

What is "the bondage of the will"?

1. More exactly, what is "the bondage of the will," assuming an anthropology that, in Bultmann's sense, goes beyond subjectivism? Is it that human beings are not free to do either good or evil, but free only to do evil (*non posse non peccare*); or is it, rather, that, regardless of how they exercise the option of doing good or doing evil, they remain bound to themselves, since neither good nor evil deeds, any more than anything else, have any ultimate meaning or worth apart from God's all-embracing, all-consummating love—and, in this sense remain "unjustified"? Or is the bondage in question somehow both of these?

2. My guess is that, for Luther, it is, in some sense, both. But it's still very important to be clear about the difference between the two conceptions, as well as about the difference between both of them and yet a third conception that is relevant to the problem.

3. To begin with this third conception, even the most uncompromising defenders of the bondage of the will in the sense of the first conception do not deny that there is some sense in which human beings can indeed do good as well as do evil. Thus, even though Luther denies that "a man is able of himself, to fulfill the law, to love God, &c.," he can still say that "a man drowned in ungodliness, and a bonds slave of Satan, hath will, reason, free choice, and power notwithstanding to build a house, to execute the office of a magistrate, to guide a ship, and to do such other things as are subject unto man, according to Gen. 1. *For these things are not taken from him: generation, civil government, household management, are not done away*". . . (*A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*: 175). The distinction implied here is presumably the same as that lying behind the Lutheran distinction between the *usus legis politicus* and the *usus legis elenchticus*.

4. But, then, is the only bondage of the will that Luther allows for that to which he refers when he says, "whatsoever is in our own will is evil; whatsoever is

in our understanding is error. Wherefore in matters pertaining to God, man hath nothing but darkness, errors, malice, and perverseness both of will and understanding" (175 f.)? The answer, clearly, is No; for Luther says earlier in the same commentary: "Take thou the work of the law [Gal 2:16] . . . generally for that which is contrary to grace. Whatsoever is not grace, is the law, whether it be judicial, ceremonial, or the Ten Commandments. Wherefore if thou couldest do the work of the law according to this commandment: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart,' &c. (not to say here that no man yet ever did or could do so), yet thou shouldest not be justified before God; for a man is not justified by the works of the law" (128). Thus, according to Luther's own understanding, the bondage of the will need not be conceived as exhausted by human beings' inveterate sinfulness (even if he himself so conceived it). For even if they were to do all that the law requires, they still would not be justified—and, in *that* important sense, would still be in bondage—since "a man is not justified by the works of the law," but by "grace only and alone" (102). Luther does make clear, to be sure, that his own doctrine of the universality of sin is more than a merely *factual*, i.e., is a properly *modal*, doctrine: "no man yet ever did or *could* do so" (italics added). But, aside from the fact that a doctrine of sin that is non-Augustinian, although also non-Pelagian, can also speak of "could," there are the best of reasons for avoiding an out-an-out modal doctrine of sin, anyhow.

5. What these reflections all come to, then, is this: (1) human beings are justified, if at all, only by God's love, and this would be true even if they were perfectly to fulfill the law. Therefore, the bondage of the will—in the sense of the radical limit on human freedom—is, in the first and most fundamental sense, their utter dependence upon God, not only for their being at all but also for the justification of their being—for their being's amounting to anything, making any difference, having any meaning. (2) Given the fact of sin, human beings are, as it were, dependent upon God *a fortiori*, since nothing can free them from their sin, and in that sense, *justify* them, except the same love of God—the marvel of which, and the truth of the gospel, is that it comprises even the fact of sin within its scope. Apart from that love, therefore, or, more exactly, apart from their obedient faith in it, they are and remain in bondage in the second sense, although even *this* bondage

is not incompatible with their being free to make the categorial, or predicamental, choices of ordinary life. Whether as sinners or as believers, they can reproduce themselves, create culture, govern themselves, and manage their households.

6. There are two further relevant reflections. (1) Whatever they may have in common, there is an irreducible difference between the doctrine that the righteousness that justifies us is *our own* (even if we have it only by virtue of *fides/caritas infusa*) and the doctrine that the righteousness that alone justifies is *God's* righteousness. As Luther puts it: "Wherefore, when Paul saith (as he oftentimes doth) that a man is not justified by the law, or by the works of the law (which are both one) he speaketh generally of the whole law, setting the righteousness of faith against the righteousness of the whole law, or all that can be done, whether by divine power [*sic!*] or by man's own strength, according to the law. For by the righteousness of the law, saith he, a man is not pronounced righteous before God: but the righteousness of faith imputeth freely through grace, for Christ's sake. The law, no doubt, is holy, righteous and good, and consequently the works of the law are holy, righteous and good; yet notwithstanding a man is not justified thereby before God" (128; cf. 129: ". . . to do no murder, not to commit adultery, &c., whether it be done according to nature, or the strength of man, or free will, or according to the gift and power of God, yet it justifieth not"). (2) If one is not to fall into the very error Luther himself condemns when he says of the schoolmen that "it is in a manner as much as if they should say, that the fault is not in us if we be damned, but in God" (134), one must say that the possibility of the righteousness of God and of faith is every human being's possibility, despite her or his place in history relative to the event of Christ, and even despite her or his own sinful failure to realize that possibility.

7. Sad to say, however, there are other passages in the same commentary, where Luther at least appears to take it all back! For example, he says: "True it is that we ought to fulfill the law, and to be justified through the fulfilling thereof: but sin hindereth us. . . . Faith therefore is our righteousness in this life. But in the life to come, when we shall be thoroughly cleansed and delivered from all sins and concupiscences, we shall have no more need of faith and hope, but we shall then

love perfectly” (495; cf. also 382). Even if one could argue that there need not be a contradiction between saying (1) that a human being ought to be justified; and (2) that a human being ought not to be justified by fulfilling the law—since to fulfill the law in order to be justified, without already being justified through obedient faith, is precisely *not* to fulfill it, because “the law commandeth that we should fear, love and worship God with a true faith” (267; cf. also 247: “‘to do’ is first of all to believe, and so through faith to perform the law”)—there remains the disconcerting delimitation of faith to this life only, although Luther still might agree that even Adam before the fall could have been justified solely by faith.

Such agreement, in fact, would seem to be the clear implication of his statement that the “one solid rock which we call the doctrine of justification . . . was shaken by Satan in Paradise, when he persuaded our first parents that they might by their own wisdom and power become like God, abandoning faith in God, who had given them life and promised its continuance” (16).

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