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The Double Bind of the Protestant Reformation: The Birth of Fundamentalism and the Necessity of Pluralism

ROBERT GLENN HOWARD

When Martin Luther used the printing press to help realize his vision of individual access to the biblical texts, he did so at the expense of the unity of belief made possible by the Catholic Church. Luther relocated truth from the authority of a specialized priest class to the individual minds of every human. For Luther, the church had no authority. Instead, only God did. And that authority was accessible to anyone who could read or hear the text of the Bible. This essay argues that the movement of authority from the sacred Latin on the tongues of priests to the printed pages in the European vernaculars simultaneously generated the fundamentalist impulse and the necessity of the pluralism that this impulse seeks to constrain. This double bind is the result of "a radical shift." With the Reformation, the Western conception of truth moved away from Ciceronian *controversia*¹ and toward the necessity of a direct experience of the divine through His word.

Luther liberalized divine authority by offering it to each individual. He had a deep faith that God spoke through the Bible with a clarity that, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, individuals could access and understand for themselves. In this basic sense, by both making the unerring texts accessible to individuals and by claiming that there was only one truth that was communicated, Luther

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1. By *controversia* I do not mean the more specific method of teaching by modeling declamations. Instead, I refer the general method of public deliberation. See T. M. Conley *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (New York: Longman, 1990), 36-38; and in specific reference to Erasmus, 123 versus G. A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 46-47. Conley describes *controversia* in the sense I mean here saying: "controversia requires that both sides on any question be heard, thus creating the conditions necessary for arriving at decisions and negotiating differences in a reasonable way in both politics and philosophy," 37.

made fundamentalism possible.

It seems odd from today's perspective, but the liberalization of access to a single divine truth meant, for Luther, that individuals did not have free will. His argument that this was the only true interpretation of God's Word famously pitted the younger Luther against the respected Ciceronian theologian Erasmus of Rotterdam. In their exchange on free will, completely different conceptions of authority immediately placed the two theologians at an insurmountable impasse.

Luther had located truth for himself and had no need to engage in reasoned deliberation with Erasmus or even consider the accumulated wisdom of past theologians. Luther was emboldened to make this affront to the authority of the Catholic Church by his own personal experiences of the divine.² Arguing for individual access to the Bible from this basis, Luther began a process that would render pluralism necessary.

After the Protestant Reformation, pluralism became necessary because a state that attempts to impose a shared belief about the divine could be challenged by individuals with conflicting beliefs if those beliefs were felt to be authorized by an individual experience of the divine. Such challenges held the dangerous potential of undermining the authority of any system of governance. As a result, state governments eventually sought to maintain a pluralist position toward divine truth.

For Luther, the Bible has a singular and knowable meaning. Once every potential Christian had the opportunity to experience the Bible and locate this singular meaning for him or herself, the fundamentalist ideology that sees the biblical text as an inerrant conduit of the Holy Spirit became possible. Though Luther expected that there would be periods of disagreement caused by the Devil and his demons inserting error into minds of individuals seeking access to this conduit of the divine, he did not expect the sudden and broad diversity of interpretations that would emerge with the Reformation. In hindsight, the Bible has proved not to have a clear and singular meaning and, as a result, the variety of comprehensive and normative beliefs has multiplied unchecked.

From a secular perspective, this multiplicity is a problem of communication. If truth can only be found in the individual experience of a shared text, then the accurate communication of that experience becomes necessary. However, it also opens up the possibility for such communication to become destabilizing. Communication is necessary because in order for a society to judge and act on shared values, it must, to some degree, communicate and understand those values. At the same time, communication is potentially destabilizing because when variance in individual experiences of the divine occur, there is no external guiding authority to which members of that society can turn for a final decision to resolve those conflicting experiences. The vernacular texts of the Bible granted the masses the

2. It is well documented by both his supporters and his detractors that Luther was thought to have been driven to the priesthood by a direct experience of the divine.

freedom to access truth. This access fostered a sense of individual freedom and thought. However, that very liberty led to the sudden emergence of a wild diversity of conflicting belief systems. The resulting conflicts reduced Western Europe to a mire of violence.

The philosopher John Rawls noted the necessary problem generated by the liberalization of access to the Bible. The Protestant Reformation "fragmented the religious unity of the Middle Ages and led to religious pluralism, with all its consequences for later centuries" (Rawls 1996, xxiv). Among those consequences have been the repeated violent wars arising out of conflicting religious beliefs being played out between or within governments. It was precisely these violent conflicts that led Enlightenment thinkers to systematically attempt to separate church and state. This separation meant that a government took a necessarily pluralist approach to divine truth insofar as governments protected religious practice and belief in its diverse forms.

For Rawls, this sort of political pluralism requires a "reasonable" acceptance of multiple views:

Citizens are reasonable when, viewing one another as free and equal in a system of social cooperation over generations, they are prepared to offer one another fair terms of social cooperation (defined by principles and ideals) and they agree to act on those terms, even at the cost of their own interests in particular situations, provided that others also accept those terms.³

For Rawls, reasonable people working toward or in a pluralist democracy must "be prepared" to offer one another "fair terms of social cooperation." Individuals in a pluralistic society must offer other individuals the same terms that they themselves are willing to take even when they might not benefit in all applications of those terms. In this way, pluralism requires a shared value of reciprocity that overarches even a belief in the authority of the divine. Even as successful post-Reformation governments developed this sort of approach to the divine, they conflicted with the growing "elective affinities" between Luther's theology and fundamentalisms that reject any pluralism.

