitas* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1948), 65-101; and Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career, 1521-1530* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 417-458. For comprehensive analyses, see McSorley's *Luther: Right or Wrong?* and Klaus Schwarzwaller, *Theologia Crucis: Luthers Lehre von Prädestination nach De servo arbitrio*, 1525 (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1970). Schwarzwaller has also written a monograph that reviews the interpretation of *The Bondage of the Will* in the second half of the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth centuries, *Sibboleth: Die Interpretation von Luthers Schrift De servo arbitrio seit Theodosius Harnack: Ein systematisch-kritischer Überblick* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1969).

quences—before moving to the more difficult.

As the title itself suggests,<sup>7</sup> Luther's principal concern in this work is to demonstrate man's inability to save himself—an inability rooted in his condition as a sinner. In only one place, however, does Luther really discuss original sin (*peccatum originale*), at least as far as the term is concerned, and then, only in passing, as an argument among many that he is *not* going to develop against free will. Nevertheless, in that passage, Luther describes original sin as the sin that becomes ours by birth and argues that on its account, free will has no "power at all except to sin and incur damnation."<sup>8</sup>

Obviously, this consequence of original sin is dire indeed, and Luther mentions it all over the place in *The Bondage of the Will*. That man is a sinner from first to last and therefore powerless to save himself is one of the great themes of the treatise.<sup>9</sup> Of course, Luther's focus is on what sin means for the will, i.e., the power to choose. But he makes the following points as well: (1) all human beings are sinful; (2) every person is sinful in every part; (3) sin puts people under the power of Satan; and (4) even after Baptism, man remains a sinner.

Consider, first of all, the scope of human sinfulness. Who are sinners? Answer: everybody. Every human being. Referring specifically to original sin, Luther writes, "Of that one man [Adam], thus corrupt, *all* men were

---

<sup>7</sup>*De servo arbitrio* (literally, "Concerning the enslaved choice"). Since Augustine used the term on at least one occasion (*Contra Iulianum* 2.8.23), Lohse, 163, thinks that Luther chose it in order to identify himself with Augustine's doctrine of sin and grace. Luther himself refers to Augustine's terminology at WA 18:665.10-11 (P&J, 142). See McSorley, 90-93, for Augustine's understanding of "*servum arbitrium*."

<sup>8</sup>P&J, 297-298. "Igitur ipsum originale peccatum liberum arbitrium prorsus nihil sinit posse nisi peccare et damnari." WA 18:773.17-18. Cf SA 3.1.1.

Lohse, 251-257, argues that "Luther's view of inherited sin did not differ from the tradition to any great degree" (251). See also Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 157-160. Regarding possible influences on Luther's doctrine of original sin, Adolar Zumkeller, *Erbsünde, Gnade, Rechtfertigung und Verdienst nach der Lehre der Erfurter Augustinertheologen des Spätmittelalters* (Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1984), 503, maintains that in the century before Martin Luther, Erfurt Augustinians did not teach the theology of Occam, but there were some advocates of Gregory of Rimini. Unfortunately, the position of Johannes Nathin, the theologian most likely to have influenced Luther directly, is not known. For an overview of medieval theologians' understanding of sin, see *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, 10 vols. (München: Artemis-Verlag, 1977-1999), s.v. "Sünde, 'Sündenfall'" and Gerhard Krause and Gerhard Müller, eds., *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 1- (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1977-), s.v. "Sünde VI. Mittelalter."

<sup>9</sup>"[The ungodly man's] corruption, his turning of himself from God, makes it impossible for him to be moved and made to act well...the ungodly man cannot alter his perversion. As a result he sins and errs incessantly and inevitably until he is set right by the Spirit of God." P&J, 205 (WA 18:710.5-8). See also P&J, 100 (632.29-32), 102 (634.15-21), 113 (643.13-20), 147 (670.8-11), 168-169 (684.19-22), 179 (691.33-34), 198 (705.20), 241 (735.20-22), 256 (745.30-31), 263 (750.31-38), 265 (252.12-15), 278 (760.22-23), 286 (765.25-27), 288 (767.14-16), 290 (768.23-26), 292 (769.20-23), 296 (772.6-11), 310 (781.15-22), 311 (781.14-16).

born ungodly [emphasis mine]."<sup>10</sup> This means then that all people are liable to God's condemnation. Writing with reference to Romans 1:18 ("The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold down the truth in unrighteousness"), Luther says: "Do you hear this general judgment against all men, that they are under the wrath of God?...He [Paul] assigns the reason for the wrath by saying that they do only that which merits wrath and punishment—that they are all ungodly and unrighteous."<sup>11</sup> Luther explicitly rejects the notion that Paul's judgment refers only to some and not all people;<sup>12</sup> and in another place, Luther includes even the "saints" under the condemnation of sin:

