

The Bondage of the Will

By [Martin Luther](#)

EXORDIUM.

Section XXXIV.

Sect. XXXIV. — BUT as you say — “what therefore shall we do? The Church is hidden, the Saints are unknown! What, and whom shall we believe? Or, as you most sharply dispute, who will certify us? How shall we search out the Spirit? If we look to erudition, all are rabbins! If we look to life, all are sinners! If we look to the Scripture, they each claim it as belonging to them! But however, our discussion is not so much concerning the Scripture (which is not itself sufficiently clear,) but concerning the sense of the Scripture. And though there are men of every order at hand, yet, as neither numbers, nor erudition, nor dignity, is of any service to the subject, much less can paucity, ignorance, and mean rank avail any thing.” —

Well then! I suppose the matter must be left in doubt, and the point of dispute remain before the judge so that, we should seem to act with policy if we should go over to the sentiments of the Sceptics. Unless, indeed, we were to act as you wisely do, for you pretend that you are so much in doubt, that you professedly desire to seek and learn the truth; while, at the same time, you cleave to those who assert “Freewill,” until the truth be made glaringly manifest.

But no! I here in reply to you observe, that you neither say all, nor nothing. For we shall not search out the Spirit by the arguments of erudition, of life, of talent, of multitude, of dignity, of ignorance, of inexperience, of paucity, or of meanness of rank. And yet, I do not approve of those, whose whole resource is in a boasting of the Spirit. For I had the last year, and have still, a sharp warfare with those fanatics who subject the Scriptures to the interpretation of their own boasted spirit. On the same account also, I have hitherto determinately set myself against the Pope, in whose kingdom, nothing is more common, or more generally received than this saying: — ‘that the Scriptures are obscure and ambiguous, and that the Spirit, as the Interpreter, should be sought from the apostolical see of Rome!’ than which, nothing could be said that was more destructive; for by means of this saying, a set of impious men have exalted themselves above the Scriptures themselves; and by the same, have done whatever pleased them; till at length, the Scriptures are absolutely trodden under foot, and we compelled to believe and teach nothing but the dreams of men that are mad. In a word, that saying is no human invention, but a poison poured forth into the world by a wonderful malice of the devil himself, the prince of all demons.

We hold the case thus: — that the spirits are to be tried and proved by a twofold judgment. The one, internal; by which, through the Holy Spirit, or a peculiar gift of God, any one may illustrate, and to a certainty, judge of, and determine on, the doctrines and sentiments of all men, for himself and his own personal salvation concerning which it is said. (1 Cor. ii. 15.) “The spiritual man judgeth all things, but he himself is judged of no man.” This belongs to faith, and is necessary for every, even private, Christian. This, we have above called, ‘the internal clearness of the Holy Scripture.’ And it was this perhaps to which they alluded, who, in answer to you said, that all things must be determined by the judgment of the Spirit. But this judgment cannot profit another, nor are we speaking of this judgment in our present discussion; for no one, I think, doubts its reality.

The other, then, is the external judgment; by which, we judge, to the greatest certainty, of the spirits and doctrines of all men; not for ourselves only, but for others also, and for their salvation. This judgment is peculiar to the public ministry of the Word and the external office, and especially belongs to teachers and preachers of the Word. Of this we make use, when we strengthen the weak in faith, and when we refute adversaries. This is what we before called, ‘the external clearness of the Holy Scripture.’ Hence we affirm that all spirits are to be proved in the face of the church, by the judgment of Scripture. For this ought, above all things, to be received, and most firmly settled among Christians: — that the Holy Scriptures are a spiritual light by far more clear than the sun itself, especially in those things which pertain unto salvation or necessity.

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