Max Weber famously noted the "elective affinities" between Calvinist thinking and a capitalist economic system.⁴ Though subsequent critics have argued his claims oversimplified the case, the mutually constitutive interplay of ideology and social structures remains a powerful tool for understanding the relationship between religion, authority, and government.⁵

3. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press [1993], 1996), xlv.

4. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958); and his *Economy and Society: an Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1978).

5. R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1926); Jacob Viner, *Religious Thought and Economic Society* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1978); Robert W. Green, *Protestantism and Capitalism: The Weber Thesis and Its Critics* (Boston, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company, 1959); Tony Dickson and High V. McLachlan, "In Search of 'The Spirit of Capitalism': Weber's Misinterpretation of Franklin," *Sociology* 23 (February 1989): 81-89.

In the case of Luther and fundamentalism, the rise of individual access to the divine created a potential for conflict because of the affinities that arose between Luther's liberalism and religious fundamentalism. In this essay, I locate these affinities as they first began to emerge during the public debate between Martin Luther and the Ciceronian humanist, Erasmus of Rotterdam.

THE DOUBLE BIND OF THE REFORMATION

On All Saints Day, 1 November 1517, a local church official had been given authority by the pope to offer a special indulgence for sale to the laity around Wittenberg.⁶ That day, crowds would gather at the local cathedral to celebrate the holiday and listen to a sermon that would implore them to buy the indulgences for the sake of their dead relatives. Luther, still an obscure provincial teacher, chose that day to place his ninety-five theses on the door of the cathedral. It was not necessarily a conscious act of rebellion because Luther could not have known what consequences his action would have. It was common practice to post academic papers on the cathedral door so that his colleagues and students could read them and later offer comment. Still, Luther seems to have chosen the day carefully because he must have known that a large number of people would be gathered there—and he also knew that indulgences would both be sold and discussed.

Apparently without his blessing, someone took the theses, translated them into German, and began to distribute them using the new technology of the printing press. Within weeks, the thesis statements were being traded and distributed throughout the German-speaking area. Luther had given voice to a growing sentiment that the Roman authorities were taking advantage of their access to God through indulgences and other fees. Suddenly, Luther had a huge following. A year later, a printer had published a collection of Luther's works including the theses, and it was selling well. The popular following Luther found was made possible by the use of the printing press because this technology gave the literate nobles of Germany cheap and quick access to his text. However, Luther's success among the nobles was not based as much on his theology as it was on the political expedience of that theology. For European nobles, Luther justified a new questioning of the power of Rome.

The theses caused a stir first of all because in them Luther refuted not just the specific use of indulgences but also the authority of the Roman Catholic Church itself. Specifically, he denied that the pope had any control over the fate of individuals after death. Instead, he located the sole source and expression of divine authority in the actual text of the Bible: "The true treasure of the Church is the Most Holy Gospel of the glory and the grace of God." M. Luther, "Ninety-Five Theses."

6. Indulgences were special documents purchased by parishioners from the Roman Church that claimed to release either the parishioner or his or her relatives from a stated period of torment in the limbo or Purgatory that most humans were believed to have to endure before being to be judged worthy to enter heaven at the end of time.

With the popularity of his claims, Luther was suddenly brought to the attention of church officials. Between 1517 and 1521, he wrote new works and his previous works were printed and reprinted for a growing audience. At the time, challenging the authority of the pope was heretical, but an obscure teacher in Germany should have offered no threat to the power of Rome. However, the growing notoriety of Luther eventually did bring him to the attention of the pope.

Luther was summoned to defend his views in public debates with the most significant theologians of his time. Through these debates and printing, a furious public controversy about indulgences emerged. Though Luther seems clearly to have been most interested in forwarding his claim that authority was located in the text of the Bible itself, others saw the political implications of this claim. If, as Luther argued, the Bible was the sole source of divine authority, then the tributes paid to Rome by nobles and peasants all over Europe were not necessary. If, of course, Rome lost its ability to tax, then it would no longer be able to exert its influence over the European aristocracy. Luther's theses inadvertently challenged the very power center of Rome and caused a torrent of political wrangling and intrigue.

On 10 September 1520, Luther first received a papal bull condemning his claims and writings as heretical. However, the politics of the situation were already working in Luther's favor. All but three cities in Germany had refused to publish the public condemnation of Luther's heresies by the pope. Once the literate members of the German nobility had been largely won over by his anti-Roman stance, Luther masterfully organized a public event to perform his devotion to the ideas he was writing about for the largely non-literate masses. His actions, again, would have implications far beyond any theology. He tapped the nationalism and anti-clerical sentiments of both nobles and peasants.