I can easily prove to you [Erasmus]...that whenever such holy men as you boast of approach God to pray or deal with Him, they approach him in utter forgetfulness of their own "free-will"; in self-despair they cry to Him for pure grace alone, as something far other than they deserve. Augustine was often thus, and so was Bernard when, at the point of death, he said, "I have wasted my time, because I have lived a waster's life." I see no mention here of a power that could apply itself to grace; all power is here condemned, because it was entirely turned away from grace.<sup>13</sup>

Besides the universality of sin, Luther also teaches the total corruption of the sinner as a consequence of original sin. There is no part of man that is not sinful. Luther writes, "Since by the single offence of the one man, Adam, we all lie under sin and condemnation, how can we set our hand to anything that is not sinful and damnable?"<sup>14</sup> Referring to Romans 3:9 ("We have proved both Jews and Gentile to be all under sin."), Luther also says, "By describing them all as 'under sin,' that is, slaves of sin, he leaves them no goodness"; and in response to Erasmus's suggestion that the best parts of man, reason and will, still have power to make endeavors

<sup>10</sup>P&J, 202. "Ex quo homine sic corrupto nati sunt omnes impii." WA 18:708.23-24. Cf. SA 3.1.1.

<sup>11</sup>P&J, 273. "Audis hic generalem sententiam super omnes homines, quod sint sub ira Dei?...Caussam irae assignat, quod gerant non nisi ira et supplicio digna, nempe quod impii et iniusti sint omnes." WA 18:757.14-17. See also P&J, 242 (736.15-16), 248 (740.12-16), 250 (742.5-9), 254 (744.25-27), 279 (761.9-11), 283 (763.19-25).

<sup>12</sup>P&J, 274-275, 277 (WA 18:757.37-758.1, 759.20-26).

<sup>13</sup>P&J, 114. "Ego vero contrarium vobis facile ostendam, Quod viri sancti, quales iactatis, quoties ad Deum oraturi vel acturi accedunt, quam penitus obliti incedant liberi arbitrii sui, desperantes de semetipsis, ac nihil nisi solam et puram gratiam longe alia meritis sibi invocantes, Qualis sepe Augustinus, Qualis Bernhardus cum moriturus diceret: Perdidit tempus meum, quia perditte vixi. Non video hic allegari vim aliquam, quae ad gratiam sese applicet, sed accusari omnem vim quod non nisi aversa fuerit." WA 18:644.4-11.

<sup>14</sup>P&J, 297. "Cum unius Adae unico delicto omnes sub peccato et damnatione sumus, quomodo possumus aliquid tentare, quod non peccatum et damnabile sit?" WA 18:773.8-9. Cf. SA 3.1.3-8.

for good, Luther writes, "But wrath is revealed from heaven against them, and unless they are justified by the Spirit, it will damn them, whole and entire; which would not be, were they not under sin, whole and entire."<sup>15</sup>

As further evidence of total corruption, Luther cites the failure of "the best and most excellent of men...with their best and most excellent faculties, that is, their reason and their will" to find favor with God in spite of undeniable "zeal for the works of the law." "If *they* are condemned," writes Luther, "for ungodliness...and are declared to be 'flesh' in God's sight, what then is left in the entire human race which is not 'flesh' and ungodly?"<sup>16</sup>

In fact, Luther views it as a singular indication of sinful perversity that these "best devotees of the law" ("*optimi et studiosi legis*") who seek righteousness before God by the law not only fail in their objective but are actually ignorant of what the law teaches, viz., the knowledge of sin. "And what can a man essay to do in order to take away sin, when he does not know what sin is?" Luther asks. "Surely this: mistake what is sin for what is not sin, and what is not sin for what is sin!" As a result, those whom the world values as its best representatives of righteousness and godliness, hate and hound the true righteousness of the Gospel.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, then, because of their sinful condition, all human beings—apart from grace—take their marching orders from the devil. Christians know, Luther writes,

...that there are in the world two kingdoms at war with each other. In the one, Satan reigns.... He...holds captive at his will all that are not wrested from him by the Spirit of Christ; nor does he allow them to be plucked away by any other power but the Spirit of God.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup>P&J, 278-279. "Neminem excipit, qui dicit: omnes. Nihil relinquit boni, qui eos sub peccato esse id est servos peccati definit" (WA 18:760.22-23), and "Sed ira de coelo revelata super eos totos est damnatura, nisi spiritu iustificentur, quod non fieret, nisi toti essent sub peccato" (WA 18:760.38-39). See also P&J, 102 (634.16-20), 241 (735.20-27), 243 (736.24-25), 248 (740.19-26), 251 (742.15-21), 254 (744.25-29), 280-81 (761.32-37; 762.5-7), 308 (780.16-17).

