

The Bondage of the Will

By Martin Luther

EXORDIUM.

Section XXXII.

Sect. XXXII. — AND now, while I am making these observations, I will reply to that remark of yours, where you say — ‘that it is not to be believed, that God would overlook an error in His Church for so many ages, and not reveal to any one of His saints that, which we contend for as being the grand essential of the Christian doctrine’ —

In the first place, we do not say that this error was overlooked of God in His Church, or in any one of His Saints. For the Church is ruled by the Spirit of God, and the Saints are led by the Spirit of God. (Rom. viii. 14.) And Christ is with His Church even unto the end of the world. (Matt. xxviii. 20.) And the Church is the pillar and ground of the truth. (1 Tim. iii. 15.) These things, I say, we know; for the Creed which we all hold runs thus, ‘I believe in the holy Catholic Church;’ so that, it is impossible that she can err even in the least article. And even if we should grant, that some of the Elect are held in error through the whole of their life; yet they must, of necessity, return into the way of truth before their death; for Christ says, (John x. 28,) “No one shall pluck them out of My hand.” But this is the labour, this the point — whether it can be proved to a certainty, that those, whom you call the church, were the Church; or, rather, whether, having been in error throughout their whole life, they were at last brought back before death. For this will not easily be proved, if God suffered all those most learned men whom you adduce, to remain in error through so long a series of ages — Therefore, God suffered His Church to be in error.

But, look at the people of Israel: where, during so many kings and so long a time, not one king is mentioned who never was in error. And under Elijah the Prophet, all the people and every thing that was public among them, had so gone away into idolatry, that he thought that he himself was the only one left: whereas, while the kings, the princes, the prophets, and whatever could be called the people or the Church of God was going to destruction, God was reserving to Himself “seven thousand.” (Rom. xi. 4.) But who could see these or know them to be the people of God? And who, even now, dares to deny that God, under all these great men, (for you make mention of none but men in some high office, or of some great name,) was reserving to Himself a Church among the commonalty, and suffering all those to perish after the example of the kingdom of Israel? For it is peculiar to God, to restrain the elect of Israel, and to slay their fat ones: but, to preserve the refuse and remnant of Israel, (Ps. lxxviii. 31.; Isaiah i. 9., x. 20-22., xi. 11-16.)

What happened under Christ Himself, when all the Apostles were offended at Him, when He was denied and condemned by all the people, and there were only a Joseph, a Nicodemus, and a thief upon the cross preserved? Were they then said to be the people of God? There was, indeed, a people of God remaining, but it was not called the people of God; and that which was so called, was not the people of God. And who knows who are the people of God, when throughout the whole world, from its origin, the state of the church was always such, that those were called the people and saints of God who were not so while others among them, who were as a refuse, and were not called the people and saints of God, were the People and Saints of God? as is manifest in the histories of Cain and Abel, of Ishmael and Isaac, of Esau and Jacob.

Look again at the age of the Arians, when scarcely five catholic bishops were preserved throughout the whole world, and they, driven from their places, while the Arians reigned, every where bearing the public name and office of the church. Nevertheless, under these heretics, Christ preserved His Church: but so, that it was the least thought or considered to be the Church.

Again, shew me, under the kingdom of the Pope, one bishop discharging his office. Shew me one council in which their transactions were, concerning the things pertaining to godliness, and not rather, concerning gowns, dignities, revenues, and other baubles, which they could not say, without being mad, pertained to the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless they are called the church, when all, at least who live as they do, must be reprobates and any thing but the church. And yet, even under them Christ preserved His Church, though it was not called the Church. How many Saints must you imagine those of the inquisition have, for some ages, burnt and killed, as John Huss and others, in whose time, no doubt, there lived many holy men of the same spirit!

Why do you not rather wonder at this, Erasmus, that there ever were, from the beginning of the world, more distinguished talents, greater erudition, more ardent pursuit among the world in general than among Christians or the people of God? As Christ Himself declares, "The children of this world are wiser than the children of light." (Luke xvi. 8.) What Christian can be compared (to say nothing of the Greeks) with Cicero alone for talents, for erudition, or for indefatigability? What shall we say, then, was the preventive cause that no one of them was able to attain unto grace, who certainly exerted "Free-will" with its utmost powers? Who dares say, that there was no one among them who contended for truth with all his efforts? And yet we must affirm that no one of them all attained unto it. Will you here too say, it is not to be believed, that God would utterly leave so many great men, throughout such a series of ages, and permit them to labour in vain? Certainly, if "Free-will" were any thing, or could do any thing, it must have appeared and wrought something in those men, at least in some one instance. But it availed nothing, nay it always wrought in the contrary direction. Hence by this argument only, it may be sufficiently proved, that "Free-will" is nothing at all, since no proof of it can be produced even from the beginning of the world to the end!

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