The day his grace period to retract his heresy ended and he became officially wanted for questioning by the Catholic authorities, Luther posted an announcement on the cathedral door inviting all the students of the Wittenberg university to join him publicly outside the city at the dump. There, he led a large public gathering in burning not just the papal edict that essentially condemned him to death as a heretic but also the books of papal law and scholastic theology that supported it. In this act, Luther accessed the power of populism, and his fame spread widely. He was a local hero, by German standards, for standing up to the oppressive and greedy power of the institutional Catholic Church. For the nobles, he created a legitimate argument for them to begin to dispute and ultimately reject the political power which Rome exerted all over Europe.

In the three years before these dramatic events, Luther had been writing personal letters to the influential theologian, priest, and humanist courtier Erasmus of Rotterdam asking for his support. Erasmus was a well-known critic of indulgences and had satirized them damningly in his long poem *The Praise of Folly*. At the time, Erasmus was considered a liberal reformer of the church because of his willingness to question indulgences and even the authoritative representation of the divine word of God at the time: Jerome's

Latin translation of the Bible. However, by this time, Erasmus was not a young man. He had spent his life negotiating the complex politics of the European nobles and the Roman Church. He had managed to pull himself from obscurity to participate in the courtly life of the European aristocracy. Erasmus was not quick to publicly support Luther's radical movement.

Both Erasmus and Luther felt that Rome was abusing its political authority. However, at an intellectual level they were deeply divided. Erasmus represented the older line of Renaissance thought that placed the power of policymaking in the hands of a few "eloquent" men as Cicero and Quintilian had envisioned. There was not yet a wide conception of individual liberty. For Erasmus, as it was for Augustine, the educated elites should publicly debate issues and engage in controversia in an effort to locate the most probable truth in any given case.

In politics, this may not have often occurred. However, Erasmus felt that it could and should occur in the interpretation of scripture that, at the time, was not consciously separated from issues of government. Luther, on the other hand, believed that such debate was not necessary. For him, the specific truths of scripture were self evident and incontrovertible. Arguing that all people should be "theologians," Luther claimed individuals could easily understand the "suffering" of Christ as His primary message: Christ so loved humans that he endured the crucifixion and sacrificed his own life. In his famous "Heidelberg Disputation," Luther proclaimed that: "Because men misused the knowledge of God through works, God wished again to be recognized in suffering, and to condemn wisdom concerning invisible things by means of wisdom concerning visible things, so that those should honor him as he is hidden in his suffering." Elsewhere, Luther put it more bluntly: "The Holy Spirit is the simplest writer and adviser in heaven and on earth. That is why His words could have no more than the one simplest meaning which we call the written one, or the literal meaning of the tongue."⁷

Luther argued that there was no need to interpret the mysterious writings of God. He even attacked the authority of the priest class directly. Arguing that each Christian individual has the right and obligation to "pray before God," Luther eliminated the main function of priests as the performers of necessary religious rituals. This claim functionally de-legitimized the primary way the Roman Church raised funds: through the performance of priestly rites for fees. As Luther put it, "Christ made it possible for us, provided we believe in him, to not only be his brethren, co-heirs, and fellow-kings, but also his fellow-priests."⁸ The priest, and thus the church, was unnecessary.

For Luther, the Holy Spirit led individuals to clarity. For those who did not reach this clarity, Satanic influences clouded their minds. At the base, it

7. Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, trans. and ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1989), 43.

8. Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, trans. and ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1989), 607.

was a conflict on the nature of truth itself. For Luther, truth was expressed explicitly by God in the text of the Bible. And this argument meant that there was a significantly reduced need for specialized priests or their scholarly debates on theology.⁹ For Erasmus, on the other hand, the Bible presented the divine mystery of God's communication and must be studied and debated by eloquent men.

This fundamental difference in thinking was most publicly evident in the so-called "debate" on the nature of free will. I say it is "so-called" because, actually, debate did not occur. Erasmus attempted through public printings to engage Luther in controversia. But Luther refused to engage the old Ciceronian at all. In so doing, Luther enacted his belief and new reliance on individual access to divine authority over any public deliberation. For Luther, there was a single, simple, and correct interpretation of scripture, and he had located it.

Pressed by church authorities to publicly denounce Luther and his movement, in 1524 Erasmus published "A Diatribe or Sermon Concerning Free Will." Instead of contending with Luther on the issue of indulgences, the role of priests, or the language in which the holy sacraments should be spoken, Erasmus went to what, at the time, was thought to be the heart of the issue: did humans have any power over their fate in the afterlife? In order to answer this question, Erasmus attempted to engage the argument with the methods of controversia. As Luther did throughout his writings, Erasmus used scripture to locate arguments about the free will of individuals and its relationship to the divine. Unlike Luther, however, he then systematically explored various different interpretive perspectives in an effort to locate the most reasonable or probable answer to the question of whether or not humans had free will.

The following year, Luther published what was billed as a response: *The Bondage of the Will*. In essence, Luther argued that individuals were preordained by God to either live good lives and gain access to eternal salvation or suffer damnation in eternal separation from the deity after death. Needless to say, these two radically divergent views left the issue at an impasse.