<sup>16</sup>P&J, 283. "At cum ipsa legis opera damnet et impia faciat coram Deo, manifestum fit, quod omnes, qui studio legis et operum pollebant, damnat. Studebant autem legi et operibus non nisi optimi et praestantissimi, idque non nisi optimis et praestantissimis sui partibus, ratione scilicet et voluntate...si, inquam, ii damnantur impetatis...sed caro esse definiuntur coram Deo—, Quid iam reliquum est in toto hominum genere, quod non caro et impium est?" WA 18:763.39-764.6. For Luther, this indictment includes Jews like Nicodemus (P&J, 305-306; WA 18:778.17-779.10) and Gentiles like Cicero and Demosthenes (P&J 316; WA 18:785.11-12). See also P&J, 251-252 (742.26-743.15), 253 (743.35-744.2), 275 (758.14-16), 276 (758.36-759.12), 318 (786.14-17).

<sup>17</sup>P&J, 286-287. "At qui peccatum ignorat, quid ille conetur pro peccato auferendo? Hoc scilicet, quod peccatum pro non peccato et non peccatum pro peccato iudicabit." WA 18:766.10-12. See also P&J, 153 (674.1-2), 186 (697.9-12), 187 (697.36-698.9), 232-233 (729.7-730.15), 275 (758.14-17), 276 (759.6-12), 277-78 (759.33-37; 760.8-14), 285 (765.14-17), 300 (775.1-4), 311 (782.1-4).

<sup>18</sup>P&J, 312. "[Cuncti Christiani] sciunt (inquam) duo esse regna in mundo mutuo pugnantisima, in altero Satanam regnare...qui cunctos tenet captivos ad voluntatem

But what does it mean to be ruled by Satan? For one thing, it means that we are blind to God's Word, "fast bound in a darkness that is no more human, but devilish."<sup>19</sup> In spite of the inherent clarity of the Bible, the power of Satan is such that we do not understand its plainest teachings. As a result, we are blind to our own condition as sinners, "The work of Satan is to hold men so that they do not recognize their wretchedness, but presume that they can do everything that is stated [in the law]."<sup>20</sup> It also means that we are powerless to do anything but sin, because "Satan is by far the most powerful and crafty prince in this world.... Under his 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. And he will not let it will any good."<sup>21</sup>

It is in connection with this total power of Satan over people that only God can break that Luther employs his famous comparison of the human will to a beast of burden standing between two riders. "If God rides," says Luther, "it wills and goes where God wills.... If Satan rides, it wills and goes where Satan wills. Nor may it choose to which rider it will run, or which it will seek; but the riders themselves fight to decide who shall have and hold it."<sup>22</sup>

Though effective in conveying the utter helplessness of man's will, there is something misleading about the comparison, for man's situation is even worse than it suggests. Luther contends that even after God has rescued man from Satan's kingdom, there is a sense in which the devil continues to ride—or at least tries to—for man remains a sinner. Although Luther does not really develop this argument because Erasmus did not debate it in his work,<sup>23</sup> Luther designates it "the Achilles" of his argu-

---

suam, qui non sunt Christi spiritu ab eo rapti,...nec sinit eos sibi rapti ullis viribus nisi spiritu Dei." WA 18:782.29-34. See also P&J, 147 (670.6-11), 156 (675.36-37), 187 (697.27), 188 (698.13-14), 253 (743.32-35), 301 (775.16-18). Cf. SA 3.1.1.

<sup>19</sup>P&J, 132. "Daemoniacis nec iam humanis tenebris tenemur." WA 18:658.15-16.

<sup>20</sup>P&J, 162. "Satanae opus est, ut homines teneat, ne suam miseriam agnoscant, sed praesumant sese posse omnia quae dicuntur." WA 18:679.31-33. Cf. SA 3.1.3.

<sup>21</sup>P&J, 263. "...Satanam esse principem longe potentissimum et callidissimum mundi,...quo regnante voluntas humana iam non libera nec sui iuris, sed serva peccati et Satanae non potest velle nisi quod princeps ille suus voluerit. Nihil vero boni ille sinit eam velle." WA 18:750.33-36. See also P&J, 103 (635.7-9), 107 (638.9-11), 156 (675.36-37), 162 (679.23-26), 201 (707.10-11), 262 (750.31-35), 312 (782.21-783.1), 317 (786.7-10). Cf. SA 3.1.5.

<sup>22</sup>P&J, 104. "Sic humana voluntas in medio posita est ceu iumentum, si insederit Deus, vult et vadit, quo vult Deus,...Si insederit Satan, vult et vadit, quo vult Satan, nec est in eius arbitrio ad utrum sessorem currere aut eum quaerere, sed ipsi sessores certant ob ipsum obtinendum et possidendum." WA 18:635.17-22. See McSorley, 335-40, for historical background to this image.

