

Martin Luther talking with Erasmus about Sola Scriptura, in Luther's book 'The Bondage of the Will'

ERASMUS' PREFACE REVIEWED.

Sect. 1. — FIRST of all, I would just touch upon some of the heads of your PREFACE; in which, You somewhat disparage our cause and adorn your own. In the first place, I would notice your censuring in me, in all your former books, an obstinacy of assertion; and saying, in this book, — "that you are so far from delighting in assertions, that you would rather at once go over to the sentiments of the skeptics, if the inviolable authority of the Holy Scriptures, and the decrees of the church, would permit you: to which authorities You willingly submit yourself in all things, whether you follow what they prescribe, or follow it not." — These are the principles that please you.

I consider, (as in courtesy bound,) that these things are asserted by you from a benevolent mind, as being a lover of peace. But if any one else had asserted them, I should, perhaps, have attacked him in my accustomed manner. But, however, I must not even allow you, though so very good in your intentions, to err in this opinion. For not to delight in assertions, is not the character of the Christian mind: nay, he must delight in assertions, or he is not a Christian. But, (that we may not be mistaken in terms) by assertion, I mean a constant adhering, affirming, confessing, defending, and invincibly persevering. Nor do I believe the term signifies any thing else, either among the Latins, or as it is used by us at this day.

And moreover, I speak concerning the asserting of those things, which are delivered to us from above in the Holy Scriptures. Were it not so, we should want neither Erasmus nor any other instructor to teach us, that, in things doubtful, useless, or unnecessary; assertions, contentions, and strivings, would be not only absurd, but impious: and Paul condemns such in more places than one. Nor do you, I believe, speak of these things, unless, as a ridiculous orator, you wish to take up one subject, and go on with another, as the Roman Emperor did with his Turbot; or, with the madness of a wicked writer, you wish to contend, that the article concerning "Free-will" is doubtful, or not necessary.

Be skeptics and academics far from us Christians; but be there with us assertors twofold more determined than the stoics themselves. How often does the apostle Paul require that assurance of faith; that is, that most certain, and most firm assertion of Conscience, calling it (Rom. x. 10), confession, "With the mouth confession is made unto salvation?" And Christ also saith, "Whosoever confesseth Me before men, him will I confess before My Father." (Matt. x. 32.) Peter commands us to "give a reason of the hope" that is in us. (1 Pet. iii. 15.) But why should I dwell upon this; nothing is more known and more general among Christians than assertions. Take away assertions, and you take away Christianity. Nay, the Holy Spirit is given unto them from heaven, that He may glorify Christ, and confess Him even unto death; unless this be not to assert — to die for confession and assertion. In a word, the Spirit so asserts, that He comes upon the whole world and reproves them of sin (John xvi. 8) thus, as it were, provoking to battle. And Paul enjoins Timothy to reprove, and to be instant out of season. (2 Tim. iv. 2.) But how ludicrous to me would be that reprobate, who should neither really believe that himself, of which he reproved, nor constantly assert it! — Why I would send him to Anticyra, to be cured.

But I am the greatest fool, who thus lose words and time upon that, which is clearer than the sun. What Christian would bear that assertions should be contemned? This would be at once to deny all piety and religion together; or to assert, that religion, piety, and every doctrine, is nothing at all. Why therefore do you too say, that you do not delight in assertions, and that you prefer such a mind to any other?

But you would have it understood that you have said nothing here concerning confessing Christ, and His doctrines. — I receive the admonition. And, in courtesy to you, I give up my right and custom, and refrain from judging of your heart, reserving that for another time, or for others. In the mean time, I admonish you to correct your tongue, and your pen, and to refrain henceforth from using such expressions. For, how upright and honest soever your heart may be, your words, which are the index of the heart, are not so. For, if you think the matter of "Free-will" is not necessary to be known, nor at all concerned with Christ, you speak honestly, but think wickedly: but, if you think it is necessary, you speak wickedly, and think rightly. And if so, then there is no room for you to complain and exaggerate so much concerning useless assertions and contentions: for what have they to do with the nature of the cause?

ERASMUS' SCEPTICISM.

Sect. 2. — BUT what will you say to these your declarations, when, be it remembered, they are not confined to "Free-will" only, but apply to all doctrines in general throughout the world — that, "if it were permitted you by the inviolable authority of the sacred Writings and decrees of the church, you would go over to the sentiments of the Sceptics?" —

What an all-changeable Proteus is there in these expressions, "inviolable authority" and "decrees of the church!" As though you could have so very great a reverence for the Scriptures and the church, when at the same time you signify, that you wish you had the liberty of being a Skeptic! What Christian would talk in this way? But if you say this in reference to useless and doubtful doctrines, what news is there in what you say? Who, in such things, would not wish for the liberty of the skeptical profession? Nay, what Christian is there who does not actually use this liberty freely, and condemn all those who are drawn away with, and captivated by ever opinion? Unless you consider all Christians to be such (as the term is generally understood) whose doctrines are useless, and for which they quarrel like fools, and contend by assertions. But if you speak of necessary things, what declaration more impious can any one make, than that he wishes for the liberty of asserting nothing in such matters? Whereas, the Christian will rather say this — I am so averse to the sentiments of the Sceptics, that wherever I am not hindered by the infirmity of the flesh, I will not only steadily adhere to the Sacred Writings every where, and in all parts of them, and assert them, but I wish also to be as certain as possible in things that are not necessary, and that lie without the Scripture; for what is more miserable than uncertainty.

