

Johann Tetzel, Grace for Sale Through Indulgences

Source: <http://biblelight.net/tetzel.htm>

Document

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Source: Martin Luther, *Wider Hans Worst*, 1541. (WA 51, 538.)

It happened in 1517 that a Dominican monk named Johann Tetzel, a braggart, caused a great stir. Maximilian once sentenced him to drowning in the River Inn - presumably because of his great virtue - but Duke Frederick rescued him in Innsbruck from the punishment of being drowned. Duke Frederick reminded him of this incident when he began to denounce us Wittenbergers. Actually, he admitted it quite openly. This same Tetzel now began to peddle indulgences. With might and main he sold grace for money as dearly or as cheaply as he could. At the time I was preacher here in the cloister and was filled as a new doctor with an ardent love for the scriptures.

When many people from Wittenberg ran after indulgences... I did not know - as surely as my Lord Christ has redeemed me - what indulgences were, but no one else knew either. I carefully began to preach that one could do something better and more certain than to purchase indulgences. On an earlier occasion I had already preached here in the castle against indulgences, but was not very graciously received by Duke Frederick, who was fond of his collegiate church. Now, to speak about the real cause for the 'Lutheran scandal', at first I let everything continue its course. Then it was reported to me, however, that Tetzel was preaching some cruel and terrible propositions, such as the following:

He had grace and power from the Pope to offer forgiveness even if someone had slept with the Holy Virgin Mother of God, as long as a contribution would be put into the coffer.

Furthermore, the red Cross of indulgences and the papal coat of arms on the flag of the churches was as powerful as the Cross of Christ.

Moreover, even if St. Peter were here now he would have no greater grace or power than he had.

Furthermore, he would not want to trade places in heaven with St. Peter, for he had redeemed more souls with his indulgences than Peter with his sermons.

Furthermore, if anyone put money into the coffer for a soul in purgatory, the soul would leave purgatory for heaven in the moment one could hear the penny hit the bottom.

Also the grace of indulgences is the grace by which man is reconciled with God.

Furthermore, it is not necessary to show remorse or sorrow or do penance for sins when purchasing indulgences or a letter of indulgence. He even sold indulgences for future sins. Such abominable things he did abundantly. He was merely interested in money...

Source: *Luthers Schriften*, herausg. von Walch. XV, 446.

After Tetzel had received a substantial amount of money at Leipzig, a nobleman asked him if it were possible to receive a letter of indulgence for a future sin. Tetzel quickly answered in the affirmative, insisting, however, that the payment had to be made at once. This the nobleman did, receiving thereupon letter and seal from Tetzel. When Tetzel left Leipzig the nobleman attacked him along the way, gave him a thorough beating, and sent him back empty-handed to Leipzig with the comment that this was the future sin which he had in mind. Duke George at first was quite furious about this incident, but when he heard the whole story he let it go without punishing the nobleman.

Source: Friedrich Myconius, *Historia reformationis*, p. 14.

At the time a Dominican monk named Johann Tetzel was the great mouthpiece, commissioner, and preacher of indulgences in Germany. His preaching raised enormous amounts of money which were sent to Rome. This was particularly the case in the new mining town St. Annaberg, where I, Friedrich Myconius, listened to him for over two years. The claims of this uneducated and shameful monk were unbelievable. Thus he said that even if someone had slept with Christ's dear Mother, the Pope had power in heaven and on earth to forgive as long as the money was put into the indulgences coffer. And if the Pope would forgive, God also had to forgive. He furthermore said if they would put money quickly into the coffer to obtain grace and indulgence, all the mountains near St. Annaberg would turn into pure silver. He claimed that in the very moment the coin rang in the coffer, the soul rose up to heaven. Such a marvellous thing was his indulgence. In sum and substance: God was no longer God, as he had bestowed all divine power to the Pope: 'Tu es Petrus, tibi dabo claves, quodcunque.' And then there were the masters of the Inquisition, who banished and burned those saying conflicting words.