<sup>23</sup>It is a major theme, however, in Luther's reply to the Louvain theologian, Latomus, (WA 8:43-128; LW 32:137-260). Luther's teaching that sin remains after Baptism was also one of the points for which Luther had been condemned in the papal bull of 1520 and which derived from Thesis 2 of the Leipzig Debate, "To deny that...sin remains in the

ments against free will and explains it on the basis of Romans 7<sup>24</sup> and Galatians 5,

There is in the saints and the godly such a mighty warfare between the Spirit and the flesh that they cannot do what they would. From this I would argue as follows: If human nature is so bad that in those who are born again of the Spirit it not only fails to endeavour after good, but actually fights against and opposes good, how could it endeavour after good in those who are not yet born again of the Spirit, but serve under Satan in the old man?<sup>25</sup>

Luther returns to the problem of sin in the life of the faithful in the conclusion to *Bondage* and lists it as one of his five chief arguments against free will. He identifies it explicitly as a consequence of original sin:

If we believe that original sin has ruined us to such an extent that even in the godly, who are led by the Spirit, it causes abundance of trouble by striving against good, it is clear that in a man who lacks the Spirit nothing is left that can turn itself to good, but only to evil.<sup>26</sup>

Because of original sin, therefore, man's situation is truly desperate, a slave to sin and Satan, unless he is rescued by God's grace, and even then, so weak that he remains utterly reliant upon that same grace.

But if that's the case, how did humanity come to be in this situation? Where did original sin come from?

The simple answer is from Adam, "By the single offence of the one man, Adam, we all lie under sin and condemnation." But that single of-

---

child after baptism...is equivalent to crushing Paul and Christ under foot." LW 31:317 (WA 2:160.34-35). See also Roos, 919, and Brecht, 7-9.

<sup>24</sup>There is a long history of debate over who it is that Paul is talking about in Romans 7:14-25, but Luther, as early as his lectures on Romans (1515-1516), understood these verses as referring to Paul and all Christians (LW 25:61[WA 56:68.9-15] and LW 25:327-236 [WA 56:339.5-347.28]). See Michael Paul Middendorf, *The "I" in the Storm: A Study of Romans 7* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1997), 273-274, and Otto Kuss, *Der Römerbrief*, vol. 2: *Röm 6,11 bis 8,19* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1963), 473-475.

<sup>25</sup>P&J, 313. "Paulus docet, in sanctis et piis esse pugnam spiritus et carnis tam validam, ut non facere possint, quae vellent. Ex hoc sic arguebam: Si natura hominis adeo mala est, ut in iis, qui spiritu renati sint, non modo non conetur ad bonum, sed etiam pugnet et adversetur bono, quomodo in illis, qui nondum renati in verteri homine sub Satana serviunt, ad bonum conaretur?" WA 18:783.4-9. See also P&J, 255 (745.6-10) and 262 (750.4-5). Therefore, Luther concludes in the Smalcald Articles (3.3.40), the life of the Christian is one of daily repentance.

<sup>26</sup>P&J, 317. "Si peccatum originale credimus sic nos perdidisse, ut etiam iis, qui spiritu aguntur, negotium molestissimum faciat adversus bonum luctando, clarum est, nihil in homine spiritus inani reliquum esse, quod ad bonum sese verti possit, sed tantum ad malum." WA 18:786.10-14.

fence now belongs to every human being, for, Luther inquires, "who could be condemned for another's offence, especially in the sight of God?" This does not mean, however, that each of us has committed this sin. No, we are born with it, "His offence becomes ours; not by imitation, nor by any act on our part (for then it would not be the single offence of Adam, since we should have committed it, not he), but it becomes ours by birth."<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, Luther is not much interested in *how* original sin is passed from one generation to the next, but he does insist that it is so passed and thus wreaks spiritual havoc in humanity.<sup>28</sup>

If, however, we all suffer from the consequences of Adam's sin, it is not surprising that Luther discusses the origins of original sin in Adam himself. This, in turn, raises significant questions about the relationship of sin to the sovereignty of God.

As is well known, a principal argument for the "bondage of the will" apart from human sinfulness is the sovereignty of God. Luther makes this point early in his treatise in connection with God's foreknowledge. "It is fundamentally necessary and wholesome," writes Luther, "for Christians to know that God foreknows nothing contingently, but that he foresees, purposes, and does all things according His own immutable, eternal and infallible will. This bombshell knocks 'free-will' flat, and utterly shatters it."<sup>29</sup>

It is a great argument, but the challenge of Luther's work is putting the argument from the sovereignty of God together with Luther's other one, viz., the sinfulness of man. If God is in charge, how is it that man is a sinner? Is God responsible for sin?

Luther's answer is, in part, No. Man and Satan are responsible for sin. True enough, they exist, live, and do evil—all while being subject to God. "Since God moves and works all in all, He moves and works of necessity

---

<sup>27</sup>P&J, 297-98. "Cum unius Adae unico delicto omnes sub peccato et damnatione sumus, quomodo possumus aliquid tentare, quod non peccatum et damnabile sit?...Quis enim alieno delicto damnaretur, praesertim coram Deo? Nostrum autem non fit imitando aut operando, cum hoc non esse posset delictum illud unicum Adae, ut quod non ipse, sed nos fecerimus, fit vero nostrum nascendo." WA 18:773.8-16. See also P&J, 202 (708.23-24), 314 (784.5-6).

