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Author

Dr. James E. McGoldrick is professor of history at Cedarville College, Cedarville, Ohio. He is a serious student of Reformation history. This article, in a slightly different form, originally appeared in *The Banner of Truth*, No. 232, January 1983, and is used with their permission.

The Protestant Reformation is rich in images connected with Martin Luther. Our mind's eye sees him nailing his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of *The Church of All Saints* in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. These topics for debate among theologians kick off the controversy with Rome—inadvertently, to be sure. Again, in April, 1521, we can imagine Luther before Emperor Charles who has ordered him to recant. Charles Krauth has called this moment “the greatest scene in modern European history.” What will he do? Listen: “I cannot and I will not retract, for it is unsafe for a Christian to speak against conscience. Here I stand; I can do no other. May God help me! Amen!”

Speaking of images, who cannot see brother Martin throwing his inkwell at the devil! These images, whether quite accurate or not, are vividly before us in the late 20th century.

But the heart of the Reformation does not lend itself so readily to imagery. Theological issues rarely do. Images usually capture action rather than thought. Chief among the thoughts of Luther was the idea he captured in the title of his book *The Bondage of the Will*. To most of us neither his thought nor the title are familiar. They conjure up no image at all. We simply stand blankly before them.

The issue Luther grappled with in *The Bondage of the Will* can be turned into imagery by asking the question, “Just how dead is the dead sinner?” There he is; look at him. What can you expect of him? Can he move his arms or legs? Will he clean his plate? Will he sneeze? Just how dead is he? Look again. Is he, or is he not, a corpse? Luther's answer: yes, he is. But what exactly does this mean?

For Martin Luther the natural man was a spiritual corpse, wholly insensitive to the will of God. In practical terms that meant the natural man would never turn to God. He would have to be resurrected from his spiritual death to do that. Unlike many evangelicals in our time, Luther was convinced

that the sinner could do nothing to gain eternal life. Even the sinner's faith would have to be given to him.

This is what Luther meant by the bondage of the will. The natural man is a wicked man in all his parts. Since he is wicked, his will is wicked. *His will, in other words, is bound to what he is.* To imagine wicked man exercising his will to turn to a good God is to imagine what has never yet happened in all the world. It has not happened; it could not happen. No amount of time—not even billions of years could produce one wicked sinner that would turn to God or Christ. Man is dead spiritually. Really dead! And his will reflects that spiritual death. Let us compare Luther's understanding with that of some other figures in Christian history.

At the end of the fourth century a man named Pelagius wrote on this subject. Pelagius held that Adam's fall in Eden set a bad example for all mankind. That example, he argued, has resulted in the awful amount of sin and ungodliness that we see around us. All men have followed Adam's example, but they need not have done so. Their "free will" could have been used to serve God. All men need to do is to decide to exercise their wills for godliness and they will find that their wills will operate as robustly for righteousness as they have often operated for sin. Basically man, though sinful for sure, has within himself the power to serve God if he makes a proper choice. Martin Luther was definitely **not** a Pelagian!

Actually, Pelagius did not convince many theologians. In part that was due to the opposition of a much more famous name in Christian history, Aurelius Augustine. Augustine held the same view that Martin Luther came to hold a millenium later. No denomination, large or small, seems to have officially adopted Pelagianism. But Pelagius made his mark in another way. He led a number of theologians over the centuries to adopt what has been called Semi-Pelagianism. These men did not agree with Pelagius, but

they also thought that Augustine was a bit too strict. What they taught was this: Man was just about as sick with sin as Augustine thought, but not quite. While he could not please God on his own, he did retain the power to turn to God for salvation. Man is very sick indeed, but not quite dead!

Luther saw the Roman Catholic church as corrupt in several ways, but especially in this: the church had slipped into Semi-Pelagianism. The church no longer followed the Scriptures in viewing the natural man as dead; they saw him as merely sick. Luther thought the difference between sickness and death to be an infinite difference!

Luther was not alone in his understanding of Scripture. John Huss, who had been martyred in the previous century, had held the same view. Huss, in turn, had been influenced by John Wycliffe, the man who has been called "the Morning Star of the Reformation." Among Luther's contemporaries, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin and, indeed, all the best-known names of the Reformation period shared his view of human nature. They were sure that anyone who read his Bible with an open mind would see that the natural man is an enemy of God who must be given a new heart in order to turn to God. His "free will" is a cipher as far as its power to turn to God is concerned. "We shall do battle," Luther writes to Erasmus, "against 'free-will' for the grace of God."

These men were radicals! But were they "radically" right or wrong? Can we think of having a reformation and a great new awakening in our time apart from the convictions of these Reformers? We must judge the answer to these questions by asking what the Scripture teaches.

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, plainly teaches that the natural man is "dead in trespasses and sins" (2:1) and that the cure for this is only found in resurrection. Says the Apostle in the same letter:

"But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our

transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him..."(Ephesians 2:4-6a).

This radical change from death to life is a work of (new) creation, totally done by the Lord. As Paul says, "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works..."(Ephesians 2:10). Quite obviously, dead men do not exercise faith. *Dead men do not do anything!*

There, someone says, is exactly the problem. Luther read these statements about death as though man were a literal corpse. The dead men the Bible talks about do all kinds of things! The objector is right about man's activity, of course. The Bible's dead men are still very active. But what do they do? Listen to the Apostle again in the same chapter of Ephesians:

"You were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest."

(Ephesians 2:1-3)

Paul describes the activity of dead men in these verses, and it is not a pretty picture. How do they walk (2:2)? In the way the world and Satan would have them to walk. In what sense do they live (2:3)? Their "life" is being swept along by lusts, the desires of the flesh and the thoughts of the unregenerate mind. Is there any room here for God? Not without new life.