IMPASSE ON FREEDOM OF THE WILL

At its very base, Luther's position against freedom of the human will grated against the Renaissance humanist view of the world. For Erasmus, it was clear that humans could act in the world for either better or worse. Further, it was essential that humans strive to act in the circumstances given them by God to fulfill their purpose as God's highest creation. This action was

9. It should be noted that Luther did leave space for the utility of most of the sacraments and a class of priests as what might be thought of in modern terms as "evangelical" tools. However, he relentlessly disputed any claims to the necessity of priestly activities for entrance into Heaven or the attainment of Christian Grace. See, for example, "Answer to the Hyperchristian," pages 88 and following.

made possible, from the humanist perspective, through exercising human will.

From today's perspective, it seems oddly contradictory that Luther's great emphasis on individual access to the divine was premised on a denial of the freedom of the will. However, within his theology, this denial of freedom makes it possible to posit the necessity of individual access to the biblical texts. Both Erasmus and Luther were, in their own ways, emphasizing a new kind of individualism—a new kind of liberty. For Erasmus, it was premised on the long held value of human achievements within the context of a community of eloquent and educated men. For Luther, however, it was premised on the lack of power human actions had over the authority of the divine.

At that time, the free will debate was already an ancient and reoccurring one in Western thought and, particularly, in Christian thought. For Luther, the issue was one made clear by his own divine inspiration. In his zeal to unseat the human authority Luther saw the Catholic institution as taking from the divine, he denounced the idea that humans had any influence at all over their fate in the eyes of God. For Luther, God's omnipotence made it impossible to conceive that humans, including his human representatives on earth like the pope, controlled their own fate in God's Judgment at the end of time. Luther: "Ah! Why should we boast that free will can do aught in man's conversion? . . . So long as the Holy Ghost comes not into us, we are not only unable to do anything good."¹⁰ In keeping with his claim that God's authority drives humans irrevocably to either good or evil, Luther couched his own authority on this issue in his personal access to the Holy Spirit that he gained through meditation on the Bible. Luther argued that his study of the Bible created the communicative link between himself and God. This divine channel of communication completely overshadowed any human debate. Luther: "We ought not to criticize, explain, or judge the Scriptures by our mere reason. . . . The Holy Ghost must here be our only master and tutor."¹¹

Luther was highly aware of Erasmus's Ciceronianism. In the preface to *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther directly attacks it. First, Luther acknowledges specifically that Erasmus is an "eloquent man" in contrast to Luther's presentation of himself as an "uncivilized fellow who has lived his life in the backwoods."¹² Then Luther condemns this very quality of eloquence. Luther argues that Erasmus has feigned "modesty" in an effort to sap Luther's will to "fight."

However, Erasmus makes it clear in his diatribe that he was not attempting to engage Luther in an adversarial exchange. Instead, Erasmus, by presenting himself "modestly" as a reasonable and well-meaning man, specifically invites Luther to engage him in "inquiry" on the topic of free will. Erasmus:

10. Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, trans. William Hazlitt (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), 134-35.

11. *Ibid.*, 4-5.

12. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Barker Books, 1957), 62.

Let no one misinterpret our battle. We are not two gladiators incited against each other. I want argue only against one of Luther's teachings, illuminating, if this be possible, in the subsequent clash of scriptural passages and arguments, the truth, the investigation of which has always been the most reputable activity of scholars. . . . I am quite aware I am a poor match in such a contest.¹³

Erasmus was, as Luther recognized, attempting to open up an engaged debate on the topic of free will. As Erasmus puts it, Luther must, to engage in the debate, "not be burdened with the preceding judgments." Instead, he must keep an open mind as Erasmus claims he himself has:

Even if I have understood what Luther discusses, it is altogether possible I am mistaken. Therefore, I merely want to analyze and not to judge, to inquire and not to dogmatize. I am ready to learn from anyone who advances something more accurate or reliable.¹⁴

Responding to Erasmus in *Bondage of the Will*, Luther specifically ridicules Erasmus's peaceful invitation saying that this friendly stance has "drained [his] strength before the fight began." Specifically, Luther again cites Erasmus's eloquence as a hindrance to Luther's normal "zeal for battle." "Your skill for debate—for you discuss the matter throughout with quite remarkable restraint, by which you have prevented my wrath waxing hot against you."¹⁵

However, Luther's primary problem with Erasmus's deployment of eloquence was even more damning. Based on his Ciceronianism, Erasmus, as did humanism generally, believed that one must read and engage the community of literature already written about a topic in order to learn and apply "decorum."¹⁶ For Luther, however, this reliance on the past was a form of conservatism:

Fortune (or Chance, or Fate, if you prefer) has led you to say nothing at all on this whole vast topic that has not been said before, and to say so much less about, and assign so much more to, 'free will' than the Sophists did before you (I shall say more about that later), that it seemed a complete waste of time to reply to your arguments.¹⁷

Luther used the term "Sophists" in this case to refer to the Scholastics whom he felt were the primary creators of the complex argument-based theology that both upheld the Catholic Church and muddled the simple clarity of the Bible. By linking Erasmus's use of eloquence both to the ancient Greek Sophists as well as the Scholastics, Luther clearly debunks and attacks not just

13. Erasmus, "A Diatribe or Sermon Concerning Free Will," *Erasmus-Luther: A Discourse on Free Will*, ed. and trans. Ernst F. Winter (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1992), 6.