<sup>28</sup>Elsewhere, in connection with the virgin birth of our Lord, Luther explains the transmittal of original sin in a little more detail by maintaining that the corruption of sin extends to the activity of human procreation: "...the flesh is consumed and corrupted by evil lust, so that its natural act of procreation cannot occur without sin. Whatever conceives and bears through an act of the flesh produces also a carnal and sinful fruit." *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, LW 45:202 (WA 11:317.1-10).

<sup>29</sup>P&J, 80. "Est itaque et hoc imprimis necessarium et salutare Christiano, nosse, quod Deus nihil praescit contingenter, sed quod omnia incommutabili et aeterna infallibilique voluntate et praevident et proponit et facit. Hoc fulmine sternitur et conteritur penitus liberum arbitrium." WA 18:615.12-15. See also P&J, 213 (716.5), 216-17 (718.31-32), 218 (719.26-30), 222 (722.9-13), 259 (747.31-35), 310 (781.10-14). One interesting note is that Luther claims that this truth is a part of the natural knowledge of God. P&J, 82-83 (617.23-618.18), 203 (709.10-11), 216-217 (718.15-19), 218 (719.20-35), 315 (784.21-26), 317 (786.3-7).



even in Satan and the ungodly. But He works according to what they are, and what He finds them to be.<sup>30</sup> In other words, the fact that they do anything at all is due solely to the almighty power of God; but the fact that what they do is evil is due solely to the corruption of their natures, not God.

Luther applies the same reasoning to the transmission of original sin from one generation to the next. Every time a child is born God is creating human life that is sinful, not because He is wicked but because He creates it from human life that is already sinful. Luther writes:

Though God does not make sin, yet He does not cease to form and multiply our nature, from which the Spirit has been withdrawn and which sin has impaired. He is like a carpenter who makes statues out of warped wood. As is the nature, so are men made; for God creates and forms them out of that nature.<sup>31</sup>

In spite of God's active participation in a world of wickedness, Luther insists that God Himself remains good. This is true even when He moves the wicked while they are doing evil, because God uses the evil done by them to accomplish His own good ends:

We being evil by nature, and God being good, when He impels us to act by His own acting upon us according to the nature of His omnipotence, good though He is in Himself, He cannot but do evil by our evil instrumentality; although, according to His wisdom, He makes good use of this evil for His own glory and for our salvation.<sup>32</sup>

God's good purposes may be invisible to us ("Many things seem, and are, very good to God, which seem, and are, very bad to us"), but Luther offers "Christ and the gospel" as a premier example of how God operates. The world cannot see—it "abominates" them both—but in truth nothing is bet-

---

<sup>30</sup>P&J, 204. "Quando ergo Deus omnia movet et agit, necessario movet etiam et agit in Satana et impio. Agit autem in illis taliter, quales illi sunt et quales invenit." WA 18:709.21-23. See also P&J, 258 (747.16-20), 259 (747.31-35), 265 (752.12-15), 267-68 (753.28-33).

<sup>31</sup>P&J, 203. "Licet enim Deus peccatum non faciat, tamen naturam peccato, subtracto spiritu, vitiatam non cessat formare et multiplicare, tanquam si faber ex limbo corrupto statuas faciat. Ita qualis natura, tales fiunt homines, Deo creante et formante illos ex natura tali." WA 18:708.31-34. Talking about Pharaoh, Luther says that "God created Pharaoh ungodly, that is, of an ungodly and corrupt seed." P&J, 202 (WA 18:708.25-26).

<sup>32</sup>P&J, 206. "Sed ita cogit, qui utcunque talia volet intelligere: In nobis, id est, per nos Deum operari mala, non culpa Dei, sed vitio nostro, qui cum simus natura mali, Deus vero bonus, nos actione sua pro natura omnipotentiae suae rapiens, aliter facere non possit, quam quod ipse bonus malo instrumento malum faciat, licet hoc malo pro sua sapientia utatur bene ad gloriam suam et salutem nostrum." WA 18:711.2-7.

ter. So recognizing God's goodness is not a matter of sight but of faith. Luther puts it this way, "How things that are bad for us are good in the sight of God is known only to God and to those who see with God's eyes, that is, who have the Spirit."<sup>33</sup>

From Luther's perspective, therefore, God is responsible for what happens and employs it for His own good purposes, but Satan and man are responsible for the sinful character of what they do.

