Erasmus and Luther on the Freedom of the Will in Their Correspondence

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ABSTRACT. In the first part of this essay is underlined the common interest of Erasmus of Rotterdam and Martin Luther. The items in common are successively another interpretation of the Holy Scripture, another kind of theology, another piety, another Church. The first part closes with bringing to the fore the differences between the two. In the second part of the essay the correspondence between Erasmus and Luther is submitted to a close examination. After a short introduction on writing letters in the 16th century, Erasmus’ first acquaintance with Luther through mutual friends is brought up. Formally Luther made the first step. In succession is analyzed the correspondence in the years 1519-1520 (before the condemnation of Luther), from 1521 till the publication of Erasmus’ De libero arbitrio (September 1524), from September 1524 till the publication of Luther’s De servo arbitrio (December 1525), and the aftermath from the publication of Erasmus’ Hyperaspistes I (March 1526) and II (September 1527) till his death. In this last phase Luther did not think it necessary to write again to or against Erasmus. Luther was finished with him.

KEY WORDS: correspondence as a genre in the sixteenth century, Bonae litterae (humanism), Erasmus and reform, Luther and the Reformation, Free will or bound will?

Introduction
The disintegration of the “scholastic” paradigm compelled the theologians of the sixteenth century to a new reflection on the method and starting points of theological thinking. Partly it
lead to a “restoration” of the scholastic paradigm, i.e. to a clearer formulation of and clinging on that till than valid, in broad outline accepted frame of interpretation. Partly new formulations of understanding reality and a new expression of faith are brought up, or at least shifts in the meaning of old conceptions. At last this leads to a new, more or less accepted horizon of understanding, in which is room for differences in interpretation of reality. An important component of this new horizon of understanding is the place a human being occupies in respect of God, Church and Tradition.

Between 1510 and 1520 Erasmus was the contested but indisputable exponent of a theology of reform in a Church which had become all the time less Catholic and more Roman. He stood for a kind of catholicity, which was a living synthesis of universal humanity and Evangelical concentration on Christ. He was a representative of loyal Evangelical inclined opposition in the Church. Erasmus and his friends embodied a counterforce against the Roman Church, which was dominated by the Curia.

At the time Martin Luther incited to a radical reformation of the Church in top and members, in doctrine and life, Erasmus got involved in this conflict against his will. He was asked to choose and just that was what Erasmus did not want to do. Luther’s excommunication by pope Leo X (1520) did escalate the conflict. Even before the discussion with Luther inside the Catholic Church could be brought up, Luther was condemned as a heretic. As it were Erasmus was compelled to take an ambiguous position between Rome and Wittenberg. Where Luther was in the right according to Erasmus, there Erasmus approved him, but where Luther was not explicitly in the right; there stayed Erasmus rather on the side of pope and emperor. At last this puts an end on the reform theology Erasmus stood for.

On the one hand Erasmus agreed on several points with Luther, on the other hand Erasmus was not willing and not able to
identify himself with Luther.¹ Erasmus saw himself a “the defender of the true freedom Christ brought”.² He was convinced that this was the heart of the biblical testimony. That is why he strived after a renewal of theology, piety and Church based on the Bible; Christianity returning to its original simplicity, a biblical humanism based on reviewing the Holy Scripture and the Fathers of the Church.³

Common Interests

Another Interpretation of the Holy Scripture

For Erasmus in the reform program of this biblical humanism is another way of reading Holy Scripture at stake. Although he made no objections against an allegorical, spiritual sense of the Holy Writ, yet Erasmus takes the line that the starting point of the interpretation of Bible is the literal sense of the text and not the spiritual sense. Luther still uses in his Dictata super Psalterium (Notes on the Psalter) (1513-1515) the quadruple sense on interpreting the Holy Scripture. In his Operationes in Psalmos (Operations on Psalms) (1519-1521)⁴ Luther works strictly according to the new hermeneutical principle. From that moment on it was in the first place a question of grammatical sense, for that has already a theological meaning. Instead of multiple quotations of Fathers of the Church now Erasmus and Nicholas of Lyre are cited. “It is not advisable”, Luther writes in his Operaciones in Psalmos, “to enumerate the (allegorical; D. A.) interpretations of all commentators and also in the multiplicity, I have

³ This is also the framework within which has to be placed Erasmus Instrumentum Novi Testamenti (the first edition of the New Testament in Greek) and a critical edition of the Vulgate text of the New Testament, in which Erasmus has made a number of corrections (which called on protest on the part of the traditionalists, who appeal to the infallibility of the Church).
⁴ Respectively before and after the publication of Erasmus’ Instrumentum Novi Testamenti!
chosen, I am not sure on all points. I am not easy inclined to allegories, especially not when I am searching for the legitimate, proper and original sense, which counts in the fight and strengthens the instruction of faith”.

**Another Theology**

For Erasmus another way of theological thinking is at stake. In his *Moriae encomium id est Stultitiae laus* (*Praise of Folly*) he gives very sneeringly his opinion about the super-subtle theologians, that conceited and thin-skinned kind of people, which thinks that it can get to the bottom of God’s inscrutable secrets and doing so poses the most silly questions like: could God have himself also incarnate in the form of a woman, a devil, an ass, a calabash or a stone? The Apostles did not know anything about issues as the doctrine of transubstantiation, the Immaculate Conception of Mary and the like, and they knew nothing about scholastic method and scholastic usage of language. Erasmus reproaches the theologians that they arbitrary mould and remould the words of the Holy Scripture, as were they wax. Therefore the adage: “Ad fontes” (back to the sources). It involves a theology, which is based on the norm of the Holy Scripture like in the days of the Apostles and the Fathers of the Church. It involves a theology, which in its interpretation of the Holy Scripture has not centred on scholastic theology but on the Fathers of the Church and which made the original Christian message understandable for Erasmus’ contemporaries. Issues which have nothing to do with the Holy Scripture are out of place in theology. Starting point of all theological thinking is reading the Holy Writ and, based upon the Holy Scripture, doctrine, law and practice of the Church must always be re-examined critically, must be liberated of every speculation

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5 Martin Luther, *Operationes in Psalms, 1519-1521*, AWA 2, 119, 7-11.
7 Ibid., 146, 399-148, 404.
about God’s secrets and must concentrate on the meaning of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in relation to the way of human being to salvation. Luther had this criticism in common with Erasmus. In one of his Tischreden (Table-talks) (February 2, 1538) Luther looks back together with his friend Nicholas of Amsdorf on the theological books of the prior period “when talented people were still occupied with useless studies … This sophistic nomenclature lies now far behind us. The people of our time consider them as barbaric. Scotus, Bonaventura, Gabriel (Biel; D. A.) and Thomas (Aquinas; D. A.), who lived when the papacy flourished, were extremely conceited men. With so much time available they had to give their fantasy free play. Gabriel wrote a book on the Canon of the Mass, which I in my youth considered the best; when I was reading it, my heart was bleeding. The authority of the Bible was nothing compared with that of Gabriel. I still possess those books with which I struggled so much. Scotus wrote best on the third book of (Peter Lombard’s; D. A.) Sentences. And Ockham, who specialized in method, was the most subtle and ingenious … Thomas was the biggest twaddler, because he was distracted by metaphysics. But God has led us away from them in a miraculous way and he has involved me in the play, now already more than twenty years ago, without knowing it”. 

