

## ***Introduction:***

### **The background to the book and the controversy with Erasmus.**

Martin Luther wrote THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL in answer to the teaching of Desiderius Erasmus who was born in Rotterdam between 1466 and 1469. Erasmus was an Augustinian monk for seven years and then he travelled to England. There he met men who made him eager to pursue his study of Greek. Eventually Erasmus produced a critical text of the Greek New Testament (1516). He rejected fanciful methods of interpreting the scriptures and many of the superstitions of church teachers. He rebelled against the laziness and vice common in the monasteries. But despite this, Erasmus was not an evangelical believer. He was a humanist, believing that men could earn their salvation instead of relying only on Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection. Erasmus rightly preferred a simple approach to Christian teaching, rather than the complicated hair-splitting of the professional theologians. He avoided controversy and for a long time did not come into the open on the issue of 'free-will', but when he did, it was a challenge that Martin Luther could not ignore.

Martin Luther was born in Saxony and was about fourteen years younger than Erasmus. While Luther was a monk, he had a dramatic experience of the gospel of God's grace. From that time he knew that every experience and belief must be tested by the authority of scripture. He knew that salvation is 'by grace ... through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast' (Ephesians 2:8-9). His own experience confirmed that conviction.

Luther was a professor, a theologian and also a pastor. His people knew that he felt what he preached. He was no dry scholar. He felt the pressure of eternity every time he preached. This compelled him sometimes to do unpopular and even dangerous things. He was prepared to stand for God's truth against the whole world.

At first, Erasmus appeared to be on Luther's side because both men rejected many of the errors and failings of the Roman church. But Luther challenged, more and more, the Roman teaching of salvation by works, insisting that 'the righteous shall live by faith' (Romans 1:17). Erasmus was still in the Roman church and as a scholar he at last yielded to his church's pressure to state the teaching of 'free-will'. In defiance of Luther's request to him not to do so, he issued his DISCUSSION CONCERNING 'FREE-WILL' in 1524. Erasmus wrote to Henry VIII: 'The die is cast. The little book on "free-will" has seen the light of day'. The book pleased the Pope and the Roman Emperor and was praised by Henry VIII.

Luther now declared Erasmus to be an enemy of the evangelical faith. God over-ruled the intense quarrel between these two men to the advantage of his kingdom. It produced a great statement of evangelical doctrine that has enriched Christ's church ever since — Luther's BONDAGE OF THE WILL. We offer here a summary of this great work. We have retained much of Luther's style but have not followed Luther's order.

We begin where Luther left off, by first summarising his positive doctrine of the bondage of the will. We follow this with other sections in which Luther states, and then refutes, Erasmus' arguments.

Luther's style would normally cause us to add certain words every time he uses the expression 'free-will'. For example: the free-will 'that you suppose exists'. But we have

chosen to reflect Luther's meaning by using quotation marks — 'free-will'. And in chapters two, three and four, we have retained Luther's direct speech, keeping as closely as possible to the atmosphere of his work. We have not included every argument Luther uses because to do so would enlarge this simplification unduly.