But still there remains the question of origins. Since nothing happens apart from God's power, isn't God responsible for Satan's and man's becoming sinful in the first place? Luther frames the question this way, "Why did God let Adam fall, and why did He create us all tainted with the same sin, when He might have kept Adam safe, and might have created us of other material, or of seed that had first been cleansed?"<sup>34</sup>

In a Table Talk, Luther once speculated that if somebody asked God at the last judgment why he permitted Adam to fall, He might answer, "In order that my goodness toward the human race might be understood when I gave my Son for man's salvation."<sup>35</sup> In this way, God's good purpose can be seen even in the Fall.

But in *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther responds differently. First of all, he says that we should not ask such questions. "It is not for us to inquire into these mysteries, but to adore them."<sup>36</sup> God is God, and we are not. He is the one who determines what is good; we certainly do not. "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 wills it so." This means that human beings are in no position to question or challenge God's decisions. In fact, there is no basis for anyone to challenge God, "Causes and grounds are laid down for the will of the creature, but not for the will

---

<sup>33</sup>P&J, 203. "Multa videntur Deo et sunt bona valde, quae nobis videntur et sunt pessima. Sic afflictiones, mala, errores, infernus, imo omnia optima opera Dei sunt coram mundo pessima et damnabilia. Quid Christo et Euangelio melius? At quid mundo execratus? Igitur quomodo sint bona coram Deo, quae nobis mala sunt, solus Deus novit et ii qui oculis Dei vident, id est qui spiritum habent." WA 18:708.37-709.3. See also P&J, 232-233 (729.13-21), 234-235 (731.9-13), 314 (784.1-9), 317 (785.26-38).

<sup>34</sup>P&J, 209. "Cur permisit Adam ruere, et cur nos omnes eodem peccato infectos condit, cum potuisset illum servare et nos aliunde vel primum purgato semine creare." WA 8:712.29-31.

<sup>35</sup>WATR 4, 5071; LW 54:385-386; cited in Althaus, 160. Luther's main point, however, is the same as in *Bondage*, viz., that we should not we should not ask God "why" He does something.

<sup>36</sup>P&J, 208. "Nec nostrum hoc est quaerere, sed adorare mysteria haec." WA 8:712.26. Though introduced as the answer to another question, "Why then does He not alter those evil wills which He moves?" Luther says that "the same reply" ("idem dicetur illis") should be given to those who ask why God permitted Adam to sin. See also P&J, 99 (631.39-632.2), 100 (632.22-26), 176 (690.1-2), 200 (706.29), 314 (784.6-9). Similarly, in the Genesis lectures (LW 1:144; WA 42:108.33-40, 109.8-13) Luther rejects questions about why God permitted Satan to tempt Eve.

of the Creator—unless you set another Creator over him!”<sup>37</sup> Since God has not told us why He permitted sin to enter the world, we must remain silent.

Interestingly, however, Luther himself does not quite let it rest there. Although he does not seek to answer why God permitted sin to enter into the world, he does say just a word or two about how it happened. Regarding the devil, for example, Luther writes, “God, finding Satan’s will evil, not creating it so (it became so by Satan’s sinning and God’s withdrawing) carries it along by His own operation and moves it where He wills.” This suggests a dual responsibility. Satan did the sinning but God “withdrew” (“*desero*”). Though he could have, God did not act to prevent Satan’s fall.<sup>38</sup>

But with respect to Adam, Luther goes even further and comes very close to saying that God was responsible for his fall. Luther initiates a discussion of Adam’s original sin in order to show the impotence of sinful man. It is an argument from the greater to the lesser: If even sinless Adam could not exercise his will to resist Satan, how can sinners expect to do so now? Luther attributes a kind of “free will” to Adam, but one that does him no good apart from the presence of God’s Spirit. In Luther’s thinking, man as “man” is pretty weak stuff in the face of Satanic power. Luther writes, “What then could we, who are fallen, do to secure the first-fruits of the Spirit that have been taken from us. Especially when Satan, who cast Adam down by temptation alone, at a time when he was not yet Adam’s ruler, now reigns in us with complete power over us!”<sup>39</sup>

So Satan overwhelmed Adam’s defenses. But why was Adam so vulnerable to the devil’s enticement? Luther answers, “Because God did not give him what he needed to resist”:

And if he [Adam], who had the Spirit, could not with his new will will a good newly proposed (that is, obedience), because the Spirit

---

<sup>37</sup>P&J, 209. “Non enim quia sic [Deus] debet vel debuit velle, ideo rectum est, quod vult. Sed contra: Quia ipse sic vult, ideo debet rectum esse, quod fit. Creaturae voluntati causa et ratio praescribitur sed non Creatoris voluntati, nisi alium illi praefeceris creatorem.” WA 18:712.35-38. See also P&J, 232-233 (729.13-730.2), 234 (731.9-13), 314-315 (784.6-13), 317 (785.26-38). For Luther, God is the only truly free being. See P&J, 137 (602.5), 198 (705.24-36), 233 (730.12-14). According to Lohse, 214-218, statements like this may reflect “Occamist influence” on Luther’s thought, but Luther differed from Occam in that Luther “did not set the freedom of God in the context of a distinction between the *potentia Dei absoluta* and the *potentia Dei ordinata*, but always under the aspect of the question of salvation.” For Occam’s theology, see *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, s.v. “Ockham/Ockhamism” and Joseph R. Strayer, ed., *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, 13 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1982-1989), s.v. “Ockham, William of.”