Another Piety
For Erasmus also another piety is at stake is. His attack on piety is by many, especially priests and monks, seen as disruption of the entire ecclesiastical system. According to Erasmus the theologian’s task is to design a theory of piety. Interiorizing and

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8 In Moriae Encomium id est Stultitiae laus many forms of folly are denounced. The final part (ASD 4.3, 178, 904-194, 275) describes the true foolishness, as in Old and New Testament represented to us. “By means of the so-called ‘foolish’ message we preach, God has decided to save those who believe” (1 Corinthians 1:21).
9 Martin Luther, WATr 3, no. 3722, 563, 31, 34-564, 13.
10 Desiderius Erasmus, Opus epistolarum, 46-52.
spiritualizing are the most important characteristics of Erasmus’ range of ideas, but that did not prevent him to criticize and to strive after reform of the Church in doctrine and above all in life. According to Erasmus piety has to conform to the message of Holy Scripture, which is Jesus. His Paraphrases on the New Testament are meant to open laymen the way to understanding of the true Jesus. Luther too wanted to interpret the Bible in the tongue of the common people, his ‘raw Saxons’. In his first writing published in German, an interpretation of Die sieben Busspsalmen (the Seven Penitential Psalms) (1517) Luther states the man has to be very humble, in order that God can live and work in him.

Another Church
At stake is for Erasmus another Church. Appealing to the same one baptism the difference between clergy and laity has abolished and Erasmus is making a plea for a simple piety concentrated on Christ and applied to everybody. Luther too has the significance of baptism strongly emphasized, and with that the universal priesthood of all believers. Hardly Erasmus shows the discrepancy between the claims of the bishops hold as “successors of the Apostles” and reality noticing just a little bit of the “vita apostolica” (living like the Apostles). The hierarchy is above all occupied in its own power and glory, in spiritual compulsion by means of Church law, in pomp and circumstance, and especially in money. For Erasmus it become continually clearer, that people instead of being occupied in Church law, the doctrine of the Church and the ecclesiastical system, had to be focussed on the Holy Writ and on Christ, who speaks in the Holy Scripture instead of in artificially con-

11 C. Augustijn, Erasmus von Rotterdam. Leben-Werk-Wirkung, 175.
12 Desiderius Erasmus, Enchiridion militis christiani, LBV, 65 C-66 A (H., 135, 4-16).
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structured Christology, on which the hierarchy again could base claims. Luther agrees with Erasmus on this matter too.\textsuperscript{14} Neither Erasmus’ reform program nor Luther’s did make it; neither of them succeeded in reforming the existing Church. The sharp theological criticism on the hierarchy based on the Gospel found no echo in the hierarchy itself. With Luther’s excommunication in 1520 the rupture of the Church was an accomplished fact. It is no longer a difference of opinion among theologians, but Luther’s cause (\textit{causa Lutheri}) had become a struggle between two worlds; the question involved is if the Latin-medicieval theological model, with its hierarchy, institutions and sacraments—by Luther called the Babylonian Captivity of the Church—stands firm or has to give way to a new model. Erasmus was convinced that he was right not choosing Luther’s side, despite the fact that he took action against abuses in the Church long before Luther and strived after reform and renewal according to the Gospel. For the rest Erasmus refused to conform to the Roman theology of that time, more, he was convinced that Rome was also to blame for the rupture of the Church.\textsuperscript{15} But Luther too was to blame according to Erasmus. Luther has formulated his rightful demands unnecessarily sharp. Erasmus subscribes Luther’s public protest against unchristian elements in the Roman system as appears from some of his remarks to friends: “I see in the monarchy of the Roman high priest Christianity’s plague; the Dominicans flatter him in

\textsuperscript{14} Martin Luther, \textit{De Captivitate Babylonica}, 1520, WA 6, 565, 34-566, 3; 32-34.

\textsuperscript{15} Desiderius Erasmus, \textit{Spongia adversus aspergines Hutteni}. ASD 9.1, 209, 115-210, 126. In a letter to Zwingli dated August 31, 1523 Erasmus writes, that he, if it would be necessary, would die for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but that he is not prepared to do so for Luther’s paradoxes, see Desiderius Erasmus, \textit{Opus epistolarum}, vol. 5, no. 1384, 2-7. The quote from \textit{Spongia} shows that Erasmus also is not prepared to die for “Rome”, when just scholastic discussions are at stake and not articles of the faith, which are supported by the \textit{consensus ecclesiae} (consensus of the Church).
all in a shameless way. But”, so he adds, “I don’t know if it is right to touch that ulcer publicly”.  

**Differences**

Why has Erasmus in the moment of truth not spoken in love for the Church, and not acted giving himself with the whole heart, such as Luther did? Erasmus was for many people, both in the Roman camp and in the Lutheran, the only one who could have prevent the rupture of the Church, because he had authority on both sides. Should Erasmus not have to be “confessor”, what the consequence would have been? For there is in the moment of truth a “status confessionis” (state of confessing) that could no longer be a “casus disputationis” (case of discussion). 

We have seen that Erasmus and Luther at first glance seem to have a lot in common. Both can be seen as innovators of Church and theology on the plane of fracture between of an “old” and a “new” paradigm. Both of them are departing from (the literal meaning of) the Holy Scripture (“sensus litteralis”), are contrasting to the scholastic method, to certain practices of piety, against abuses in the Church from an interest for the people of their time. On the basis of the interpretation of the Holy Scripture, however, Luther has a different view on God’s justice and the original sin than Erasmus: a human being becomes, according Luther, not righteous, because he acts righteously, as Aristotle thought, but only when a human being is justified (which presupposes conversion), one can act righteously.  