Source: The Text of a Sermon on Indulgences by Johann Tetzel

What are you thinking about? Why do you hesitate to convert yourself? Why don't you have fears about your sins? Why don't you confess now to the vicars of our Most Holy Pope? Don't you have the example of Lawrence, who, compelled by the love of God, gave away his inheritance and suffered his body to be burned? Why do you not take the example of Bartholomew, Stephen, and of other saints who gladly suffered the most gruesome deaths for the sake and salvation of their souls? You, however, do not give up great treasures; indeed you give not even moderate alms. They gave their bodies to be martyred, but you delight in living well and joyfully. You priest, nobleman, merchant, wife, virgin, you married people, young person, old man, enter into your church which is for you, as I have said, St. Peter's, and visit the most holy Cross. It has been placed there for you, and it always cries and calls for you. Are you perhaps ashamed to visit the Cross with a candle and yet not ashamed to visit a tavern? Are you ashamed to go to the apostolic confessors, but not ashamed to go to a dance? Behold, you are on the raging sea of the world in storm and danger, not knowing if you will safely reach the harbor of salvation...

You should know that all who confess and in penance put alms into the coffer... will obtain complete remission of all their sins. If they visit, after confession and after the Jubilee, the Cross and the altar every day they will receive that indulgence which would be theirs upon visiting in St. Peter's the seven altars, where complete indulgence is offered. Why are you then standing there? Run for the salvation of your souls! Be as careful and concerned for the salvation of your souls as you are for your temporal goods, which you seek both day and night. Seek the Lord while he may be found and while he is near...

Don't you hear the voices of your wailing dead parents and others who say, 'Have mercy upon me, have mercy upon me, because we are in severe punishment and pain [in Purgatory]. From this you could redeem us with a small alms and yet you do not want to do so.' Open your ears as the father says to the son and the mother to the daughter . . . , 'We have created you, fed you, cared for you, and left you our temporal goods. Why then are you so cruel and harsh that you do not want to save us, though it only takes a little? You let us lie in flames so that we only slowly come to the promised glory.' You may have letters which let you have, once in life and in the hour of death . . . full remission of the punishment which belongs to sin. Oh, those of you with vows, you usurers, robbers, murderers, and criminals - Now is the time to hear the voice of God. He does not want the death of the sinner, but that he be converted and live...

Source: W. Köhler, *Dokumente zum Ablassstreit*, pp. 125-26.

The above are quoted from *The Reformation*, by Hans J. Hillerbrand, published by Harper & Row, publishers, Copyright 1964 by SCM Press Ltd and Harper and Row, Inc., Library of Congress catalog card number 64-15480, pp. 41-46.

Martin Luther's Ninety- Five Theses (1517)

Document

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Source: *Works of Martin Luther: Adolph Spaeth, L.D. Reed, Henry Eyster Jacobs, et Al., Trans. & Eds.(Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Company, 1915), Vol.1, pp. 29-38*

Out of love for the truth and the desire to bring it to light, the following propositions will be discussed at Wittenberg, under the presidency of the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and of Sacred Theology, and Lecturer in Ordinary on the same at that place. Wherefore he requests that those who are unable to be present and debate orally with us, may do so by letter.

In the Name our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ... willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.
2. This word cannot be understood to mean sacramental penance, i.e., confession and satisfaction, which is administered by the priests.
6. The pope cannot remit any guilt, except by declaring that it has been remitted by God and by assenting to God's remission...
7. God remits guilt to no one whom He does not, at the same time, humble in all things and bring into subjection to His vicar, the priest.
21. Therefore those preachers of indulgences are in error, who say that by the pope's indulgences a man is freed from every penalty, and saved;
27. They preach [human doctrines] who say that so soon as the penny jingles into the money-box, the soul flies out [of purgatory].
28. It is certain that when the penny jingles into the money-box, gain and avarice can be increased, but the result of the intercession of the Church is in the power of God alone.
30. No one is sure that his own contrition is sincere; much less that he has attained full remission.
31. Rare as is the man that is truly penitent, so rare is also the man who truly buys indulgences...
32. They will be condemned eternally, together with their teachers, who believe themselves sure of their salvation because they have letters of pardon.
33. Men must be on their guard against those who say that the pope's pardons are that inestimable gift of God by which man is reconciled to Him;
36. Every truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without letters of pardon.
42. **Christians are to be taught** that the pope does not intend the buying of pardons to be compared in any way to works of mercy.
43. **Christians are to be taught** that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better work than buying pardons;
44. Because love grows by works of love, and man becomes better; but by pardons man does not grow better, only more free from penalty.
45. **Christians are to be taught** that he who sees a man in need, and passes him by, and gives [his money] for pardons, purchases not the indulgences of the pope, but the indignation of God.
46. **Christians are to be taught** that unless they have more than they need, they are bound to keep back what is necessary for their own families, and by no means to squander it on pardons.
48. **Christians are to be taught** that the pope, in granting pardons, needs, and therefore desires, their devout prayer for him more than the money they bring.