14. *Ibid.*, 7.

15. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 62.

16. The concept of "decorum" (meaning "fitting" in Latin) is a deeply Ciceronean idea. It refers to the ability to properly apply judgment in specific cases by acquiring eloquence through an examination of many (or "copious") cases. Erasmus describes it saying: "In selecting, judgment is required; in storing away, diligence," Erasmus, *On Copia of Words and Ideas*, trans. H. D. Rix (Milwaukee, Wisc.: Marquette University Press, 1999), 20.

17. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 62.

Erasmus's argument but also its organizing warrant. For Erasmus, the methods of controversia are necessary for coming to good judgments in cases of probability. As it emerged in *On Copia*, *Ciceronianus*, and elsewhere, Erasmus's sense of controversia was that humans, through public deliberation, can come to reasoned conclusions about issues that are factually unknowable.¹⁸

Luther states with clarity that his authority is not based on any human actions. Instead, it is based in his personal access to the Holy Spirit itself. And, in a single sweep of the printing press, Luther condemns Cicero, Renaissance humanism, and the authority of the Catholic Church. At the same time, he initiates what would become the double bind of the Reformation.

Filled with a profound and conscious sense of personal authority, Luther yokes that authority to the will of the Holy Spirit:

To those who have drunk in the Spirit's teaching in my books, we have given enough and to spare already, and such find no difficulty in dismissing your [Erasmus'] arguments. But it is not surprising if those who read without the Spirit are tossed hither and thither, as a reed is tossed by every wind that blows.¹⁹

Simply put, Luther states that his argument will be seen as correct by those who feel the "Spirit" of his work. Luther's subtlety here is worth noting. He contradicts Erasmus's well known mastery of the "abundant" style of eloquence by claiming an "abundance" of "Spirit." And, here, Luther does not mean his own "spirit." Instead, he means the Holy "Spirit." Claiming this direct individual access to the divine, what hope did the old Ciceronian have of engaging Luther in controversia at all? As it turned out, he had none.

In his diatribe, Erasmus began with what humanists and Luther would have recognized as an invitation to engage in deliberation on the issue. Following Cicero's teachings, Erasmus states the problem at hand: "Free will after sin is a reality in title only, and when it does what is in it, it sins mortally." He then immediately goes on to convey his recognition that it is a difficult and important issue. He acknowledges that Luther has some reason to disagree with the entire weight of the Catholic Church as well as the push of Renaissance humanism. It is, as Luther noted in his response, a modest gesture that acknowledges that deliberation can and should proceed. Erasmus even admits that it is only in "his opinion" that the long debates about free will have not provided much "reward":

Among the difficulties, not a few of which confront us in divine Literature, there is hardly a more impassable labyrinth than that concerning freedom of choice. For this matter has of old remarkably exercised the talents of philosophers, then also those of theologians, now ancient, now recent, although in my opinion with more momentous trouble than reward.²⁰

18. Thomas M. Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (White Plains, N. Y.: Longman, 1990).

19. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 63.

20. Erasmus, "A Diatribe or Sermon Concerning Free Will," 1.

In fact, the very name Erasmus gave to his work belied his deliberative approach. In Latin, Erasmus called the publication: *Diatriba*. Though related to the modern word "diatribe," this genre of written deliberation was not a gladiatorial polemic. Instead, it was an invitation to a shared investigation of an issue with a long tradition in classical rhetoric. An expert on the *Diatriba*, Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, has more than adequately shown, "Erasmus's treatment of the freedom of the will in the deliberative mode thus coincides with the definition of the classical diatribe." The genre of the *diatriba* developed in the classical period as:

... a popularization of the philosophical dialogue, one which restricted that discipline to the investigation of moral issues and the criticism of popular morals. It deliberated the nature of good and evil, and the means to their respective acquisition and avoidance; it taught the cultivation of virtue and the achievement of wisdom.²¹

In his *diatriba*, Erasmus isolates the problem of free will as one that can only be explored through deliberation about what is probably true because free will is, itself, a mystery of God. With Augustine, Erasmus sees some elements of the scriptures as fundamentally unknowable to humans in the mundane world:

Holy Scripture contains secrets into which God does not want us to penetrate too deeply, because if we attempt to do so, increasing darkness envelopes us, so that we might come to recognize in this manner both the unfathomable majesty of divine wisdom and the feebleness of the human mind.²²

In addition to the question of freedom of the will, Erasmus specifically cites the doctrines of Virgin Birth and the Trinity as mysteries best not explored by "common" people or be "offered for indiscriminate consideration."²³ Instead, when the divine texts exhibit these mysteries, "Holy Scripture knows how to adjust its language to our human condition."²⁴ Still, acknowledging that Luther had raised the point, he goes on to "inquire" into the probability that humans do in fact have freedom.²⁵

At the beginning of his masterful array of both Old Testament and New Testament citations, Erasmus notes and expresses his displeasure that Luther specifically rejects any need to refer to previous scholars and theologians who have dealt with the issue. Erasmus jokingly thanks Luther for rejecting all such discourse because it saves Erasmus the trouble of going through all the previous scholarship. Then, however, Erasmus gently notes the many "pious" men who "gave their lives" to the study of scripture. He actually names twenty of them. Then he notes that "no author has hitherto completely denied the freedom of the will, save Manichaeus and John Wycliffe alone." Erasmus

21. Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Rhetoric and Reform: Erasmus' Civil Dispute with Luther* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

22. Erasmus, "A Diatribe or Sermon Concerning Free Will," 8.

23. *Ibid.*, 10ff.