In his *Disputatio contra Scholasticam Theologiam* (Disputation against the scholastic theology, 1517) Luther made a frontal attack on the theology of his time and his *Disputatio pro declaratiorne virtutis indulgentiarum* (the so-called 95 Theses on the Indulgence) was an attack on the Catholic system of penitence.

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18 Martin Luther, *Disputatio Heidelbergae habita*, 1518, WA 1, 364, 1-16.
When Erasmus, after refusing so many years to write against Luther, finally in the autumn of 1524 publishes *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio* (*Diatribes* or *Collation on the Free Will*) reluctantly, he has already lost all his credits among the “Lutherans”, but he remains also suspicious in the circles, which him suspect of “Lutheran” sympathies.

Erasmus and Luther have contested each other explicitly on the issue of the freedom respectively the bondage of the human will. In Erasmus’ *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio* (*On Free Will*) the issue of the freedom of the will—still an open question under theologians—is brought under discussion in an objective style. Luther, to whom the freedom of the will and the predetermination was a very existential question, replied in December 1525 with *De servo arbitrio* (*On the Bondage of the Will*). In most studies on this dispute is stated, that the views of Erasmus and Luther are square with each other. The question seems to be justified whether this dispute necessarily had to be interpreted in this way. The question is whether the views really so much differ. In 1533, eight years after the dispute with Luther, Erasmus writes, that it is sufficient, when one agrees, that the human being out of his own power is capable to nothing, and that a human being what it can do, owes completely to God’s grace.¹⁹ Further is striking that Luther and his followers in the Augsburg Confession speak of the free (sic; D. A.) will in the part in which is dealt with the main articles of the Christian faith and not in the part in which is dealt with the abuses.²⁰ Has

¹⁹ Desiderius Erasmus, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, LB 5, 500 BC.


Important is here to remember that the confutatores (confuters) (the *Confutatio* is the Catholic reply on the Augsburg Confession written by a committee of theologians on request of the Emperor) agree in this article, because, according to them, it is becoming for Catholics to go the middle course between Pelagians and Manicheans. Cfr. *Die Confutatio der Confessio Augustana vom 3. August 1530*, Bearbeitet von H. Immenkötter 2, verbesserte Aufl. (Münster: Aschendorff, 1981), 116, 11-18.
Luther really understood Erasmus and has he done him right? Is it not rather so, that Erasmus in his *De libero arbitrio* did not want go further than to describe and compare opinions, while Luther wanted to make assertions. Erasmus and Luther differ clearly in their theological approach. Who of them has the best theological arguments, seems to be still an open question.

**The Correspondence between Erasmus and Luther on Closer Examination**

*On Writing Letters*

There are more than 3100 letters from and to Erasmus preserved. He was in correspondence with princes, bishops, and learned people in the whole of Europe. From and to Luther, there are more than 4300 letters preserved. The correspondence between Erasmus and Luther contains six letters. At least four letters are lost. The correspondence between Erasmus and Luther is more extensive than the letters which they have send to each other. Letters to mutual friends should also be drawn into the analysis, because it is very plausible that Erasmus and Luther have looked into these letters too. Besides they are sometimes also in discussion with each other through their books.

At a time in which no newspapers and magazines publishing news items and the results of learning, were letters indispensable means of communication. Letters were by the addressees often submitted for perusal to others. The sender had to bear in mind this usage of letters. But there were of course also strictly secret or confidential letters, for example when mediation in sensitive matters was involved. But precisely in these letters were others interested and regularly we read complaints about letters delivered with broken seal. So, for example, Erasmus had given a letter for Cardinal Albert of Brandenburg to Ulrich von Hutten, who however did not hand over to the addressee but made sure that the letter was given in print. The cardinal set only eyes on the text of the letter as pamphlet in printed form.
That letters were printed was quite normal at that time. Writing letters was an art which one we could learn. Erasmus published in 1522 to that end a handbook entitled *De conscribendis epistolis* (*On writing letters*). It is clear that during the preparation of the publication of collection of letters corrections could be made. This is the case with the Erasmus’ letter to Luther from March 28, 1519. Erasmus has got a little into trouble when the letter by supporters of Luther was published. The Bishop of Liege considered himself compromised, because he was mentioned as sympathizer of Luther. For this reason replaced Erasmus in his own edition of this letter, the words “the Bishop of Liege” by “a high ranking person”.

A large part of his letters has Erasmus himself published. The different volumes contain approximately 1200 letters, including a number of which was addressed to him. With the exception of some open letters, Luther did not publish his letters in printed form.

The best guide for Erasmus’ personal thoughts are those letters, which he never published in his *Epistolae* (*Letters*). The reason for his concern with Luther’s cause is clear from a letter to Spalatinus in March 1523: “If Luther would go down, no God or man could hold against the monks. Moreover, when Luther is destroyed, a large part of the pure Gospel will be destroyed with him”.

**Erasmus’ First Acquaintance with Luther**

Already in the autumn of 1516 Luther mentioned by the way in a letter to Spalatinus the subject of the subsequent dispute with Erasmus. Around mid-December 1516 Erasmus received a letter from Georg Spalatinus, chaplain and secretary of Elector Frederick of Saxony. In this letter Luther addressed over a friend to Erasmus for the first time and Erasmus did not hear talk about Luther until now, though still not knowing his name, for Spalat-
tinus only spoke of “an Augustian priest”. This letter from Spalatinus is “very important”, because the theological differences of opinion between the two great men in the history of Christianity in the first half of the 16th century are found already clearly in this letter. After a large number of formal compliments which are fitting to the rhetorical style of that time and which are intended to propitiate Erasmus, finally Luther’s objections on Erasmus’ Annotationes in epistolam ad Romanos (Annotations on the Letter to the Romans) are brought out. In the first place Luther asks Erasmus to reconsider his limited view of “justice out of the works”. According to Luther Erasmus reduces “the works of the law”, following Jerome, exclusively to the maintenance of external ceremonies. According to Luther, “the works of the law” enclose however also the Ten Commandments. According to Luther we are not justified, as Aristotle thought, by doing righteous things, but only he who is justified, acts justly. Further he attacks Erasmus’ interpretation of the notorious text in the Vulgate “in whom all have sinned” (Romans 5:12). According to Luther Erasmus asserts that Paul does not write clearly about the original sin. Luther supposes that these misinterpretations are due to the neglect of the antipelagian writings of Augustine, among others De spiritu et lettera (On spirit and letter). When Erasmus would study these writings of Augustine, he would understand Paul’s Letter to the Romans correctly, and do more justice to Augustine. Finally is given in Spalatinus’ letter a summary of Luther’s view with regard to “justice out of works” in the line of its own comments on Romans 1:17. Luther is afraid that those who feel themselves