Paul makes this same point in 1 Corinthians 2:14:

"But a natural man does not accept the things of

the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised." (2:14)

Why will a natural man not accept the things of the Spirit? Because "...they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them." Sane men do not risk their lives on foolishness that makes no sense to them. What is it that looks like folly to the natural man? At one time I would have answered, *the deep things of God*. We all know, I would have added, that natural men accept the gospel; that is clear enough. So it must be the deep things of God—whatever they are—that natural men do not accept. In saying that, however, I would have abandoned Paul. Why? Because Paul has just taken great pains in chapter one to explain that it is the gospel that both Jews and Gentiles find to be foolishness! Listen to him as he repeatedly makes the same point:

"For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing *foolishness*....God was well-pleased through the *foolishness* of the message preached to save those who believe....we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles *foolishness*, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1:18, 21, 23, 24) It is not the deep things of God that the natural man rejects; *it is Christ in the gospel!* Without Christ he will be lost forever, and, in his folly, he will have nothing to do with Christ.

Now I think I hear another objection that goes like this: "If a natural man cannot understand the gospel so as to embrace it, how can he be held accountable? That's not fair, is it?" In answering this question we come to the heart of the difference between Luther and his opponents, both then and now.

In the New Testament, ignorance of the gospel is often a moral issue. Remember how the Lord described the Phari-

sees? He said of them, "Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit." (Matthew 15:14) Let me tell you a curious thing about this verse. You may have read it a thousand times without ever feeling that the words of our Savior are cruel or unjust. Why not? Because you sensed the reason He said what He did here. The Pharisees' problem was not with their minds. It was a moral problem, a problem with their hearts. If they had loved God they would not have been blind to the greatness of Christ. But they hated God, and their blindness was their judgment!

So it is with all natural men. Since the Fall the natural man has hated God, and his hatred of God blinds him to the truth of the gospel. Blindness, spiritual death, these are his judgments. In the words of Paul:

"The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those in the flesh cannot please God."
(Romans 8:7-8)

"The mind set on the flesh" is the only mind the natural man has, and with it he hates God! Hence, he "cannot please God"—not now, not ever!

What bearing does this truth have on the Reformation of the 16th century? Does it have any bearing on our efforts at Reformation and our prayers for revival in this day? Why were Wycliffe, Huss, Zwingli, Luther, and Calvin so clear and so adamant on this *particular* theological truth?

Every Christian who thinks of reformation and revival must always begin by thinking of how to give glory to God. Why should God revive His work if others get the glory?

Martin Luther and the other Protestant Reformers had been brought by sovereign grace to the knowledge of Christ. In Luther's case, he had struggled long and hard to make himself right with God—fasting, praying, wearing a hair-

shirt and pouring into the ears of his confessor the roll call of his sins. All was to no avail; all was worse than useless! But then he found peace!

That raised the practical question: Who should get the glory for his new-found life?

In the Roman Catholic church, generally speaking, Luther thought he saw the glory of salvation being divided between God and man, between the God of heaven and the idol "free-will." Was his fear justified?

The apostle Paul shared Luther's fear that man would get some credit for that which is entirely from God. In the same first chapter of First Corinthians that we looked at previously he shares this fear with his readers by saying:

"For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble [called]; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise...that no man should boast before God." (1:26-29)

Paul was on the lookout for man's boasting so that he might cut it off before it even got started. How does he do this? By telling the Corinthians plainly that they were as foolish as others, but they are now saved because of God's choice. It was not their free will that brought them to Christ, but God Himself. That is why he adds, "But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus..." (1:30). It is not the sinner's doing, it is God's. Why did God arrange it that way? "That, just as it is written; 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.'" (1:31)

Today, again, men and women who belong to the Lord are longing to see God revive His work. Perhaps God asks such people, however, "Who will get the glory if I answer your cry?" Every true believer in Jesus Christ will answer that question with a resounding, "To you, O Lord, be the glory forever and forever!" Yes, every believer will say that and mean it. A new heart, a new creation from God, could

not answer in any other way.

Not every believer, though, will give that answer with full understanding of the teaching of Scripture. The answer I have given above comes instinctively to the minds and lips of the redeemed when they are not thinking argumentatively. But that is not the whole story. Many a man and woman has been redeemed by Christ and still finds himself defending the old idol "free-will" when he is drawn into theological battle. In that way, God is robbed of His glory.

If we want revival and the moving of God's Spirit in the late 20th century, are we prepared to let our theology be formed by the Word of God? If we are, we will soon discover that man is not simply going down for the third time in the sea of life. Man is drowned in sin. He does not need a life preserver; he needs the power of Almighty God to raise him up from the grave! "Free will" cannot help him; only free grace can resurrect the dead!

Martin Luther saw this clearly. Our help is only in the sovereign intervention of God. Men may go on resting on the thought that by their own will they may turn to God at any time, but if they think that, they are deceived. Let Luther have the last word on this:

"The Diatribe (a book defending "free will") constantly imagines a man who either can do what he is commanded, or at any rate knows that he cannot. But such a man is nowhere to be found. If there were such, then, in truth, either the commanding of impossibilities would be absurd, or the Spirit of Christ would be in vain. But the Scripture sets before us a man who is not only bound, wretched, captive, sick, and dead, but who, through the operation of Satan his lord, adds to his other miseries that of blindness, so that he believes himself to be free, happy, possessed of liberty and ability, whole, and alive....Hence, 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."

If God does not deliver such men, if God does not revive His work, what hope is there? According to the Scripture there is none. It is God or nothing! *Soli Deo Gloria*.

For further reading:

Luther, Martin. *The Bondage of the Will*. (Translated by J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston), Old Tappan, New Jersey: Revell, 1957.

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Wells, Tom. *The Moral Basis of Faith*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986.