<sup>38</sup>P&J, 206. “Sic Satanae voluntatem malam inveniens, non autem creans, sed deserente Deo et peccante Satana malam factam arripit operando et movet quorsum vult.” WA 18:711.7-9. See also P&J, 204 (709.12-14).

<sup>39</sup>P&J, 156. “Quomodo nos lapsi possemus in primitias spiritus ablatas? Praesertim iam regnante in nobis plena potestate Satana, qui illum [Adam] sola tentatione nondum regnans in eo prostravit.” WA 18:675.35-37.

did not add that to him, what can we, without the Spirit, do about the good that we have lost? By the example of that first man, it was shown us, with a view to breaking down our pride, what our "free-will" can do if it is left to itself, and is not continually moved and increased more and more by the Spirit of God.<sup>40</sup>

Adam could not ("*non potuit*"), Luther says, will to obey the commandment because the Spirit did not give ("*non addebat*") that power to him.

Although Luther's main point is a pastoral one, sinful human beings must rely exclusively upon the grace of God,<sup>41</sup> Luther's language locates the ultimate responsibility for the Fall in the omnipotent God who did not supply what was necessary to prevent it.

Such statements are simply corollaries to a larger point that Luther makes elsewhere regarding the hidden and revealed wills of God. Rather than surrender one iota of God's sovereignty, even in the face of sin and evil, Luther posits two, virtually contradictory wills in God—one as we have it in the Gospel, the other as we see it but do not understand it in a sin-cursed world. Luther describes the situation this way:

So it is right to say: "If God does not desire our death, it must be laid to the charge of our own will if we perish"; this, I repeat, is right if you spoke as God preached. For He desires that all men should be saved, in that He comes to all by the word of salvation, and the fault is in the will which does not receive Him.... But why the Majesty does not remove or change this fault of will in every man (for it is not in the power of man to do it), or why He lays this fault to the charge of the will, when man cannot avoid it, it is not lawful to ask; and though you should ask much, you would never find out.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup>P&J, 156. "Quod si is homo, cum adesset spiritus, nova voluntate non potuit velle bonum de novo propositum, id est obedientiam, quia spiritus illam non addebat, quid nos sine spiritu possemus in bono amisso? Ostensum est ergo in isto homine terribili exemplo pro nostra superbia conterenda, quid possit liberum arbitrium nostrum sibi relictum ac non continuo magis ac magis actum et auctum spiritu Dei." WA 18:675.28-34. See also P&J, 202 (WA 18:708.22-23), "The immediate sequel, in the third chapter [of Genesis], tells how man became evil, and was abandoned by God and left to himself."

<sup>41</sup>Indeed, Luther says of the entire dispute with Erasmus, "I did not undertake this debate with a view to self-advertisement, but in order that I might exalt the grace of God." P&J, 111 (WA 18:641.13-14). See also P&J, 270 (755.3-16), 281 (762.28-30), 302 (775.41-776.3), 312 (782.35-38), 314 (783.28-33).

<sup>42</sup>P&J, 171. "Igitur recte dicitur: Si Deus non vult mortem, nostrae voluntati imputandum est quod perimus. Recte inquam, si de Deo praedicato dixeris. Nam ille vult omnes homines salvos fieri, dum verbo salutis ad omnes venit, vitiumque est voluntatis, quae non admittit eum.... Verum quare maiestas illa vitium hoc voluntatis nostrae non tollit aut mutat in omnibus, cum non sit in potestate hominis, aut cur illud ei imputet, cum non possit homo eo carere, quaerere non licet ac si multum quaeras, nunquam tamen invenies." WA 18:686.4-11.

Clearly, Luther does not shy away from the most terrifying consequences of his understanding of God's power. Of course, he insists that we rely on God's revealed will, "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?"<sup>43</sup> But reliance on the Word does not prevent Luther from acknowledging God's sovereignty over a world thrown into misery by original sin and its consequences.<sup>44</sup>

But why does Luther care so much about God's sovereignty? Are these statements simply the consequences of unrestrained theological speculation? Admittedly, Luther believes that God's sovereignty is an invincible argument against free will, but is there anything more to it than that? Just a great argument to defeat Erasmus?