What shall we say to these things also, where you add — "To which authorities I submit my opinion in all things; whether I follow what they enjoin, or follow it not." —

What say you, Erasmus? Is it not enough that you submit your opinion to the Scriptures? Do you submit it to the decrees of the church also? What can the church decree, that is not decreed in the Scriptures? If it can, where then remains the liberty and power of judging those who make the decrees? As Paul, 1 Cor. xiv., teaches "Let others judge." Are you not pleased that there should be any one to judge the decrees of the church, which, nevertheless, Paul enjoins? What new kind of religion and humility is this, that, by our own example, you would take away from us the power of judging the decrees of men, and give it unto men without judgment? Where does the Scripture of God command us to do this?

Moreover, what Christian would so commit the injunctions of the Scripture and of the church to the winds, — as to say "whether I follow them, or follow them not?" You submit yourself, and yet care not at all whether you follow them or not. But let that Christian be anathema, who is not certain in, and does not follow, that which is enjoined him. For how will he believe that which he does not follow? — Do you here, then, mean to say, that following is understanding a thing certainly, and not doubting of it at all in a skeptical manner? If you do, what is there in any creature which any one can follow, if following be understanding, and seeing and knowing perfectly? And if this be the case, then it is impossible that any one should, at the same time, follow some things, and not follow others: whereas, by following one certain thing, God, he follows all things; that is, in Him, whom whoso followeth not, never followeth any part of His creature.

In a word, these declarations of yours amount to this — that, with you, it matters not what is believed by any one, any where, if the peace of the world be but undisturbed; and if every one be but allowed, when his life, his reputation, or his interest is at stake, to do as he did, who said, "If they affirm, I affirm, if they deny, I deny;" and to look upon the Christian doctrines as nothing better than the opinions of philosophers and men: and that it is the greatest of folly to quarrel about, contend for, and assert them, as nothing can arise therefrom but contention, and the disturbance of the public peace: "that what is above us, does not concern us." This, I say, is what your declarations amount to. — Thus, to put an end to our fightings, you come in as an intermediate peace-maker, that you may cause each side to suspend arms, and persuade us to cease from drawing swords about things so absurd and useless.

What I should cut at here, I believe, my friend Erasmus, you know very well. But, as I said before, I will not openly express myself. In the mean time, I excuse your very good intention of heart; but do you go no further; fear the Spirit of God, who searcheth the reins and the heart, and who is not deceived by artfully contrived expressions. I have, upon this occasion, expressed myself thus, that henceforth you may cease to accuse our cause of pertinacity or obstinacy. For, by so doing, you only evince that you hug in your heart a Lucian, or some other of the swinish tribe of the Epicureans; who, because he does not believe there is a God himself, secretly laughs at all those who do believe and confess it. Allow us to be assertors, and to study and delight in assertions: and do you favour your Sceptics and Academics until Christ shall have called you also. The Holy Spirit is not a Skeptic, nor are what he has

written on our hearts doubts or opinions, but assertions more certain, and more firm, than life itself and all human experience.

On the clearness of Scripture

Sect. 3.—Now I come to the next head, which is connected with this; where you make a "distinction between the Christian doctrines," and pretend that some are necessary, and some not necessary." You say, that "some are abstruse, and some quite clear." Thus you merely sport the sayings of others, or else exercise yourself, as it were, in a rhetorical figure. And you bring forward, in support of this opinion, that passage of Paul, Rom xi. 33, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and goodness of God!" And also that of Isaiah xl. 13, "Who hath holpen the Spirit of the Lord, or who hath been His counselor?"

You could easily say these things, seeing that, you either knew not that you were writing to Luther, but for the world at large, or did not think that you were writing against Luther: whom, however, I hope you allow to have some acquaintance with, and judgment in, the Sacred Writings. But, if you do not allow it, then, behold, I will also twist things thus. This is the distinction which I make; that I also may act a little the rhetorician and logician—God, and the Scripture of God, are two things; no less so than God, and the Creature of God. That there are in God many hidden things which we know not, no one doubts: as He himself saith concerning the last day: "Of that day knoweth no man but the Father." (Matt. xxiv. 36.) And (Acts i. 7.) "It is not yours to know the times and seasons." And again, "I know whom I have chosen," (John xiii. 18.) And Paul, "The Lord knoweth them that are His," (2 Tim. ii. 19.). And the like.