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22 Ibid., vol. 2, no. 501, 14.
23 Ibid., 29.
24 Erasmus, Opus epistolarum, vol. 2, no. 501, 48-62; Cfr. Martin Luther, WABr 1, Nr 27, 4-26.
25 Ibid., no. 501, 65-67; Cfr. Martin Luther, WABr 1, no. 27, 17-32.
26 Ibid., 52.
27 Meant here is Martin Luther, Vorlesungen über den Römerbrief, 1515.16. WA 56.
supported by Erasmus, only focus on the literal (i.e. for Luther the dead) sense of the text.\textsuperscript{28} Spalatinus passed Luther’s criticism on to Erasmus.\textsuperscript{29}

Luther’s criticism of Erasmus’ way of interpreting the Holy Scripture is still more apparent if we the text of the Luther’s original letter to Spalatinus compare with Spalatinus’ letter to Erasmus, on top of which is written by Luther “ad usum Erasmi” (for the use of Erasmus)

In the original letter to his friend, we read in addition to respect for Erasmus’ erudition, a very great admiration for the spirituality and the sincerity of Faber Stapulensis. This last remark is omitted by Spalatinus in his letter to Erasmus. But this remark makes it clear that Luther saw a difference between two ways of dealing with the Holy Writ, and it is obvious which way Luther preferred. Here already the judgment announces itself, which would be passed in a letter from March 1517 to Johann Lang, prior of the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt: “I read Erasmus, but my reluctance is growing by the day. It is good that he consistently takes in a bright way monks and priests in and disapproves their deeply rooted sleepy featherbrain, but I am afraid that he brings not enough forward Christ and God’s grace. In that he is still more ignorant than Faber Stapulensis. The human things overgrow the divine in Erasmus”.\textsuperscript{30} Again the distinction between Erasmus and Luther is translated to the distinction between Jerome and Augustine. There is just simply a difference of opinion between someone who leaves room for a freedom of choice of the human will and another who knows nothing else than God’s grace.\textsuperscript{31} Luther keeps these ideas carefully to himself, because he does not want to support those who are with favour of Erasmus.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 48-72.
\textsuperscript{30} Martin Luther, \textit{WABr} 1, no. 35, 15-20.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 20-26.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 27-28.
This judgment has been confirmed in January 1518, when Luther puts his feeling on Erasmus to Spalatinus into words and warns him for Erasmus: “there is in my opinion to find a great deal in Erasmus writings which is not in line with the knowledge of Christ—but I speak now as a theologian and not from the point of view of grammatical competence”.

The letter of Spalatinus asked for a response from Erasmus. But that did not come. The initiative to a direct contact came from Luther, undoubtedly at the instigation of Melanchthon and a few others who felt a bound with Erasmus as well as with Luther. Melanchthon took in January 1519 preliminary steps: “Martin Luther, who greatly admires your name, asks your full consent”. Three months later, on March 28, 1519, Luther wrote his first letter to Erasmus.

**Luther’s First Letter to Erasmus**

Luther’s impulses to the reformation of doctrine and life of the Church are particularly welcomed promptly in humanist circles. Martin Bucer, who in 1518 was present at the Heidelberg disputation, where Luther his views put in paradox formulations, wrote that Luther agreed in every way with Erasmus, although he seems to exceed Erasmus at one point, namely what Erasmus had taught only in veiled terms, Luther had taught openly and unrestrictedly. Many young in the humanistic way formed theologians of that time saw in the theology of Luther a deepening of the ideas of Erasmus. They saw Luther as like-minded: Luther was bracketed together with Erasmus.

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33 Martin Luther, *WABr* 1, no. 57, 21-23.
34 Erasmus, *Opus epistolæarum*, vol. 3, no. 910, 468, 22.
35 (Martin Bucer), *Correspondance de Martin Bucer*, Tome 1 (jusqu’en 1524) (Leiden: J. Rott, 1979), 54-56. The letter was dated May 1, 1518, a few days after Luther defended his theses in Heidelberg.
It seems like Erasmus (initially) shared this vision. But Erasmus was also afraid of commotion. He let Wolfgang Capito know, that he can agree with Luther’s theses on the indulgence, but asks him to convey to Luther to be cautious and not to express any insults to the address of the Pope. Although he thus could appreciate in these years Luther’s writings with respect to the content on the one hand, on the other he took offence from the very beginning at the way in which Luther disguised his criticism.

More and more involved in the religious conflict Luther was in search of support. The agreement of Erasmus and of the humanists could greatly influence the balance of power. Tactical considerations determine the tone of the letter. Luther’s letter ends in an ode on Erasmus’ intellectual greatness, accompanied by a critical remark about the scholastic theologians, the enemies of the bonae litterae: “How often am I, in fact, not talking anymore with you and are you not talking with me, dear Erasmus, jewel of us all and our hope. Indeed we have never got to know each other—that is a disgrace. Who is not moved in the bottom of his heart by Erasmus, who is not a pupil of Erasmus, who is not dominated by his influence? I speak here of them who were on the right way gaining more knowledge in linguistics and literature. For me it is always gratifying that among the gifts of grace also had to be counted the fact that one disap-


37 Erasmus writes for example to Johann Lang, that everyone is highly pleased with Luther’s arguments on the indulgences, except a few on the purgatory. Erasmus, Opus epistolarum, vol. 3, no. 872, 12-16.