49. **Christians are to be taught** that the pope's pardons are useful, if they do not put their trust in them; but altogether harmful, if through them they lose their fear of God.
50. **Christians are to be taught** that if the pope knew the exactions of the pardon-preachers, he would rather that St. Peter's [Basilica] should go to ashes, than that it should be built up with the skin, flesh and bones of his sheep.
54. Injury is done the Word of God when, in the same sermon, an equal or a longer time is spent on pardons than on this Word.
55. It must be the intention of the pope that if pardons, which are a very small thing, are celebrated with one bell, with single processions and ceremonies, then the Gospel, which is the very greatest thing, should be preached with a hundred bells, a hundred processions, a hundred ceremonies.
62. The true treasure of the Church is the Most Holy Gospel of the glory and the grace of God.
75. To think the papal pardons so great that they could absolve a man even if he had committed an impossible sin and violated the Mother of God -- this is madness.
76. We say, on the contrary, that the papal pardons are not able to remove the very least of venial sins, so far as its guilt is concerned.
82. To wit: -- "Why does not the pope empty purgatory, for the sake of holy love and of the dire need of the souls that are there, if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a Church? The former reasons would be most just; the latter is most trivial."
86. Again: -- "Why does not the pope, whose wealth is today greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus¹, build just this one church of St. Peter with his own money, rather than with the money of poor believers?"
92. Away, then, with all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, "Peace, peace," and there is no peace!
93. Blessed be all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, "Cross, cross," and there is no cross!
94. Christians are to be exhorted that they be diligent in following Christ, their Head, through penalties, deaths, and hell;
95. And thus be confident of entering into heaven rather through many tribulations, than through the assurance of peace.

Questions to Consider:

1. What problems did Luther have with the sale of indulgences?
2. According to Luther, what must a Christian do in order for his or her sins to be remitted?
3. What suggestions did Luther make to the Church and the papacy?
4. What was Luther's purpose in writing this document? What did he seek to accomplish?
5. Pick one of these theses that you found to be especially thought-provoking. Be prepared to share it with the class, along with your reflections on it.

¹ Marcus Licinius Crassus was the richest man in Rome in the first century B.C. His name is synonymous with wealth.

From Martin Luther's Preface to the New Testament

Source: <http://www.scrollpublishing.com/store/Luther-New-Testament.html>

"From all this you can now judge all the books and decide among them which are the best. John's Gospel and St. Paul's Epistles, especially that to the Romans, and St. Peter's first Epistle are the true kernel and marrow of all the books. They ought rightly be the first books and it would be advisable for every Christian to read them first and most. ...John's Gospel is the one, tender, true chief Gospel, far, far to be preferred to the other three and placed high above them. So, too, the Epistles of St. Paul and St. Peter far surpass the other three Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

"In a word, St. John's Gospel and his first Epistle, St. Paul's Epistles—especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians—and St. Peter's first Epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that it is necessary and good for you to know—even though you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James' Epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to them. For it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it."

Luther's Treatment of the 'Disputed Books' of the New Testament

Source: <http://www.bible-researcher.com/antilegomena.html>

Explanatory notes, such as an introduction and footnotes to the material below, are available by following the above link.

The English translation and notes are derived from the American edition of Luther's Works, vol 35 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), pp. 395-399.

Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude (1522)

Though this epistle of St. James was rejected by the ancients, I praise it and consider it a good book, because it sets up no doctrines of men but vigorously promulgates the law of God. However, to state my own opinion about it, though without prejudice to anyone, I do not regard it as the writing of an apostle; and my reasons follow.

In the first place it is flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture in ascribing justification to works. It says that Abraham was justified by his works when he offered his son Isaac; though in Romans 4 St. Paul teaches to the contrary that Abraham was justified apart from works, by his faith alone, before he had offered his son, and proves it by Moses in Genesis 15. Now although this epistle might be helped and an interpretation devised for this justification by works, it cannot be defended in its application to works of Moses' statement in Genesis 15. For Moses is speaking here only of Abraham's faith, and not of his works, as St. Paul demonstrates in Romans 4. This fault, therefore, proves that this epistle is not the work of any apostle.

In the second place its purpose is to teach Christians, but in all this long teaching it does not once mention the Passion, the resurrection, or the Spirit of Christ. He names Christ several times; however he teaches nothing about him, but only speaks of general faith in God. Now it is the office of a true apostle to preach of the Passion and resurrection and office of Christ, and to lay the foundation for faith in him, as Christ himself says in John 15, "You shall bear witness to me." All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach and inculcate [treiben] Christ. And that is the true test by which to judge all books, when we see whether or not they inculcate Christ. For all the Scriptures show us Christ, Romans 3; and St. Paul will know nothing but Christ, I Corinthians 2. Whatever does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even though St. Peter or St. Paul does the teaching. Again, whatever preaches Christ would be apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod were doing it.

But this James does nothing more than drive to the law and to its works. Besides, he throws things together so chaotically that it seems to me he must have been some good, pious man, who took a few sayings from the disciples of the apostles and thus tossed them off on paper. Or it may perhaps have been written by someone on the basis of his preaching. He calls the law a "law of liberty," though Paul calls it a law of slavery, of wrath, of death, and of sin.

Moreover he cites the sayings of St. Peter: "Love covers a multitude of sins," and again, "Humble yourselves under the hand of God;" also the saying of St. Paul in Galatians, "The Spirit lusteth against envy." And yet, in point of time, St. James was put to death by Herod in Jerusalem, before St. Peter. So it seems that this author came long after St. Peter and St. Paul.

In a word, he wanted to guard against those who relied on faith without works, but was unequal to the task in spirit, thought, and words. He mangles the Scriptures and thereby opposes Paul and all Scripture. He tries to accomplish by harping on the law what the apostles accomplish by stimulating people to love. Therefore, I will not have him in my Bible to be numbered among the true chief books, though I would not thereby prevent anyone from including or extolling him as he pleases, for there are otherwise many good sayings in him. One man is no man in worldly things; how, then, should this single man alone avail against Paul and all the rest of Scripture?

Concerning the epistle of St. Jude, no one can deny that it is an extract or copy of St. Peter's second epistle, so very like it are all the words. He also speaks of the apostles like a disciple who comes long after them and cites sayings and incidents that are found nowhere else in the Scriptures. This moved the ancient fathers to exclude this epistle from the main body of the Scriptures. Moreover the Apostle Jude did not go to Greek-speaking lands, but to Persia, as it is said, so that he did not write Greek. Therefore, although I value this book, it is an epistle that need not be counted among the chief books which are supposed to lay the foundations of faith.

Preface to the Revelation of St. John (1522) ⁷

About this book of the Revelation of John, I leave everyone free to hold his own opinions. I would not have anyone bound to my opinion or judgment. I say what I feel. I miss more than one thing in this book, and it makes me consider it to be neither apostolic nor prophetic.

First and foremost, the apostles do not deal with visions, but prophesy in clear and plain words, as do Peter and Paul, and Christ in the gospel. For it befits the apostolic office to speak clearly of Christ and his deeds, without images and visions. Moreover there is no prophet in the Old Testament, to say nothing of the New, who deals so exclusively with visions and images. For myself, I think it approximates the Fourth Book of Esdras; ⁸ I can in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it.