But, that there are in the Scriptures some things abstruse, and that all things are not quite plain, is a report spread abroad by the impious Sophists by whose mouth you speak here, Erasmus. But they never have produced, nor ever can produce, one article whereby to prove this their madness. And it is with such scare-crows that Satan has frightened away men from reading the Sacred Writings, and has rendered the Holy Scripture contemptible, that he might cause his poisons of philosophy to prevail in the church. This indeed I confess, that there are many places in the Scriptures obscure and abstruse; not from the majesty of the thing, but from our ignorance of certain terms and grammatical particulars; but which do not prevent a knowledge of all the things in the Scriptures. For what thing of more importance can remain hidden in the Scriptures, now that the seals are broken, the stone rolled from the door of the sepulcher, and that greatest of all mysteries brought to light, Christ made man: that God is Trinity and Unity: that Christ suffered for us, and will reign to all eternity? Are not these things known and proclaimed even in our streets? *Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what will you find remaining in them?*

All the things, therefore, contained in the Scriptures; are made manifest, although some places, from the words not being understood, are yet obscure. But to know that all things in the Scriptures are set in the clearest light, and then, because a few words are obscure, to report that the things are obscure, is absurd and impious. And, if the words are obscure in one place, yet they are clear in another. But, however, the same thing, which has been most openly declared to the whole world, is both spoken of in the Scriptures in plain words, and also still lies hidden in obscure words. Now, therefore, it matters not if the thing be in the light, whether any certain representations of it be in obscurity or not, if, in the mean while, many other representations of the same thing be in the light. For who would say that the public fountain is not in the light, because those who are in some dark narrow lane do not see it, when all those who are in the Open market place can see it plainly?

Sect. 4.—WHAT you adduce, therefore, about the darkness of the Corycian cavern, amounts to nothing; matters are not so in the Scriptures. For those things which are of the greatest majesty, and the most abstruse mysteries, are no longer in the dark corner, but before the very doors, nay, brought forth and manifested openly. For Christ has opened our understanding to understand the Scriptures, Luke xxiv. 45. And the Gospel is preached to every creature. (Mark xvi. 15, Col. i. 23.) "Their sound is gone out into all the earth." (Psalm xix. 4.) And "All things that are written, are written for our instruction." (Rom. xv. 4.) And again, "All Scripture is inspired from above, and is profitable for instruction." (2 Tim. iii. 16.)

Therefore come forward, you and all the Sophists together, and produce any one mystery which is still abstruse in the Scriptures. But, if many things still remain abstruse to many, this does not arise from obscurity in the Scriptures, but from their own blindness or want of understanding, who do not go the way to see the all-perfect clearness of the truth. As Paul saith concerning the Jews, 2 Cor. iii. 15. "The veil still remains upon their heart." And again, "If our gospel be hid it is hid to them that are lost, whose heart the god of this world hath blinded." (2 Cor. iv. 3-4.) With the same rashness any one may cover his own eyes, or go from the light into the dark and hide

himself, and then blame the day and the sun for being obscure. Let, therefore, wretched men cease to impute, with blasphemous perverseness, the darkness and obscurity of their own heart to the all-clear Scriptures of God.

You, therefore, when you adduce Paul, saying, "His judgments are incomprehensible," seem to make the pronoun His (*eius*) refer to Scripture (Scriptura). Whereas Paul does not say, The judgments of the Scripture are incomprehensible, but the judgments of God. So also Isaiah xl. 13, does not say, Who has known the mind of the Scripture, but, who has known "the mind of the Lord?" Although Paul asserts that the mind of the Lord is known to Christians: but it is in those things which are freely given unto us: as he saith also in the same place, 1 Cor. ii. 10, 16. You see, therefore, how sleepily you have looked over these places of the Scripture: and you cite them just as aptly as you cite nearly all the passages in defense of "Free-will."

In like manner, your examples which you subjoin, not without suspicion and bitterness, are nothing at all to the purpose. Such are those concerning the distinction of Persons: the union of the Divine and human natures: the unpardonable sin: the ambiguity attached to which, you say, has never been cleared up. — If you mean the questions of Sophists that have been agitated upon those subjects, well. But what has the all-innocent Scripture done to you, that you impute the abuse of the most wicked of men to its purity? The Scripture simply confesses the Trinity of God, the humanity of Christ, and the unpardonable sin. There is nothing here of obscurity or ambiguity. But how these things are the Scripture does not say, nor is it necessary to be known. The Sophists employ their dreams here; attack and condemn them, and acquit the Scripture. — But, if you mean the reality of the matter, I say again, attack not the Scriptures, but the Arians, and those to whom the Gospel is hid, that, through the working of Satan, they might not see the all-manifest testimonies concerning the Trinity of the Godhead, and the humanity of Christ.

But to be brief. The *clearness* of the Scripture is twofold; even as the obscurity is twofold also. The one is external, placed in the ministry of the word; the other internal, placed in the understanding of the heart. If you speak of the internal clearness, no man sees one iota in the Scriptures, but he that hath the Spirit of God. All have a darkened heart; so that, even if they know how to speak of, and set forth, all things in the Scripture, yet, they cannot feel them nor know them: nor do they believe that they are the creatures of God, nor any thing else: according to that of Psalm xiv, 1. "The fool hath said in his heart, God is nothing." For the Spirit is required to understand the whole of the Scripture and every part of it. If you speak of the external clearness, nothing whatever is left obscure or ambiguous; but all things that are in the Scriptures, are by the Word brought forth into the clearest light, and proclaimed to the whole world.