Not surprisingly, Luther contends that much more is at stake. God's sovereignty, he argues, is basic to the Gospel itself,

For if you hesitate to believe, or are too proud to acknowledge, that God foreknows and wills all things, not contingently, but necessarily and immutably, how can you believe, trust and rely on His promises? When He makes promises, you ought to be out of doubt that He knows, and can and will perform what He promises.... And how can you be thus sure and certain, unless you know that certainly, infallibly, immutably, and necessarily, He knows, wills and will perform what He promises?<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup>P&J, 170-171. "Nunc autem nobis spectandum est verbum relinquendaque illa voluntas imperscrutabilis. Verbo enim nos dirigi, non voluntate illa inscrutabili oportet. Atque adeo quis sese dirigere queat ad voluntatem prorsus imperscrutabilem et incognoscibilem?" WA 18:685.29-686.1. See also P&J, 175-176 (689.18-25).

There is a very interesting passage in the Genesis lectures in which Luther returns to this same theme of the hidden and revealed God and particularly predestination. Concerned that after his death people will corrupt his teachings, Luther reaffirms that "everything is absolute and unavoidable" but emphasizes even more than in *Bondage*, not only the utter foolishness of trying to probe the hidden purposes of God but especially the *absolute reliability* of God's promises in Christ. See LW 5:42-50 (WA 43:457.32-463.17). This passage is cited in the Formula of Concord (SD 2.44) as Luther's definitive commentary on some of his ideas in *The Bondage of the Will* like "absolute necessity."<sup>44</sup> "Now, the highest degree of faith is to believe that He is merciful, though He saves so few and damns so many; to believe that He is just though of His own will He makes us perforce proper subjects for damnation." P&J, 101 (WA 18:633.15-17). See also P&J, 158 (677.1-4), 176 (689.25-690.2), 199 (705.32-36), 201-202 (707.32-708.9), 217 (719.4-19), 227 (726.4-13), 228-229 (726.33-38), 314 (784.1-9), 317 (785.26-38).

<sup>45</sup>P&J, 83-84. "Si enim dubitas aut contemnis nosse, quod Deus omnia non contingenter sed necessario et immutabiliter praesciat et velit quomodo poteris eius promissionibus credere, certo fidere et niti? Cum enim promittit, certum portet te esse, quod sciat, possit et velit praestare, quod promittit.... At quo modo certus et securus eris? Nisi scieris illum, certo et infallibiliter et immutabiliter ac necessario scire et velle et facturum esse, quod promittit." WA 18:619.1-8. See also P&J, 78-79 (614.16-26), 211 (714.18-23), 213 (716.5-9, 13-15), 271 (755.36-37).

Therefore, in Luther's thinking, it is basic to the Christian hope that God is in charge of the universe: when He speaks, He delivers. It's as simple as that.<sup>46</sup>

But why the world is the way it is, why God permitted Adam to sin, why God transmitted that sin through all generations, and why He continues to let Adam's offspring suffer its horrible consequences, we do not know, nor should we seek to know. Without making very clear the grounds of his optimism, Luther believes that by the light of glory, we will all understand the justice of God in these matters even if at present we do not; nevertheless here and now, our proper response is simply to believe in the righteous justice of God.<sup>47</sup>

Humility in the face of divine mysteries is always the right course, and for Christians, the Gospel—God's revealed will—is always the answer to the horrors of the human condition. Nevertheless, in this work, *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther forces us to face these horrors and to realize that at their center is a hidden God who in a strange way wills them, including our sin and death. Original sin is certainly ours, for prior to faith we willingly embrace all that it entails and even after faith, we are always wrestling with its aftereffects in our lives. However, nothing that we are or do changes the fact that God is always in charge. This may make us uncomfortable when we are discussing sin, but it is absolutely necessary for believing the Gospel.

---

In some places, Luther grants to man a kind of freedom in things below him, i.e., that which God entrusted to his care at the time of creation. But even in these matters, man's decisions are subject to God's will: "We may still in good faith teach people to use it to credit man with 'free-will' in respect not of what is above him, but of what is below him. That is to say, man should realize that in regard to his money and possessions he has a right to use them, to do or to leave undone, according to his own 'free-will'—though that very 'free-will' is overruled by the free-will of God alone, according to His own pleasure." P&J, 107 (WA 18:638.4-9). See also P&J, 150 (671.33-39), 256 (745.39-746.8), 257-258 (746.30-35), 265 (752.6-15), 309-310 (781.6-13).

<sup>46</sup>Luther also makes the point that the Gospel itself depends on God's not acting "fairly" from a human perspective since by our standards, it is not *fair* that God forgives the sins of the undeserving. P&J, 234 (WA 18:731.7-9).

<sup>47</sup>"To think that we cannot for a little while *believe* that He is just, when He has actually promised us that when He reveals His glory we shall all clearly *see* that He both was and is just!" P&J, 315 (WA 18:784.30-34). See also P&J, 234-235 (731.9-13), 316 (785.20-26), 317 (785.35-38).