

GUIDE TO MARTIN LUTHER'S
DE SERVO ARBITRIO (1525)

Sources and literature

The dispute between Erasmus and Luther is evident in their correspondence since 1516. Important letters are printed in German translation in *W²* (Martin Luthers Sämmtliche Schriften, hg. v. Johann Georg Walch, Bd. 18: Reformations-Schriften, St. Louis 1888), and the editorial introductions to the editions trace the discussion. In 1524, Erasmus published his treatise *De libero arbitrio διατριβή sive collatio* (VD16 E 3147), to which Luther responded in 1525 with *De servo arbitrio* (VD16 L 6660). Erasmus' *Diatribē* has not yet been edited in the Amsterdam edition (Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi [ASD]), so that researchers have to use either the Leiden edition (Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opera Omnia, vol. 9, Leiden 1706, 1215–1248 [LB]) or Johann von Walter's edition (Erasmus, De libero arbitrio diatribe sive collatio, Leipzig 1910), which also forms the basis of the Latin-German study edition in Erasmus' *Ausgewählte Schriften* (ed. by Werner Welzig, vol. 4, Darmstadt 1969, 1–195 [AS]). Luther's book was edited in 1908 in WA 18:551–787 by Albert Freitag, with a detailed introduction; both the edition and the introduction are still usable, and because WA 18 is often cited in the research literature, it is advisable to have this edition at hand. In twentieth-century Germany, many also used the edition in *Luthers Werke in Auswahl* published by Otto Clemen (vol. 3, Berlin 1929, 94–293 [CI]). As part of *Studienausgabe* of Luther's writings published in the late 1970s and 1980s, the Latin text was re-edited, with the introduction and commentary reflecting more recent research (vol. 3, Berlin 1983, 170–356 [LStA]). All three editions mentioned (WA 18 – CI 3 – LStA 3) can be used and cited for academic work. The authoritative English translation is that published by Philip S. Watson in vol. 33 of *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia 1972 [LW]).

Those seeking basic information about *De servo arbitrio* can consult not only the introductions to the editions and translations, but also the accounts of Luther's biography and theology, where the book and the controversy to which it belongs are discussed. In addition, there are numerous monographs and articles that either deal with *De servo arbitrio* or discuss the writing in other contexts. Many of these are studies of systematic theology, because Luther's controversy with Erasmus invites discussion of a number of fundamental questions: the relationship between divine governance (*praedestinatio*) and human freedom (*liberum arbitrium*), the nature and understanding of the Bible (*claritas scripturae*), the distinction between the hidden and revealed God (*deus absconditus/revelatus*), and the certainty of faith (*assertio*). The following selection is arranged by publication date and contains contributions that are oriented toward either church history or systematic theology:

- Karl Zickendraht, Der Streit zwischen Erasmus und Luther über die Willensfreiheit, 1909
- Ferdinand Kattenbusch, Deus absconditus bei Luther (in: Festgabe für D. Dr. Julius Kaftan zu seinem 70. Geburtstag, 1920, 170–214)
- Erdmann Schott, Luthers Lehre vom servum arbitrium in ihrer theologischen Bedeutung (Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie 7, 1930, 399–430)
- Martin Doerne, Gottes Ehre am gebundenen Willen. Evangelische Grundlagen und theologische Spitzensätze in De servo arbitrio (Lutherjahrbuch 20, 1938, 45–92)