38 Martin Luther, WABr 1, no. 91, 1-3.

39 Ibid., 34-35.

40 Ibid., 43.

41 The term bonae litterae is normally used to describe the scholarly and educational field that we nowadays call humanism.
proves many people, because just on this way the gifts of God’s grace are distinguished from those of his anger”. 42

But why did Luther so long hesitate to express his admiration? Luther’s answer is: “I have not learned, after I have been such a long time between the Sophists (scholastic theologians; D. A.), how one has to pay one’s respect to a man of learning”. 43

And he adds in a bantering tone: “But now I have understood that my name is familiar to you from the fuss on the indulgence. The foreword to the last edition of your Enchiridion (Handbook of a Christian soldier) proves that you not only have seen my ideas, but also approves them and that compels me—albeit in simple terms—to show me personally grateful for the spiritual enrichment you gave me and many others. … For this reason, good Erasmus, I hope that you too will be prepared to acknowledge this small brother in Christ, who is very dedicated to you but hardly in a position to assist you further”. 44

When Luther had hoped with his letter to get the explicit support of Erasmus for the Evangelical cause, then he was not successful. Erasmus’ answer to Luther, dated May 30, 1519, is very polite, but in fact he refuses to take sides. He sets the matter of the bonae litterae alongside the ideas which are defended by Luther and unjustly have been fused by the theologians of Louvain with his own ideas: it is impossible to make them understand that he is not the standard-bearer of Luther’s party.45

According to Erasmus the theologians of Louvain see this as a good reason “to obliterate firstly the bonae litterae, and then to destroy himself”. 46

42 Luther, WABr 1, no. 163, 9.
43 Martin Luther, WABr 1, no. 163, 15-16.
44 Ibid., 19-23; 31-33.
45 Erasmus, Opus epistolarum, vol. 3, no. 980, 6.
46 Ibid., no. 980, 6-9.
The Correspondence between Erasmus and Luther in the Years 1519-1520

To track the development of the correspondence between Erasmus and Luther during the important years 1519-1524 is difficult. Unfortunately we have only the disposal of scattered allusions in the correspondence of Erasmus. What can we infer from these scraps?

In the first place we can deduce, that Luther in the autumn of 1519, according to a letter from Luther to Erasmus, which has been lost, appears to have deplored in general terms the publication of the response of Erasmus on his first letter.

The earliest statement of Erasmus which shows evidently an appreciation of Luther’s views, is found in a letter from May 1519 to Justus Jonas. Jonas had brought Erasmus the (partial) edition of the Operationes in Psalmos, and Erasmus was very impressed. In subsequent letters he eulogized, above all, the Operationes in Psalmos and some writings on piety, which Luther had written before the violence of his enemies had put him up to unreasonable utterances. Although Erasmus has read with pleasure the Operationes in Psalmos, and even though he knows that Luther has a good reputation among a number of important persons in England and the Low Countries, he is not prepared to unbend his reserve: “I stay neutral as long as I can”. And he continues: “With this advices I do not mean to say what you should do, but you must continue to do what you are doing”.

On the other hand Erasmus’ letters speak of finding an entirely different spirit in writings as De captivitate babylonica ecclesiae (On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church), Assertio omnium articulorum (Assertion of all the Articles Condemned) and De abro-

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47 Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 4, no. 1041, 46. See the note there.
49 Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 3, no. 980, 37.
50 Ibid., vol. 3, no. 980, 52.
gatione missae (On the Abolition of the Mass). Up to now, he writes, the majority was favorable of Luther, but now many people have turned their backs on him, because this polemical writings are an apple of discord, which Luther had thrown in the world, which made it impossible to find a peaceful solution in an increasingly dangerous battle. Although Erasmus not earlier criticized Luther’s writings not to evoke his anger, he now had a touchstone with which he could convince his Catholic friends, that his case and that of Luther were really not the same: “where do I say that all what we are doing, is sin?”

Although Erasmus’ life in these few years is highly affected by Luther’s cause, he rarely speaks on the teaching of Luther. He writes rather tauntingly about the fierce fighting against quite a number of minor issues. But what Erasmus calls a minor issue, that is, that the best works of the man are sins too, is for Luther on the contrary a central sentence of the faith.

In the course of 1519 Erasmus got into trouble, because he was accused of cooperating with Luther. The suspicion was not justified, but understandable. Erasmus and Luther had both sharp criticism on the scholastic theology and were both looking for a reformation of the Church. Erasmus has always argued in favor of a thorough investigation of Luther’s writings, before a condemnation could be the case. Erasmus took Luther under his protection, because Luther’s fall could have consequences for the flourishing of the bonae litterae.

In spring and summer of 1520 is once again an exchange of letters between Erasmus and Luther. On a letter from Luther, sent around the middle of March, Erasmus answers August 1, 1520 with the purpose to withhold Luther to mention in his writings the name of Erasmus and his friends, as Luther had done in his answer to the condemnation of the universities of

51 Ibid., vol. 5, no. 1342, 747-760.
52 Erasmus, Opus epistolarum, vol. 4, no. 1228, 25-25.
54 Ibid., no. 1225, 332-336.
55 Ibid., no. 1141, 11-14.
Louvain and Cologne. He ends the letter with the exclamation: “Oh, what if Luther could interpret the Holy Scripture without anger”.

From a letter of Luther to Lazarus Spengler, dated November 17, 1520, one could conjecture that Luther has given Erasmus the assurance that he would not mention his name, even though he did not like it at all. From that moment on, there is a kind of an armed peace. Luther writes for example in the letter to Lazarus Spengler: “Erasmus, God beware him, and I, we remain connected. It is true that I often debated in secret with Philip Melanchthon the question how close to or far from the road Erasmus was … I will not attack anybody as first; for me it is sufficient to defend myself, when I am attacked”.

On November 7, 1519, the University of Louvain has condemned a number of statements by Luther. Previously the University of Cologne had done something like that. Six of Luther’s statements criticized by the University of Louvain would turn up in the end literally in the bull Exsurge Domine (Arise, O Lord, and Judge Your Cause), which bull after the necessary preparatory drafts was promulgated on June 15, 1520. Erasmus was very unhappy with the bull. He believed that those who welcomed the bull would not rest, before they have destroyed the bonae litterae. He regrets the fact that this tragedy is being used to bury the message of the Gospel. In an attempt still to stop the matter Erasmus wrote a letter to Pope Leo X on September, 13, 1520. He makes no disguise of his judgment of the Papal bull. They had to refute Luther, and only when he did not want to concede, they had to pass on a condemnation. He speaks approving about Luther, but says that he himself has nothing to do with Luther’s cause. He could not else, because he himself was under fire.