Moreover he seems to me to be going much too far when he commends his own book so highly -- indeed, more than any of the other sacred books do, though they are much more important -- and threatens that if anyone takes away anything from it, God will take away from him, etc. Again, they are supposed to be blessed who keep what is written in this book; and yet no one knows what that is, to say nothing of keeping it. This is just the same as if we did not have the book at all. And there are many far better books available for us to keep.

Many of the fathers also rejected this book a long time ago; ⁹ although St. Jerome, to be sure, refers to it in exalted terms and says that it is above all praise and that there are as many mysteries in it as words. Still, Jerome cannot prove this at all, and his praise at numerous places is too generous.

Finally, let everyone think of it as his own spirit leads him. My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book. For me this is reason enough not to think highly of it: Christ is neither taught nor known in it. But to teach Christ, this is the thing which an apostle is bound above all else to do; as Christ says in Acts 1, "You shall be my witnesses." Therefore I stick to the books which present Christ to me clearly and purely.

Document 2.4

From Erasmus, "On the Freedom of the Will"

Source: http://wadsworth.com/history_d/special_features/ilrn_legacy/wawc1c01c/content/wciv1/readings/lutheras.html

*In 1524 and 1525, seven years after Martin Luther began the Reformation, Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536) and Luther held a "debate" in print entitled *On Free Will and Salvation*. Erasmus initiated this exchange in the form of an open letter in early 1524, and Luther replied in 1525. Erasmus, despite his own criticisms of the excesses and corruption of many Roman Catholic clergymen, felt that the Church was absolutely necessary. Humanity required guidance to avoid sin, Erasmus reasoned, and the best guidance was the accumulated wisdom of the ages, as embodied in the teachings of the Church.*

*For Erasmus, any reform of the Church had to begin by examining its role in shaping individual morality. He felt this depended on the individual Christian's acceptance of free will (the notion that humans are free to choose their actions without divine coercion or predestination). In **On the Freedom of the Will**, Erasmus argues that the Bible can be obscure, ambiguous, and seemingly contradictory on the question of free will, but that on the whole the Bible and Church tradition favor free will.*

*Luther, conversely, felt that the nature of each individual was largely predetermined in the mind and plan of God, and that the Church was only a teacher or guide, not a true mold of man's nature. In his response of 1525, **The Bondage of the Will**, Luther does more than argue for predestination. He also strongly asserts the clarity and sufficiency of the Bible (without commentary or church doctrine) on this issue and on all other essential points of faith.*

On the Freedom of the Will

A Diatribe or Discourse

by Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam

Erasmus Acknowledges His Limitations and States His Point of View

In the Name of Jesus.

Among the difficulties, of which not a few crop up in Holy Scripture, there is hardly a more tangled labyrinth than that of "free choice," for it is a subject that has long exercised the minds of philosophers, and also of theologians old and new, in a striking degree, though in my opinion [their efforts have produced] more labor than fruit.

More recently, however, it has been revived by Carlstadt and Eck, in a fairly moderate debate, and now it has been more violently stirred up by Martin Luther, who has put out an *Assertion* about "free choice" and although he has already been answered by more than one writer, it seemed good to my friends that I should try my hand and see whether, as a result of our little set-to, the truth might be made more plain.

Here I know there will be those who will forthwith stop their ears, crying out, "The rivers run backward" — dare Erasmus attack Luther, like the fly the elephant? To appease them, if I may be allowed to ask for a little quiet, I need say no more by way of preface than what is the fact, that I have never sworn allegiance to the words of Luther. So that it should not seem unbecoming to anybody if at any point I differ publicly from him, as a man surely may differ from another man, nor should it seem a criminal offense to call in question any doctrine of his, still less if one engages in a temperate disputation with him for the purpose of eliciting truth.

Certainly I do not consider Luther himself would be indignant if anybody should find occasion to differ from him, since he permits himself to call in question the decrees, not only of all the doctors of the Church, but of all the schools, councils, and popes; and since he acknowledges this plainly and openly, it ought not to be counted by his friends as cheating if I take a leaf out of his book....