24. *Ibid.*, 12.

25. *Ibid.*, 10ff.

displays his Ciceronianism when he states, though he couches it in his "own opinion," the obvious point that his humanist colleagues would have known well and agreed with: "Their powerful and subtle argumentation, in my opinion, nobody can completely disdain."²⁶ From Erasmus's perspective, Luther's reliance on his own personal access to the divine spirit "completely disdained" the generations of "pious men."

Erasmus goes on to argue against Luther's claims of being divinely inspired by noting the impossibility of communicating that personal knowledge: "Let us assume that he who has the Spirit is sure of the meaning of Scripture. How can I also possess the certainty which the other pretends to have? What can I do when several persons claim different interpretations, but each one swears to have the Spirit?"²⁷ On the other hand, even accepting the action of the Holy Spirit in the world, Erasmus notes: "No one could believe that this Spirit has deliberately overlooked an error in His Church for 1300 years."²⁸

For Erasmus, the whole weight of the many years and many lives spent studying the complexities of God's mysterious words could not be simply undone by a single individual's or even a small group of individuals' claim to divine inspiration. For Erasmus, a large group of eloquent and educated men were likely to yield a more probable solution to any problem of interpretation. As Erasmus puts it, "if it is objected: what can large numbers contribute to an understanding of the Spirit? I answer: what can a small number of people?" Erasmus is both enacting his belief in *controversia* by imagining an audience of individuals who are not easily convinced and interested in engaging in debate and, at the same time, arguing that just such a debate among a large group of educated individuals should yield a better decision. Erasmus continues to locate the authority on scriptural interpretation in an educated priest class saying: "If they say: what can a congregated synod, in which perhaps nobody is inspired by the Spirit, contribute to an understanding of Scripture? I answer: what can the private gathering of a few contribute?"²⁹

But Luther and his inspired reformers are still there for Erasmus to contend with. So he implores them: "If someone undertakes to teach me, I would not consciously oppose truth. If my opponents, however, prefer to slander me, although I dispute truthfully and without slander, rather than quarrel, then everyone will miss the Spirit of the Gospels."³⁰ In short, Erasmus invites Luther and his supporters to engage in reasoned inquiry much as Erasmus will demonstrate in the rest of his diatribe.

After marshalling an astonishing array of scripture passages that both imply and do not imply free will, Erasmus notes that far more scriptures make sense if free will is thought to exist. But in his conclusion, Erasmus explicitly

26. *Ibid.*, 13-14.

27. *Ibid.*, 19-20.

28. *Ibid.*, 19.

29. *Ibid.*, 17.

30. *Ibid.*, 19.

states his own uncertainty of the divine mystery that God created when He made humans both free and bound by sin. Erasmus never gives up his claim that the discussion is about what is probable and that the mystery of how God made humans with free will is a divine mystery: "I want the reader to consider whether he thinks it is fair to condemn the opinion offered by the Church Fathers, approved for so many centuries by so many people, and to accept some paradoxes."³¹

Erasmus limits himself to the claim that it is only probable that humans have free will. And, in so doing, he clearly aligns himself with the Ciceronian method of *controversia*: suggesting that the mystery of God's action in the world cannot in fact, as Luther claimed, be known with certainty by humans. Instead, as is appropriate for deliberation, it is an issue to which humans must apply reason and judgment in order to come to the most likely answer to the problem. In a way, it seems that Erasmus was gently prodding Luther as if he was a wayward schoolboy who was so filled with arrogance that he felt no need to read his histories or listen to his teachers.

Regardless of whether the nobles and theologians that would be the actual audience of Erasmus's and Luther's texts were happy to live with the uncertainty in Erasmus position on the mystery of God's Word, the complete disjoint of Erasmus and Luther's authorizing warrants must have been obvious to all. Erasmus, the clear humanist, sought to apply reason and previous scholarship while Luther the reformer claimed personal access to divine authority. And it was this very split that rapidly led those same nobles and princes into the bloodiest wars known in Europe up to that day.

In the debate on free will, the underlying warrants with which Luther and Erasmus approach the problem were at odds; those warrants implied far more than a simple difference of perspective. The difference was in, at base, where the authority for truth is located. Stated even more bluntly, it was a debate about to what extent an individual can know something with certainty. Erasmus, in a long tradition of rhetoric from Aristotle, felt that problems that did not deal with documentable facts were answered only in terms of probability. For him, the closest approximation of that probability was gained with educated elites, like the Senators of Republican Rome, engaged in a fair and thorough examination of the available means of persuasion on each side of the problem. A probable truth was established, at least in the ideal, by the public engagement of *controversia* by eloquent men. Luther, on the other hand, felt that individuals with access to the Bible could simply plug into the Holy Spirit that it represented. Soon, vernacular Bibles would be printed and sold. Each individual would be able to actually interact with the Holy Spirit by engaging the text in his or her own language. For Luther, there would be no need for a priest class to interpret the Bible for the laity because the Bible was not just inerrant but it was also understandable and clear.