56 Ibid., vol. 8, no. 1127a, 94-95.
57 Martin Luther, WABr 2, no. 353, 18-22.
58 Erasmus, Opus epistolarum, vol. 4, no. 1141, 20-33.
59 Ibid., no. 1143, 65-76.
60 Ibid., 8-11.
On October 8, 1520, two days before the bull *Exsurge Domine* reached Luther, Luther’s books were solemnly burnt in Louvain. The following day the Carmelite friar Nicholas van Egmond—as well as Erasmus connected to the University of Louvain—preached in St. Peter’s Church. When he saw Erasmus in the midst of the public, he deviated from the theme—according to Erasmus it was about the love—and called him in public a Lutheran.⁶¹ At a meeting, at the request of the Erasmus organized by the Rector of the University, Godescalc Rosemond, Nicholas van Egmond laid no better proof on the table for his accusation, than that Erasmus not had written against Luther.⁶²

From a number of letters, dated in the years 1519-1520, it appears that Erasmus had adopted a cautious and balanced attitude in the face of what he called the “Lutheran tragedy”,⁶³ the “Lutheran disease” or simply “Luther’s cause”.⁶⁴ He writes that he does not know Luther personally, and that he is not responsible for Luther’s writings, which he cannot defend nor condemn, because he glanced through those just cursorily.⁶⁵ On the one hand Luther is called “a marvelous tool to trumpet forth the truth of the Gospel”,⁶⁶ and someone who is very well suited to interpret the Holy Scripture in the way of the Fathers of the Church and to fan the spark of the message of the Gospel.⁶⁷ But on the other hand, Luther was a drag on Erasmus and the new theology. He cast a slur on the *bonae litterae*. The enemies of erudition used “Luther’s cause” to attack Erasmus, by which they suggested a link between erudition and heresy. Aversion

⁶² A comprehensive report of this conversation is found in a letter from Erasmus to Thomas More. Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 4, no. 1162, 12-228; cfr. also no. 1173, 26-98.
⁶³ Ibid., no. 1141, 30-31.
⁶⁴ Ibid., no. 1033, 34-35.
⁶⁶ Ibid., no. 1139, 86-89.
⁶⁷ Ibid., no. 1167, 124-128. Nota bene in a letter to a member of the Roman Curia, Lorenzo Cardinal Campeggio, dated December 6, 1520, therefore after the bull *Exsurge Domine* has already been promulgated.
from the *bonae litterae* surely played a part. That is why he draws the attention of Albert of Brandenburg, the Bishop of Mainz on the backgrounds of the Luther’s cause, because the enemies of the *bonae litterae* used his authority as a pretext to attack the *bonae litterae*. In a letter to Luther Erasmus evaluates his own position as follows: for my part, I remain neutral as far as possible in order to be more useful for the revival of learning.

Erasmus wanted to be more a spectator than an actor in the tragedy. However, he could not ignore the Lutheran movement, not only because of the attempt to bring him in discredit in connection with it, but also because of the revival of learning used for the reformation of the Church. Erasmus had written against abuses in the Church long before he knew of Luther’s existence and he had admitted in more than one occasion, that he in a sense had hastened a large part of that reformation. Therefore in the letters of 1519-1520 he adhered to the glaring need for reform. Erasmus states that he has found no fault with Luther’s reputation and he still maintains the demand not to deal rudely with Luther.

Even at the start of “Luther’s cause” Erasmus suspected that the thoughtless responses not only came on the part of Luther’s opponents, whom he urged to stand out against Luther with the pen and not with slander and heated discussions. Also

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68 Ibid., no. 1033, 195-199; cf. no. 1141, 25-26.
69 Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 4, no. 1033, 260-263.
70 Ibid., vol. 3, no. 980, 37-38. Erasmus admits that he, out of concern for the *bonae litterae*, did not do Luther completely right, and that he did not want to pass judgement on the writings of such a great man. Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 3, no. 967, 89-93.
71 Ibid., vol. 4, no. 1155, 8.
72 Ibid., 18-20.
74 Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 5, no. 1352, 91-93.
75 Ibid., vol. 3, no. 939,77-78.
Luther’s fierceness was a problem, which by his natural drift and impatience the reformation could transform into chaos and discord. Moreover Luther made a public matter of issues which should be dealt with more tactfully. According to Erasmus Luther too did no good to the cause of learning and Erasmus constantly called to mind the advice which he gave to Froben not to print Luther’s writings; in short, the threat (for the bonae litterae) was that Luther’s cause would lead to “Lutheran” tumult.

Between the end of October and early November 1520 Erasmus made an attempt of conciliation in Cologne. The gap could still be bridged over, provided that, in the light of Erasmus, three conditions were fulfilled. In the first place Luther would have to speak more moderate and his greatest opponents would be opposed silence by the civil and religious authorities. Further one had to be prepared to admit that Luther’s adherents and those of the old faith had different views on ecclesiastical rules and non-essential theological views, to which in any case, according to Erasmus also belonged issues such as the predestination and the Papal teaching authority, not fundamental Christian dogmas. Finally, people’s thirst for piety at least had to be quenched by preaching the Gospel and by softening some of the tyrannical ecclesiastical rules. If these conditions were fulfilled, all other issues should be submitted to a group of impartial experts, such as outlined in the Consilium Cujusdam (Somebody’s Advice), which Erasmus, together with Johann Faber, had written in Cologne. But already by December 1520 disillusionment is heard in a letter. In a world that thirsts for the pure living water of Evangelists and the Apostles, Luther seemed to be extremely appropriate. But the aggressiveness of

76 Ibid., vol. 4, no. 1120, 26-41.
77 Erasmus, Opus epistolarum, vol. 4, no. 1202, 56-62.
78 Ibid., no. 1143, 20-22; Cfr. vol. 5, no. 1526,34-37.
80 J. D. Tracy, Erasmus. The Growth of a Mind, 188-189.
81 Erasmus, Opus epistolarum, vol. 4, no. 1167, 137-141.
his writings was not a reflection of the gentleness of the apostolic spirit. In the spring of 1521, little was left of the optimism arising out of the mediation efforts in Cologne. The burning of the Ecclesiastical Laws by Luther, the publication of *De Captivitate Babylonica*, and the in Erasmus’ eyes exaggerated *Assertio omnium Articulorum* had made the disease, as it seemed, incurable. Luther’s enemies helped Erasmus, for this reason Erasmus helped them. He hopes for an intervention from the top. Erasmus begins at this time to emphasize the differences between Luther and himself.

