

# Cornerstones of Salvation

Foundations and Debates in  
the Reformed Tradition

Lee Gatiss





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# Preface

The Reformed tradition in theology is both broad and deep. It is broader than a single figure, such as John Calvin. And it is deeper than any superficial summary, such as the infamous acronym TULIP, could ever encapsulate. In the chapters which follow I explore some of the foundational teachings and debates in the Reformed tradition, particularly around the subject of salvation. I have found over the years that there is an astonishing ignorance about what people such as Luther, Calvin, Owen, and Wesley actually taught, even amongst those who claim to be Reformation Christians. The following chapters were originally researched and written to fill in the gaps in my own knowledge, and I hope they will be useful to others too.

Here, people such as Luther are seen, ‘warts and all’, establishing the basic contours of Reformed thought on free will and predestination. Calvin’s brilliance not just as a theologian but as an exegete and preacher of the Bible are made clear as he opens up the riches of ‘union with Christ’ in the book of Ephesians. Recent challenges to the foundational doctrine of justification by faith alone, which are often ultra-critical of the Reformation, are seen as unjustified and ill-thought through. The Reformation emphasis on preaching as ‘the ordinary means and instrument of the salvation of mankind’, as Edmund Grindal memorably put it, is brought into sharp relief during a furious conflict with the Tudor monarchy.

The variety in Reformed thought on the atonement, and the subtlety of its confessional formulas, especially on the controversial topic of ‘limited atonement’, is brought out. An often neglected sacramental angle is discovered afresh in an exposition of John Owen’s doctrine of infant baptism and infant salvation. And eighteenth-century arguments between the great celebrity Revival preachers over predestination and justification

are seen to be more foundational than the standard accounts give them credit for.

I have tried throughout to keep one eye on applications to the contemporary church scene in each of these areas, so as not to get lost in (albeit fascinating) historical and theological detail. I owe a great deal to many other scholars for their insights and sharpening interaction on the subjects discussed here. In addition to those I have thanked in the notes on each chapter, I would also like to express my gratitude to David Meager of Church Society and Stephen Boon of the Proclamation Trust for their invaluable help in proofreading and indexing this book.

I have found the Reformed tradition of biblical teaching exhilarating, edifying, and engaging at so many levels. I hope that readers will enjoy these explorations — all significantly modified, expanded, and updated from lectures and published research in peer-reviewed theology journals. I trust they will find them to be both stimulating to the mind and satisfying for the soul. My hope and prayer above all is that they will draw people to the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, who has become for us *wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'* (1 Corinthians 1:30-31).

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# The Manifesto of the Reformation: Luther vs. Erasmus on Free Will

*This chapter is a modified version of an article first published in Churchman 123.3 (2009). I am grateful to Carl Trueman for commenting on an early draft of this. References to the English edition of Luther's Works (55 volumes; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960-1975) are abbreviated throughout to LW.*

The clash between Martin Luther and Desiderius Erasmus over the issue of free will is 'one of the most famous exchanges in Western intellectual history.'<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, we will examine the background to the quarrel between these two men, and two of the central themes of Luther's response to Erasmus – the clarity of Scripture, and the bondage of the will. In doing so it is critical to be aware that studying these things 'operates as a kind of litmus test for what one is going to become theologically.'<sup>2</sup> Ignoring the contemporary relevance and implications of these crucially important topics will not be possible. Whether thinking about our approach to the modern reformation of the church, our evangelism, pastoral care, or interpretation of the Bible there is so much of value and vital importance here that it would be a travesty to discuss them without at least a nod in the direction of the twenty-first century church. From Luther's perspective, as

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1 Attributed to John W. O'Malley in R. Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005), 7.

2 Steven Paulson in G. O. Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005), xi.

Gerhard Forde rightly says, this was not just one more theological debate but ‘a desperate call to get the gospel preached.’<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, this is a fundamentally significant dispute historically since it involved key players in the two major movements of the sixteenth century: Erasmus the great Renaissance Humanist and Luther the Reformation Hercules.<sup>4</sup> The debate between these two titans reveals not only the reasons behind ‘humanism’s programmatic repudiation of the Reformation’,<sup>5</sup> but also gives us a clear view of the heartbeat of the Reformation itself. As B. B. Warfield wrote, *The Bondage of the Will* is ‘the embodiment of Luther’s reformation conceptions, the nearest to a systematic statement of them he ever made. It is the first exposition of the fundamental ideas of the Reformation in a comprehensive presentation, and it is therefore in a true sense the manifesto of the Reformation.’<sup>6</sup> If, therefore, modern evangelicals have lost Luther’s clarity and faithfulness to Scripture on this issue of free will we will have lost something very precious and foundational indeed.

## The Fly vs. the Elephant

Neither party in this grand debate was particularly keen on getting involved in a match against the other. Luther’s position was precarious enough in 1524–25, so it is not surprising that, as Brecht puts it, he ‘really wanted to maintain an attitude of charitableness and good-naturedness in dealing with his

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<sup>3</sup> *The Captivation of the Will*, xvii.

<sup>4</sup> The title ‘Hercules Germanicus’ is given to Luther in a cartoon of 1522 which is most uncomplimentary to the Pope, the Inquisition, and the scholastic theologians. See R. H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978 [1950]), 93–94.

<sup>5</sup> H. A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (London: Yale University Press, 1989), 216.

<sup>6</sup> B. B. Warfield, ‘The Theology of the Reformation’ in *Studies in Theology: The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield volume 9* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003 [1932]), 471.