In this way, the fundamentalist ideology was born.

31. Ibid., 94.

THE BIRTH OF FUNDAMENTALISM

Locating the emergence of Christian fundamentalism as early as Martin Luther is a bold claim because, quite simply, the very word "fundamentalism" is most closely associated with a 1910 publication by Lyman Stewart called *The Fundamentals*. Since then, the term has come to be loaded with a range of meanings that make it difficult to define. However, my use of the term does not refer to the specific doctrine posited by Lyman Stewart. Instead, by fundamentalism I refer to the ideology of individual access to divine authority that laid the foundation for the basic characteristics we now associate with fundamentalism as a Christian ideology.

Recent studies of the psychology of fundamentalism have yielded a definition rooted in its current descriptive meaning as a specific sort of religious ideology. In 1991, social scientists Lyman Kellstedt and C. Smidt defined Christian fundamentalist belief "as a subgroup within evangelicalism that accepts biblical authority, salvation through Christ, and a commitment to spreading the faith."³² This definition, however, more or less describes a wide swath of Christians; many of whom would reject any self-definition as "fundamentalists." From the perspective of political science, Harold Perkin defined fundamentalism more narrowly, stating that, "it is the conviction that the adherents have a special knowledge of and relationship to Deity, based either on a sacred and unquestionable text or on direct contact with and experience of God's message."³³ Here, Perkin comes closer to the ideological definition that I am using for Christian fundamentalism.

However, a more systematic catalogue of observable traits identifying fundamentalist discourse can be found in the work of Charles B. Strozier. He lists the following four traits as defining a discursive expression of the Christian fundamentalist ideology: 1) an "orientation toward biblical literalism," 2) "the experience of being reborn in faith," 3) "evangelicalism (or the obligation to convert others)," and 4) "an apocalypticism in its specifically end time form."³⁴ For the purposes of this study, when these four traits are expressed in discourse, that discursive expression can properly be termed ideological Christian fundamentalist.

And, it is precisely these four traits that Martin Luther exhibited. As I have described, Luther argued that the Bible was clearly understandable. He argued repeatedly and at length, as I noted above, that the Bible has "one simple meaning . . . the literal meaning."³⁵ This was one of the foundations of his argument that the Catholic Church should give up its monopoly of access

32. Lyman Kellstedt and C. Smidt, "Measuring Fundamentalism: An Analysis of Different Operational Strategies," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30 (1992): 260.

33. Harold Perkin, "American Fundamentalism and the Selling of God," *The Political Quarterly* (2000): 79.

34. Charles B. Strozier, *Apocalypse: On the Psychology of Fundamentalism in America* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1994), 5.

35. Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, trans. and ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1989), 78.

to the text.

In terms of an "experience of spiritual rebirth," Luther believed he had special access to revelatory knowledge, giving him the fundamental insight that faith alone lead to salvation. Though historians have found evidence of his new conception of divine authority slowly taking shape, Luther recounts it as a sudden revelation that occurred in 1513. He described his revelatory moment as a "rebirth":

The righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.³⁶

Further, the case for Luther's evangelical stance is clear in his aggressive attempts to convert European society to his own position on the necessity of individual experience of faith.

And, finally, Luther was, in distinction from the Catholic Church both in his time and today, willing to approach the final book of the Bible, Revelation, as a literal description of the near approach of God's judgment at the End of Time.³⁷ There is ample evidence throughout his writings that Luther believed in the active force of Satan in the world. Further, until the end of his life he expressed the belief that the Second Coming of Christ was near. One of his most virulent expressions of this belief can be found in the many published materials where he states bluntly that the pope was, in fact, Antichrist.

In a 1537 article on the papacy, Luther states the case plainly. He fully associates Pope Leo X with Antichrist as the leader of a false religion saying: "All the pope's bulls and books, in which he roars like a lion (as the angel in Rev. 10:3 suggests), are available." As his short article builds to a climax, Luther states the case more directly. Because the pope places himself above Christ in his claims to authority, he sets himself up as a false god, as Antichrist is prophesied to do in the book of Revelation: "This is a powerful demonstration that the pope is the real Antichrist who has raised himself over and set himself against Christ, for the pope will not permit Christians to be saved except by his own power."³⁸

Since Saint Augustine wrote *The City of God*, the Catholic Church had officially accepted a "symbolic" or "typological" interpretation of the prophesy of the end of time contained in Revelation. For Augustine as well as for the Catholic Church of today, the message of Revelation is one that uses allegory to describe the individual human's experience of life and impending death. However, for Luther and all the fundamentalists that would follow him, Revelation is to be taken at its face value: a prophecy of war and strife that

36. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Volume 34: Career of the Reformer IV*, eds. J.J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1999), 337.