His Dislike of Assertions

... I see some people endowed who are so uncontrollably attached to their own opinion that they cannot bear anything which dissents from it; but they twist whatever they read in the Scriptures into an assertion of an opinion which they have embraced once for all. They are like young men who love a girl so immoderately that they imagine they see their beloved wherever they turn...

As far as I am concerned, I admit that many different views about free choice have been handed down from the ancients about which I have, as yet, no fixed conviction, except that I think there to be a certain power of free choice. For I have read the *Assertion* of Martin Luther, and read it without prejudice... And yet, although he expounds his case in all its aspects with great ingenuity and fervor of spirit, I must say, quite frankly, that he has not persuaded me....

The Obscurity of Scripture

For there are some secret places in the Holy Scriptures into which God has not wished us to penetrate more deeply and, if we try to do so, then the deeper we go, the darker and darker it becomes, by which means we are led to acknowledge the unsearchable majesty of the divine wisdom, and the weakness of the human mind....

Therefore, in my judgment on this matter of free choice, having learned what is needful to know about this, if we are in the path of true religion, let us go on swiftly to better things, forgetful of the things which are behind, or if we are entangled in sins, let us strive with all our might and have recourse to the remedy of penitence that by all means we may entreat the mercy of the Lord without which no human will or endeavor is effective; and what is evil in us, let us impute to ourselves, and what is good, let us ascribe wholly to divine benevolence, to which we owe salvation, and that no harm can come to us from a God who is by nature just, even if some things happen that seem to us amiss, for none ought to despair of the pardon of a God who is by nature most merciful. This, I say, was in my judgment sufficient for Christian godliness, nor should we through irreverent inquisitiveness rush into those things which are hidden, not to say superfluous... How many questions, or rather squabbles, have arisen over the distinction of persons, the mode of generation, the distinction between filiation and procession; what a fuss has been raised in the world by the wrangle about the conception of the virgin as Theotokos! I ask what profit has there been so far from these laborious inquiries, except that with the loss of harmony we love one another the less, while seeking to be wiser than we need....

The Dangers Inherent in Luther's Teachings

...For the most part, men are by nature dull-witted and sensual, prone to unbelief, inclined to evil, with a bent to blasphemy, so that there is no need to add fuel to the furnace. And so Paul, as a wise dispenser of the Divine Word, often brings clarity to bear, and prefers to follow that which is fitting for one's neighbors rather than the letter of the law: and possesses a wisdom that he speaks among the perfect, but amongst the weak he reckons to know nothing, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. Holy Scripture has its own language, adapted to our understanding. There God is angry, grieves, is indignant, rages, threatens, hates, and again has mercy, repents, changes his mind, not that such changes take place in the nature of God, but that to speak thus is suited to our infirmity and slowness. The same prudence I consider befits those who undertake the task of interpreting the Divine Word. Some things for this reason are harmful because they are not expedient, as wine for a fevered patient. Similarly, such matters might allowably have been treated in discussion by the learned world, or even in the theological schools, although I should not think even this to be expedient save the restraint; on the other hand, to debate such fables before the gaze of a mixed multitude seems to me to be not merely useless but even pernicious.

I should, therefore, prefer men to be persuaded not to waste their time and talents in the labyrinths of this kind, but to refute or to affirm the views of Luther...

INTRODUCTION TO THE DISPUTATION

Luther is Opposed Not Only by Scripture but Also by Weighty Authority of the Church Fathers

Now, since Luther does not acknowledge the authority of any writer, of however distinguished a reputation, but only listens to the canonical Scriptures, how gladly do I welcome this abridgment of labor, for innumerable Greek and Latin writers treat of free choice, either as a theme or incidentally, so that it would be a great labor to collect out of them what each one has to say either for or against free choice, and to explain the several meanings of each individual opinion, or to resolve or approve their arguments — a tedious and long-winded affair, and as regards Luther and his friends, quite useless, especially as they not only disagree among themselves, but often contradict their own doctrine.