- John Dillenberger, *God Hidden and Revealed: The Interpretation of Luther's Deus Absconditus and its Significance for Religious Thought*, 1953
- Hans Joachim Iwand, *Die Freiheit des Christen und die Unfreiheit des Willens* [1957] (in: Id., *Um den rechten Glauben. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 1959, 247–268)
- Hellmut Bandt, *Luthers Lehre vom verborgenen Gott. Eine Untersuchung zu dem offenbarungsgeschichtlichen Ansatz seiner Theologie*, 1958
- Rudolf Hermann, *Von der Klarheit der Heiligen Schrift. Untersuchungen und Erörterungen über Luthers Lehre von der Schrift in "De servo arbitrio"* [1958] (in: Id., *Studien zur Theologie Luthers und des Luthertums*, 1981, 170–255)
- Alfred Adam, *Der Begriff "Deus absconditus" bei Luther nach Herkunft und Bedeutung* (Lutherjahrbuch 30, 1963, 97–106)
- Harry J. McSorley, *Luthers Lehre vom unfreien Willen nach seiner Hauptschrift De Servo Arbitrio im Licht der biblischen und kirchlichen Tradition*, 1967 (English translation: *Luther: Right or Wrong? An Ecumenical-Theological Study of Luther's Major Work, The Bondage of the Will*, 1969)
- Klaus Schwarzwäller, *Sibboleth. Die Interpretation von Luthers Schrift De servo arbitrio seit Theodosius Harnack. Ein systematisch-kritischer Überblick*, 1969
- Klaus Schwarzwäller, *Theologia Crucis. Luthers Lehre von der Prädestination nach De servo arbitrio*, 1525, 1970
- Hermann Dörries, *Erasmus oder Luther. Eine kirchengeschichtliche Einführung* (in: *Kerygma und Melos, Festschrift Christhard Mahrenholz*, 1970, 533–570)
- Otto Kuss, *Über die Klarheit der Schrift. Historische und hermeneutische Überlegungen zu der Kontroverse des Erasmus und des Luther über den freien oder versklavten Willen* (in: *Schriftauslegung. Beiträge zur Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments und im Neuen Testament*, ed. by Josef Ernst, 1972, 89–149)
- Eberhard Jüngel, *Quae supra nos nihil ad nos. Eine Kurzformel der Lehre vom verborgenen Gott, im Anschluß an Luther interpretiert* [1972] (in: Id., *Theologische Erörterungen*, vol. 2: *Entsprechungen: Gott – Wahrheit – Mensch*, 2002, 202–251)
- Brian A. Gerrish, "To the unknown God." *Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God* (*Journal of Religion* 53, 1973, 263–292)
- Bernhard Lohse, *Marginalien zum Streit zwischen Erasmus und Luther* [1975] (in: Id., *Evangelium in der Geschichte. Studien zu Luther und der Reformation*, 1988, 118–137)
- Dietrich Kerlen, *Assertio. Die Entwicklung von Luthers theologischem Anspruch und der Streit mit Erasmus von Rotterdam*, 1976
- Heinrich Bornkamm, *Martin Luther in der Mitte seines Lebens. Das Jahrzehnt zwischen dem Wormser und dem Augsburger Reichstag*, 1979, 368–405
- Georges Chantraine, *Erasme et Luther – libre e serf arbitre. Étude historique et théologique*, 1981
- Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Rhetoric and Reform: Erasmus' Civil Dispute with Luther*, 1983
- *Humanismus und Reformation – Martin Luther und Erasmus von Rotterdam in den Konflikten ihrer Zeit*, ed. by Otto Hermann Pesch, 1985
- Günter Bader, *Assertio. Drei fortlaufende Lektüren zu Skepsis, Narrheit und Sünde bei Erasmus und Luther*, 1985

- James D. Tracy, Two Erasmuses, Two Luthers: Erasmus' Strategy in Defense of *De Libero Arbitrio* (Archiv für Reformationgeschichte 78, 1987, 37–60)
- Joachim Mehlhausen, Forma Christianismi. Die theologische Bewertung eines kleinen katechetischen Lehrstücks durch Luther und Erasmus von Rotterdam (Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche 87, 1990, 437–455)
- Reinhard Brandt, Die ermöglichte Freiheit. Sprachkritische Rekonstruktion der Lehre vom unfreien Willen, 1992
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- Markus Matthias, Zur Auseinandersetzung um Martin Luthers "De servo arbitrio" im 16. Jahrhundert (Luther-Bulletin 19, 2010, 40–67)
- Eilert Herms, Opus Dei gratiae: Cooperatio Dei et hominum. Luthers Darstellung seiner Rechtfertigungslehre in *De servo arbitrio* (Lutherjahrbuch 78, 2011, 61–135)
- Klaus W. Müller, Zur „voluntas Dei abscondita“ bei Martin Luther. Tradition und Innovation (Lutherjahrbuch 84, 2017, 118–169)
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- Stephen Paulson, Luther's Outlaw God, vol. 1–3, 2018–21
- Patrick Bahl, "Solus spiritus"? Luthers Rede vom Heiligen Geist in "De servo arbitrio" zwischen Abgrenzungsargumentation und Unterscheidungslehre (Lutherjahrbuch 88, 2021, 69–112)
- Luther und Erasmus über Freiheit. Rezeption und Relevanz eines gelehrten Streits, ed. by Jörg Noller and Georg Sans, 2020 [essay collection]
- Miikka Ruokanen, Trinitarian grace in Martin Luther's The Bondage of the Will, 2021
- Markus Matthias, Der Briefwechsel zwischen Martin Luther und Erasmus von Rotterdam. Eine sprachlich-rhetorische Analyse (in: Briefkultur der Reformationszeit, ed. by Johannes Schilling, 2023, 273–298)