37. Paul S. Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief In Modern America* (Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1992), 61.

38. Martin Luther, "The Smalcald Articles," *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, trans. and ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1989), 513.

will comprise a historical period generally referred to as "The End Times." The occurrence of these events, if the text is taken literally, must be near at hand. Of the many references throughout the New Testament to the close proximity of the return of "The Kingdom of Heaven", the Gospel of Mathew presents a typical one. After Jesus describes at some length the violence and suffering that will mark the End Times period, he states bluntly:

So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, *even* at the doors. Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away. But of that day and hour knoweth no *man*, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only.³⁹

So, it is no surprise that Luther implied that the End Times were near.

As an ideological unit, these four tenets, in fact, imply and support each other. With the removal of authority from the Catholic Church and placement of it in the direct experience of spiritual rebirth, individuals must have direct access to the Bible so that they can be led by the Holy Spirit to that rebirth. This, however, should not have led to a diversity of interpretation of the Bible because, as Luther thought, the message of the Bible was clear and self-evident. That message was, for Luther, the simple idea that through faith alone the individual human could gain access to God's grace, and that access was premised on a personal experience of spiritual rebirth. This claim is a simple and literal interpretation of the Gospel of John: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."⁴⁰ Further, a simple and literal interpretive method for the Bible will necessarily extend to the book of Revelation that, on its face, seems to be a prophecy of the end of time. In this way, the four interlocking and definitive traits of what would come to be called Christian fundamentalism are evident in and made possible by Martin Luther's location of divine authority in the individual experience of the biblical texts.

THE NECESSITY OF PLURALISM

While Martin Luther's theology made possible the Christian fundamentalist ideology as I have defined it, the rapid spread of that ideology was not a product of his will alone. Instead, Luther came onto the historic scene at a moment when Europe was ripe for a fundamentalist message.⁴¹ The introduction of the moveable type press would begin to make it possible for individuals to access translations of the Bible so that they could interpret them individually.⁴² Using the press to communicate to a large audience,

39. Matthew 24:33-36.

40. John 3:3.

41. David C. Steinmetz, *Reformers in the Wings: From Geiler von Kayserberg to Theodore Beza* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

42. Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe*, Volume One (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 336ff.

Luther effectively tapped a popular sentiment first among the nobles of Europe and later among the everyday individuals themselves. He presented the aristocrats and monarchs of Europe with a legitimate argument against the near imperial power that Rome exerted. He tapped the rising nationalist tendencies first of Germany and then of other regions. Grabbing for power, the nobles of Europe's diverse tribes seized upon the opportunity to challenge the political power of Rome. In so doing, Europe erupted into war.

Luther had fundamentally changed the ideological scene. No longer dominated by the single authority on ethics, morality, science, and philosophy exerted by the Catholic Church, a chaos of new ideas exploded across Europe in the form of a myriad of Protestant sects. As Rawls rightly noted, the Reformation helped generate a pluralism of ideologies in the West. At the same time, it made an acceptance of that diversity necessary for any post-Reformation political body because of Luther's theological affinities with fundamentalism. Luther's writings helped make it possible for the divine authority that was the basis of both religious and political life in pre-Reformation Europe to be distributed on the ideological level. It served as the basis for the movements that would strive for greater equality between individual humans that are still in process today. At the same time, fundamentalism could arise whenever an individual came to believe that his or her interpretation of God's Word was the only true and acceptable one. Individuals empowered by such beliefs could and did have the ability to challenge state authority. In extreme cases, those challenges impeded the state's ability to avert violence among its citizens.

As much as Cromwell or Calvin fought against the explosion of diversity in beliefs, access to the Bible afforded individuals the opportunity to formulate their own interpretations of the powerful comprehensive doctrines derived from the biblical tradition. The result was not so much a reformation of the Catholic Church as it was rapid and radical devolution of the church's political power. The doctrines of the church functioned to support the political system across Europe. The fragmentation of authority on religious doctrines for Europe made it not only possible for there to be multiple interpretations of the Bible but it made it inevitable. As a result, that political system was thrown into chaos. If there was any hope of averting violence, state-supported pluralism was made necessary by the collapse of the Catholic Church's imperial hold on ideology. At this critical juncture in history, governments had to emerge that would enforce some sort of reasonable pluralism or they would be doomed to endure ongoing violence.

The introduction of a plurality of comprehensive and normative doctrines has had a paradoxical impact on the understanding of how and what truth can or should be. It was liberal or liberating in the sense that it allowed individuals to seek and locate comprehensive truths for themselves. However, it has borne with this liberation a responsibility that problematizes the very liberty the ideology of liberalism enabled. Insofar as individuals can seek, locate, or create their own understanding of the comprehensive doctrines that guide their lives, they must also somehow coexist with a multitude of other individuals who are pursuing and locating truths of their own. This

coexistence means that some sort of authorized governmental pluralism must be enforced if ongoing conflict is to be averted. In turn, this need for pluralism in government has pitted fundamentalist individuals against the very state that must strive to maintain tolerance for their belief system as one alongside all others.