Yet in the meantime let the reader be admonished that if we shall seem to give equal weight with Luther to the testimonies and solid arguments of Holy Scripture, he should also bear constantly in mind so numerous a body of most learned men who have found approval in so many centuries down to our own day, whom not only their skill in divine studies but also godliness of life commend. For some of them gave testimony with their blood to that doctrine of Christ which they defend with their writings; such among the Greeks were Origen, Basil, Chrysostom, Cyril, John of Damascus, Theophylact; among the Latin Fathers, Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius, Hilary, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, to say nothing meanwhile of Thomas, Scotus, Durandus, Capreolus, Gabriel, Aegidius, Gregory, Alexander, the skill and force of whose dialectic, in my opinion, no one can afford to despise, not to mention the authority of so many universities, councils, and supreme pontiffs.

From the time of the apostles down to the present day, no writer has yet emerged who has totally taken away the power of freedom of choice, save only [Manichaeus](#) and [John Wyclif](#). For the authority of [Laurentius Valla](#), who comes nearest to agreement with them, has not much weight among theologians. The doctrine of Manichaeus, indeed, though it has long been exploded and repudiated by common consent of the whole world, yet I am inclined to think less useless to piety than that of Wyclif. For Manichaeus ascribes good and bad works to two natures in man in such a way that we owe good works to God in consequence of our condition, and yet against the power of darkness he leaves cause for imploring the aid of the Creator, that with this aid we may sin more lightly, and more easily do good works. Wyclif, however, ascribes all things to sheer necessity, and what room does he leave either for our prayers or for our endeavors?

So to return to my first theme, if the reader shall see that my own argument meets the other side with equal weapons, then let him also consider whether more weight ought not to be ascribed to the previous judgments of so many learned men... so many saints... martyrs... theologians... universities, councils... bishops and popes — or to trust instead the private judgment of this or that individual.

...I confess that it is right that the sole authority of Holy Scripture should outweigh all the votes of all mortal men. But the authority of the Scripture is not here in dispute. The same Scriptures are acknowledged and venerated by either side. **Our battle is about the meaning of Scripture....**

How Can Inspiration and Authority Be Tested?

Moreover, if we grant that he who has the Spirit is sure of the meaning of the Scriptures, how can I be certain of what he finds to be true for himself? What am I to do when many bring diverse interpretations, about which each swears he has the Holy Spirit? And since the Spirit does not furnish the whole truth to anyone, even he who has the Spirit may be mistaken or deceived in some single point. So much for those who so easily reject the interpretation of the Fathers in Holy Scripture and oppose their views to ours as if delivered by an oracle. **Finally, even supposing that the Spirit of Christ could have allowed his people to err in trivial matters on which the salvation of men does not greatly depend, how can it be believed that for more than thirteen hundred years he would have concealed the error in his Church and not have found anybody among so many saintly men worthy to be inspired with the knowledge of what these people claim to be the chief doctrine of the whole gospel?**

Truly — to conclude this argument — what such people choose to claim for themselves is their own affair. I claim for myself neither learning nor holiness, nor do I trust in my own spirit. I shall merely put forward with simple diligence those considerations which move my mind. If anybody shall try to teach me better, I will not knowingly withstand the truth...

PART I. SCRIPTURE PASSAGES THAT SUPPORT FREE CHOICE

I have completed half of this book, in which, if I do but persuade the reader that it would be better not to contend too superstitiously about things of this kind, particularly before the multitude, there is no need for the kind of argument for which I now gird myself, in the hope that truth may everywhere prevail, by comparison of Scriptures, as fire comes from striking flint.

Definition of Free Choice and Discussion of Ecclesiasticus 15:14-17

In the first place, it cannot be denied that there are many places in the Holy Scriptures which seem to set forth free choice. On the other hand, others seem to take it wholly away. Yet it is clear that Scripture cannot be in conflict with itself, since the whole proceeds from the same Spirit. First, then, we shall survey those passages which confirm our position; then we shall try to resolve those which seem to make for the opposite point of view. **By free choice in this place we mean a power of the human will by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from them.**

Among the texts that support free choice, priority is usually given to a passage in the book called Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Sirach, ch. 15(:14-17):

“God made man from the beginning, and left him in the hand of his own counsel.
He added his commandments and precepts. If thou wilt observe the commandments, and keep acceptable fidelity forever, they shall preserve thee.
He hath set water and fire before thee; stretch forth thine hand for which thou wilt.
Before man is life and death, good and evil; that which he shall choose shall be given him.”