Erasmus of Rotterdam
De libero arbitrio διατριβή sive collatio

OUTLINE

Introduction (LB 9:1215^A–1221^A; AS 4:2–37)

liberum arbitrium can be defined on the one hand: “liberum arbitrium hoc loco sentimus vim humanae voluntatis, qua se possit homo applicare ad ea, quae perducunt ad aeternam salutem aut ab iisdem avertere”

First main section: Bible passages that prove liberum arbitrium (LB 9:1221^A–1230^A; AS 4:36–91)

1. Old Testament (LB 9:1221^A–1227^A; AS 4:36–73)

liberum arbitrium can be defined on the other hand: “voluntas, qua eligimus aut refugimus, hactenus depravata fuit, ut suis naturalibus praesidiis non posset sese revocare ad meliorem frugem, sed amissa libertate cogebatur servire peccato, cui se volens semel addixerat”

2. New Testament (LB 9:1227^A–1230^A; AS 4:72–91)

Second main section: Bible passages that appear to contradict liberum arbitrium (LB 9:1230^A–1241^D; AS 4:90–156)

1. Passages from the Old and New Testaments (LB 9:1230^A–1235^C; AS 4:90–121)

2. On the Bible passages in Luther’s *Assertio omnium articulorum* of 1521 (LB 9:1235^C–1237^F; AS 4:120–137)

3. Further passages from the Old and New Testaments (LB 9:1237^F–1241^D; AS 4:136–157)

Conclusion (LB 9:1241^D–1248^D; AS 4:156–195)

in view of the Biblical evidence liberum arbitrium is finally defined: “homo totam salutem suam divinae gratiae ferre debeat acceptam, cum perpusillum sit, quod hic agit liberum arbitrium, et hoc ipsum, quod agere potest, sit divinae gratiae, qui primum condidit liberum arbitrium, deinde liberavit etiam ac sanavit”

Martin Luther
De servo arbitrio

OUTLINE

Preface (LStA 3:177,1–180,15; WA 18:600,1–602,37; LW 33:15–19)

First main section: Response to Erasmus' introduction (LStA 3:180,16–234,39; WA 18:603,1–666,13; LW 33:19–110)

- The right and necessity of assertio (LStA 3:180,17–183,22)
- The clarity of Scripture – first discussion (LStA 3:183,23–186,23)
- The essence of Christianity (forma Christianismi) (LStA 3:186,24–194,28)
- The necessity of public debate (LStA 3:194,29–196,17)
- Compulsory confession – pax mundi and libertas conscientiae (LStA 3:196,18–203,17)
- The paradox of mera necessitas (LStA 3:203,18–210,11)
- Concluding remarks on Erasmus' praefatio (LStA 3:210,11–211,5)
- The witnesses to the truth and the hiddenness of the Church (LStA 3:211,6–221,12)
- The clarity of Scripture – second discussion (LStA 3:221,13–230,3)
- Rejection of Erasmus' definition of liberum arbitrium (LStA 3:230,4–234,39)

Second main section: Refutation of Erasmus' scriptural evidence for liberum arbitrium (LStA 3:235,1–301,27; WA 18:666,13–733,21; LW 33:110–212)

1. Old Testament texts that appear to speak in favor of liberum arbitrium (LStA 3:235,1–256,39)
 - Sir. 15:14–18 (235,1–244,10)
 - Gen. 4:7 (244,11–33)
 - Deut. 30:15+19 (244,34–246,7)
 - Deut. 3:30 (246,8–247,2)
 - Hermeneutics of Imperatives (247,3–250,28)
 - Ezek. 18:23 and Ezek. 33:11 (250,29–254,30)
 - Deut. 30:11–14 (254,31–256,23)
 - Review of Erasmus' treatment of the Old Testament passages (LStA 3:256,24–39)
2. New Testament texts that appear to speak in favor of liberum arbitrium (LStA 3:256,40–267,18)
 - General characterization of Erasmus' treatment of the New Testament (256,40–257,3)
 - Matth. 23:37 (257,3–258,30)
 - Matth. 19:17 and comparable statements (258,31–260,5)
 - praecepta and meritum (260,6–264,30)
 - Luke 23:23 (264,31–265,18)
 - John 1:12 (265,19–266,21)
 - Rom. 2:4 (266,22–267,4)
 - Further passages from Paul (267,5–11)
 - Luther agrees with Wyclif's 'omnia necessitate fieri' (267,11–18)

