The Bondage of the Will

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ERASMUS' PREFACE REVIEWED.

Section I.

Sect. I.—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 reprover, 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?