I do not think anyone will object against the authority of this work that, as Jerome points out, it was not formerly received into the canon of the Hebrews, since the Church of Christ has received it into its canon with common consent, nor do I see any reason why the Hebrews should have thought fit to exclude this from their canon when they accept The Proverbs of Solomon and The Song of Songs... This passage, therefore, declares that Adam, the head of our race, was so created as to have an uncorrupted reason which could discern what should be sought and what avoided. But there was added will, also incorrupt but nevertheless free so that it could turn itself from good and incline toward evil. In the same state were the angels created before Lucifer and his companions renounced their Creator. In those who fell, the will was so thoroughly perverted that they could not return to better things, while in those who remained faithful, their will was so established in good that it could not henceforth turn aside into iniquity.

Man Before and After the Fall: The Forgiveness of Sins Restores Freedom of Choice Through Grace

In man the will was so upright and free that, apart from new grace, he could continue in innocence but, apart from the help of new grace, he could not attain the happiness of eternal life which the Lord Jesus promised to his followers. And although all these things cannot be proved by the plain witness of the Scriptures, yet they have been most convincingly argued in the orthodox Fathers. **In the case of Eve, however, not only does the will seem to have been corrupt, but the reason also or intellect, the source of all good and evil, for the serpent seems to have persuaded her that the threats were vain with which the Lord had forbidden them to touch the Tree of Life.**

In Adam, the will seems rather to have corrupted by immoderate love toward his spouse, whose desire he preferred to satisfy rather than the commandment of God. Nevertheless, I think that in this his reason, from which the will is born, was also corrupted. **This power of the soul with which we judge... is obscured by sin, but not altogether extinguished...**

But, by the grace of God, when sin has been forgiven, the will is made free to the extent that, according to the views of the Pelagians, even apart from the help of new grace it could attain eternal

life, so that just as it could do homage for salvation received to God who created and restored free will, according to the orthodox, so it is possible for man, with the help of divine grace (which always accompanies human effort), to continue in the right, yet not without a tendency to sin, owing to the vestiges of original sin in him. Thus, as the sin of our progenitors has passed into their descendants, so the tendency to sin has passed to all, though grace by abolishing sin so far mitigates it that it may be overcome, but not rooted out. Not that grace is incapable of destroying it altogether, but that it was not expedient for us.

Different Kinds of Grace, and Three Views of Its Relation to Free Choice

What, then, is free choice worth in us after sin and before grace? About this point ancient and modern writers differ amazingly, as each is concerned with a different aspect of the problem. Those who would avoid despair and complacency, but who would inspire men to hope and endeavor, attributed more to free choice. Pelagius taught that once the human will was freed and healed by grace there was no need of new grace, but that with the help of free will a man might attain to eternal salvation, but that man owed his salvation to God, without whose grace the will of man was not effectively free to do good. And this very power of the soul, with which a man embraces good when he knows it, and turns away from its opposite, is a gift of the Creator who might have made him a frog instead of a man....

On the other hand, those who, at the other extreme from Pelagius, attribute most of all to grace and practically nothing to free choice, yet do not entirely remove it, for they deny that man can will the good without peculiar grace, they deny that he can make a beginning, they deny that he can progress, they deny he can reach his goal without the principal and perpetual aid of divine grace. Their view seems probably enough in that it leaves man to study and strive, but it does not leave aught for him to ascribe to his own powers. But harder is the opinion of those who contend that free choice is of no avail save to sin, and that grace alone accomplishes good works in us... so that our will does nothing more than wax in the hand of the craftsman when it receives the particular shape that pleases him. These seem to me so anxious to avoid all reliance on human merit that they pass *praeter casam* [i.e., they go too far], as we say. Hardest of all seems the view of all those who say that free choice is a mere empty name, nor does it avail either in the case of the angels or in Adam or in us, either before or after grace, but it is God who works evil as well as good in us, and all things that happen come about by sheer necessity...