3. Biblical evidence for *servum arbitrium*, reinterpreted by Erasmus (LStA 3:267,18–301,27)
 - against tropological mitigations (267,21–270,30)
 - Ex. 4:21 – “Ego indurabo cor Pharaonis” (270,30–283,8)
 - Rom. 9:16 – Paul on the *induratio Pharaonis* (283,9–291,6)
 - concluding remarks on *induratio Pharaonis* (291,7–8)
 - Gen. 25:23 – Jacob and Esau (291,8–295,20)
 - Isa. 45:9 – Potter and clay (295,21–301,27)

Third main section: Erasmus’ arguments against Luther’s remarks on Art. 36 in his ‘Assertio omnium articulorum’ of 1521 (LStA 3:301,28–326,2; WA 18:733,22–756,23; LW 33:212–246)

- Gen. 6:3 – Spirit/flesh (LStA 3:301,29–303,37)
- Gen. 8:21 – *malum cordis* (LStA 3:303,38–304,26)
- Isa. 40:2 – Grace or reckoning? (LStA 3:304,27–307,18)
- Isa. 40:6 – Flesh/Spirit – *totus homo* (LStA 3:307,18–313,10)
- Jer. 10:23 (LStA 3:313,11–314,21)
- Prov. 16:1+4, Prov. 21:1 (LStA 3:314,22–316,13)
- John 15:5 (LStA 3:316,14–322,10)
- Further examples provided by Erasmus (LStA 3:322,11–324,21)
- Conclusion (LStA 3:324,22–326,2)

Fourth main section: Luther’s attack on *liberum arbitrium* (LStA 3:326,3–351,13; WA 18:756,24–783,17; LW 33:246–288)

- Luther’s approach (LStA 3:326,3–13)
- 1. Paul (LStA 3:326,13–343,41)
 - Rom. 1 (326,13–329,28)
 - Rom. 3:10–12 (329,29–331,22)
 - Rom. 3:19–20 (331,23–335,21)
 - Rom. 3:21–25 – Justification (335,22–339,32)
 - Rom. 4 – Abraham (339,33–341,2)
 - Rom. 5 – Adam (341,2–13)
 - Review of the passages from Paul discussed so far (341,14–342,6)
 - Rom. 8 – Flesh and Spirit (342,7–343,16)
 - Rom. 10:20 (343,17–41)
- 2. John (LStA 3:343,42–351,13)
 - Introduction: John as the ‘*liberi arbitrij uastator*’ (343,42–344,2)
 - John 1:5–16 (344,2–346,10)
 - Nicodemus (346,11–31)
 - John 14:6 (346,31–347,43)
 - John 3:18 (348,1–33)
 - John 3:27 (348,34–349,19)
 - John 6:44 (349,20–350,6)
 - John 16:19 (350,7–15)
 - Summary remarks (350,15–351,13)

Luther's closing remarks (LStA 3:351,13–354,31; WA 18:783,17–786,20; LW 33:288–293)

Admonition to Erasmus (LStA 3:354,32–356,9; WA 18:786,21–787,14; LW 33:294–295)

Martin Luther
De servo arbitrio

DETAILED STRUCTURE

Preface
(LStA 3:177,7–180,15)

Greeting (177,1–6)

Why Luther responds late (177,7–179,5)

Why Luther responds at all (179,6–180,1)

Thanks to Erasmus (180,1–8)

Prayer to God for Luther and Erasmus (180,8–10)

Admonition to Erasmus (180,10–15)

First main section
Response to Erasmus' introduction
(LStA 3:180,17–234,39)

The right and necessity of assertiones (180,17–183,22)

What are 'assertiones'? (180,22–181,25)

praise for Erasmus' love of peace (180,22–23)

criticism of Erasmus' error regarding assertiones → first statement: being a Christian = delectari assertionibus (180,23–26)

definition of asserere: constanter adhaerere, affirmare, confiteri, tueri atque invictum perseverare (180,26–29)

subject of asserere: quae nobis traditae sunt divinitus in sacris literis (180,29–30)

no assertiones in cases of doubtful and unnecessary matters → that would be foolish and impious (180,30–181,6)