Where Erasmus was afraid of, happened: Luther’s cause raised revolt and Luther’s medicine was worse than the disease. Also at the Diet of Worms (1521) Erasmus could not reconcile with his conscience to make a stand against Luther. In any case he did not want, that, together with Luther, good things were going downhill, which in his view may not be lost. He played the role of Gamaliel, who in the Sanhedrin advised not to prosecute the first Christians, but to wait until the time would learn it whether God was on their side was (Acts 5:33-39). Although he was of the opinion that it was wise, both Luther and his opponents to muzzle, he continued to warn against excessive rigidity. Broadly the same advice he gave two years later Pope Adrian VI. While he was recommending the restriction of the freedom of the press and reserve with regard to new developments, which promote earlier discord than

82 Ibid., no. 1167, 155-58.
84 Ibid., no. 1195, 32-34.
85 Ibid., no. 1199, 5-7; Cf. no. 1218, 1-2.
86 Ibid., no. 1202, 31-37; 128-133. Erasmus could ask even after the publication of *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio*, whether God perhaps tried to cure the Church by Luther’s bitter and powerful medicine. Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 5, no. 1495, 7-11; Cf. no. 1497, 1-2 and no. 1523, 137-41.
87 Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 5, no. 1313, 12-17.
89 Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 4, no. 1192, 57-68.
piety, Erasmus advocated genuine reforms and amnesty for the errors committed in the past. “For this is the way God deals with us every day. He will forgive us our offences”. The source of the disease should be examined and cured. Erasmus proposed a committee of calm and highly respected men.\textsuperscript{90}

The Correspondence From 1521 Untill the Publication of \textit{De libero arbitrio}

For his part Erasmus remained loyal to the tacit non-aggression treaty, refusing, as he mentions on several occasions, to write for or against Luther, despite Luther’s ever more pronounced doctrinal positions, despite his more and more destroying acts, despite his excommunication in January 1521 in the Papal Bull \textit{Decet romanum pontificem} (It pleases the Roman Pontiff), in spite of the ban of the Empire imposed on him in May 1521 by the Diet of Worms.

The continual complaint of Erasmus was that nobody seemed to be willing to take the pen in his hand against Luther and to refute him without willing to insult and destroy him.\textsuperscript{91} His friends agreed with it and thought that Erasmus would take up the pen against Luther. In the beginning, he said that he had no time, and that he lacked the talent to help them.\textsuperscript{92} At a certain point he decides to write on unity, but not against Luther. However, this plan was dropped, because the atmosphere was too fierce.\textsuperscript{93} In the end, Erasmus conceded under pressure.\textsuperscript{94} In particular, Princes like Emperor Charles V and King Henry VIII of England\textsuperscript{95} and the Popes Leo X and Adrian VI

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\textsuperscript{90} Erasmus, \textit{Opus epistolarum}, vol. 5, no. 1352, 171-91.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., vol. 4, no. 1192, 19-21.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., no. 1217, 138-41; Cf. no. 1225, 239-42.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., no. 1268, 79-81.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., vol. 5, no. 1408, 21-23; cf. no. 1415, 54-55.
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have prompted Erasmus to take the pen up against Luther.\textsuperscript{96} That Erasmus finally did concede is the consequence of the fact that he wanted to prevent the suspicion to support Luther secretly. An attack on the part of Luther’s adherents made no doubt that the decision was easier. Ulrich von Hutten wrote an \textit{Expostulatio (Expostulation)} in which he reproached Erasmus, that he, as a scared cat, hides his sympathy for the reformation. Erasmus replied this attack with his \textit{Spongia adversus Aspergines Hutteni (Sponge against Hutten’s Aspersions)}.

Erasmus was summoned by friends and protectors\textsuperscript{97} to settle with the heretic.\textsuperscript{98} Erasmus, however, did not speak of heresy, but rather of “discord”, “tragedy” and “tumult”.\textsuperscript{99} In a letter to Zwingli from August 1523 Erasmus made his reservations about Luther. The matters in dispute are not the articles of faith, but issues, which usually are discussed in the schools. He was surprised about the determination of the people, who were no prepared to give their lives for an article of faith but very much for Luther’s paradoxes. For those Erasmus himself does not like to die, because he does not understand them. The background of Erasmus’ thinking of martyrdom is that the first “Lutherans”, who died for their faith, shortly before were burned in Brussels (July 1, 1523).\textsuperscript{100} Then he gives an enumeration of the apparent-

\textsuperscript{96} Detailed reports in: A. Freitag, \textit{(Historische Einleitung zu) De servo arbitrio. 1525. WA 18, 559-597} and K. Zickendraht, \textit{Der Streit zwischen Erasmus und Luther über die Willensfreiheit} (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1909), 1-25.

\textsuperscript{97} Erasmus, \textit{Opus epistolarum}, vol. 5, no. 1411, 23-25.


\textsuperscript{99} Desiderius Erasmus. \textit{Spongia adversus aspergines Hutteni, ASD 9.1, 172}, 159-163.

\textsuperscript{100} Luther wrote with reference to this event a Letter of comfort to the Christian in the Low countries and wrote a flaming protest song \textit{Ein neues lied wir heben an} (A new song we raise) in which he gives an account of their martyr death. Erasmus’ reaction on this event is conspicuous cool; he does not know whether he had to deplore their death, because they should have died for Luther’s paradoxes and not so much for Christ. Cfr. here: D. Akerboom, “A
ly absurd enigmas, which Luther has propounded: that all of the works of the Saints are sins, that the free will is an empty concept, that man is justified by faith alone, that the works have nothing to do with it. 101 “Nonetheless” he continued, “I am firmly determined either not to write against Luther, or to write so, that I am not pleasing the ‘Pharisees’”. 102 Erasmus notes that he does not understand what the benefit is to dispute about what Luther can mean with those riddles. He suggests even, that he almost everything, which Luther learns, himself has learned, only not so sharp and that he always has avoided those enigmas and paradoxes. 103

Erasmus has never given his protectors what they wanted, because he is did not consider the matter as heresy. 104 But his judgment on this issue is at the same time miles apart from Luther’s. He considered it not worth arguing about, not to mention dying the martyr death. What was it worth? A good, polite discussion. The issue, so dear to Luther, was well suited for Erasmus’ intentions: it was adequate to show the distance to Luther, but in no way required a total breach of relations. It enabled Erasmus to be what he always had been facing Luther: not hesitant, but very ambivalent. He denied the allegation, that he was a “Lutheran” and wanted still to stay on speaking terms with Wittenberg.

In 1524, the year in which De libero arbitrio appears, according to Erasmus a moderate formulation of a conflict that was present in the background from the beginning, it came into a clash in a letter from Luther of mid-April 1524. In that letter Luther tried to prevent the outbreak of a public quarrel, but achieved the opposite, because the letter was brought into pub-

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101 Erasmus, Opus epistolarum, vol. 5, no. 1384, 2-14. Indeed these are essential elements of Luther’s doctrine of the justification of the sinner.