Christianus = assertor → taking sides in the conflict between the ancient philosophical schools (scepticism ↔ stoicism) (181,7–8)

scriptural argument with Paul → second statement: Tolle assertiones, et Christianismum tulisti (181,8–18)

foolish and appropriate asserere (181,18–20)

those who deny asserere, deny religion (181,20–25)

skepticism versus certainty (181,26–182,23)

an attempt to excuse Erasmus, with a word of caution (181,26–182,2)

distinction between arbitrari and loqui with regard to liberum arbitrium (182,2–6)

Erasmus combines skepticism regarding religious teachings with submission to the authority of the Church (182,6–12)

Christian faith allows for skepticism, but not in every aspect of it (182,12–17)

certainty is indispensable in matters of necessity (182,17–23)

submission to authority versus understanding of Scripture (182,24–183,3)

Erasmus' declaration of submission (182,24–25)

submittere both to Scripture and to the precepts of the church? (182,25–32)

third statement: no faith without certainty and understanding → Christianus anathema sit, si non certus sit et assequatur, id quod ei praescribitur, quomodo enim credet id quod non assequitur? (182,32–36)

assequi does not mean "sceptico more dubitare" or "perfecte nosse ac videre" (the latter would imply, on the one hand, "unum assecutus, omnia assecutus" and, on the other hand, "qui non assequitur, nullam partem creaturae unquam assequitur"), but "certo apprehendere", i.e. to firmly grasp the core truth of Christian faith in the Bible (182,36–183,3)

difference between dogmata christiana and opiniones hominum (183,4–22)

Erasmus equates the two and states: Quae supra nos, nihil ad nos (183,4–9)

Erasmus presents himself as a mediator (183,9–11)

Erasmus should drop the accusation of stubbornness and allow the Reformation to delight in assertiones (183,11–20)

fourth statement: Spiritus Sanctus non est scepticus, nec dubia aut opiniones in cordibus nostris scripsit, sed assertiones ipsa vita et omni experientia certiores et firmiores (183,20–22)

The clarity of Scripture – first discussion (183,23–186,23)

Erasmus' distinction between necessary and unnecessary dogmata christiana (183,23–184,4)
Luther's judgment on this distinction (184,4–8)
Luther's distinction between deus and scriptura dei → many things hidden with regard to God, nothing hidden in Scripture (184,8–14)
consequences of such a mistaken opinion among the scholastics → contempt of Scripture (184,14–19)
admitted: multa loca in scripturis obscura (184,19–21)
but: clarity of the basic teachings in Scripture → trinity and Christology (184,21–185,4)
the main points in Scripture (res) are evident, despite that the words (signa) are not always easy to understand (185,4–13)
the mysteries of God in Scripture are revealed and proclaimed (185,14–22)
the cause of concealment is the blindness of the heart (185,22–30)
in the scriptural evidence he provides, Erasmus confuses the inscrutable God and the proclamation of Scripture (185,31–37)
Erasmus' examples of inscrutable statements of scripture and teachings of the church (185,37–186,4)
the scholastic complication of dogmatic arguments contrasts with the simple statements of Scripture (186,4–13)
duplex claritas/obscuritas scripturae: externa (in uerbi ministerio posita) – interna (in cordis cognitione sita) (186,13–23)

The dispute over the essence of Christianity (forma Christianismi) (LStA 3:186,24–194,28)

general assessment of Erasmus' remarks (186,24–189,14)
the statements are insufficient in content, even incorrect (186,24–187,26)
 general assessment (186,24–29)
 this program is atheistic and frivolous (186,29–187,3)
 Erasmus suppresses the three crucial questions: about God's foreknowledge, about the relevance of human will for salvation, and about the pure necessity of our actions and sufferings (187,3–8)
 Erasmus proves to be ignorant of the nature of Christianity (187,8–26)
the positive statements in Erasmus' definition of the forma Christianismi are contradictory (187,27–188,13)
 brief summary of Erasmus' forma Christianismi (187,27–30)
 critical review of this summary (187,30–35)
 the question of the capacity of the claimed powers remains open (187,35–188,4)
 Erasmus' final answer is contradictory and causes confusion (188,4–13)