102 Ibid., no. 1384, 43-47.

103 Ibid., no. 1384, 89-91.

104 Ibid., vol. 4, no. 1033, 219-241.
licity. Erasmus had then to take side. In a tone, completely opposite to the somewhat submissive style of his first letter Luther tries to eliminate Erasmus finally by seducing him to a mutual non-aggression treaty. Besides anger and contempt one finds in Luther’s letter some of the objections, which existed already in veiled terms in the letter to Spalatinus of 1516, objections which can be summed up in one sentence: Erasmus’ Christendom is nothing more than philology. “Although we can see that the Lord has not given you the courage and even not the sense to resist freely and with certainty against us or against those, who we consider as monsters, we do not dare however to require from you, what exceeds your strengths and your size”.

Von Hutten and a few others, Luther acknowledges, have tried to force Erasmus to give in his adhesion to the cause of the Gospel. He would like to see that the old Erasmus will pass away in the Lord’s peace, but he ends with a defiant warning: “If you can do nothing else, I call upon you just to stay spectator of our tragedy, and, above all, not to publish books against me, In turn I shall abandon to do something similar against you”. Erasmus replied on May 8 in three points, “polite as it should be”, as he writes to his friend Pirckheimer. Luther and his friends do not have the monopoly of the fight for the purity of the Gospel. The supposed weakness of Erasmus is nothing else than bewilderment, because there are certain texts of Luther, from which arise legitimate doubts. People can also trace in the facts that in the name of the Gospel uprising and uproar arises. And, to finish this first point, he concludes: “I see, that it is an imminent danger that the bonae litterae and learning get lost”. “So far” Erasmus writes, “I have nothing written against you, and I have been content to denounced the alleged clashes between us”. But then follows a barely veiled an-

105 Martin Luther, WABr 3, no. 729, 8-11.
106 Ibid., 59-62.
107 Erasmus, Opus epistolarum, vol. 5, no. 1445.
108 Ibid., no. 1452, 13.
109 Ibid., no. 1445, 11.
nouncement of the publication of *De libero arbitrio*: “Erasmus, who writes against you, serves the Gospel maybe more than the idiots who write in favor of you. For the sake of them one cannot be a spectator of the tragedy”. The third point is a very lengthy justification for his actions in relation to Von Hutten. Not Erasmus’ *Spongia* has lack of measurement, but Von Hutten and his protectors are the people who overindulge themselves in excessive anger against Erasmus.

Four months later on September 6, 1524 the *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio* was published, which brought the rupture into publicity.

**Erasmus’ *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio***

Erasmus says to have written *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio* in a few days, but the preparation took much more time. One had supposed that Erasmus had already in mind the base of the strategy, which he would follow in *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive collatio*, even before he was convinced that he had to join issue with Luther to keep his credibility with his Catholic patrons. He would attack Luther’s paradoxes, but not the evangelical core of his teaching.

Before he focused on the issue of the free will, he had the intention to write a book on calming down the Lutheran cause, using the literary form of a dialogue, more than a “collatio” (collation; a comparison of texts) than a “disputatio” (dispute). In a public letter addressed to J. Botzheim, dated January 30, 1523, which has been given the title *Catalogus omnium Erasmi Lucubrationum* (*Catalogue of all Erasmus’ Lucubrations*) Erasmus unfolds his plans. His original plan was a series of three dialogues, in which two persons, Trasymachus (Luther), and Eubulus (an opponent of Luther), under the leadership of Philalethes

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110 Ibid., 26-28.
111 Desiderius Erasmus, *Hyperaspistes I*, LB 10, 1274 CD.
(possibly Erasmus himself) should occupy themselves successively in the first place with Luther’s way of dealing with the matter, namely whether or not he has dealt with the issue wisely, even if everything he says, is true, secondly with some of his “dogmas” and thirdly with Erasmus’ advice to calm down the unrest.\textsuperscript{114} Erasmus did not carry to execution this original plan.\textsuperscript{115} We may assume that to these “dogmas” also belongs the doctrine on the free will, the more so because the intended content of the first dialogue goes about what Erasmus also deals with in the introduction of De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio. Maybe there can be found traces of this framework in a letter to Laurinus, which is written between the original design and the final result: it contains an imaginary dialogue with a “Lutheran” and shows that Erasmus pays attention to the issue of free will.\textsuperscript{116} One of the reasons why Erasmus occupies him-


\textsuperscript{115} Thompson presumes that the \textit{Inquisitio de Fide}, which was published in March 1524 (after writing but before the publication of \textit{De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio}) is an abbreviated version of one of the planned dialogues. \textit{Inquisitio de Fide. A Colloquy by Desiderius Erasmus Roterdamus 1524}, C. R. Thompson ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 37. In the context of our research is interesting, that in this dialogue Aulus (Erasmus) is debating with Barbatius (Luther) about the Christian faith. Because he was told, that Barbatius has been condemned as heretic, Aulus examines his teaching point by point on the basis of the Apostles’ creed, and discovers that Barbatius is completely orthodox. This seems very conciliatory, but in fact Erasmus is, despite all appearances, very polemical. For the Apostles’ Creed says nothing about the issue, which was to be discussed: the freedom or bondage of the will of the human being in relation to his salvation. It speaks on what to Erasmus is the essence of the Christian doctrine, namely, the Trinity, the incarnation of Christ, the Church, the resurrection and the last judgement, universal Christian doctrines, on which Luther also held.

\textsuperscript{116} Erasmus, \textit{Opus epistolarum}, vol. 5, no. 1342, 926-58. We find here a number of arguments, which we will also encounter in \textit{De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio}. The design of the whole dialogue is found in Erasmus, \textit{Opus epistolarum}, vol. 5, no. 1342, 733-1021.
self with the free will is that he was attacked by the Lutherans on his views about the free will.\footnote{Letters from spring 1522 show, that Luther’s followers accused Erasmus of Pelagianism, due to a number of comments in his Paraphrase in Pauli Epistolas (on Romans 9), because he would learn that the human being in virtue of his own free will would be able to accept or reject God’s grace. Cfr. Erasmus, Opus epistolarum, vol. 5, no. 1268, 81-85 and no. 1275, 24-28. For the Lutheran party this was the worst to be accused of.}

The publication of De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio was for a long time in coming. The book was published until long after Erasmus had decided to write it.\footnote{See, for example, a letter to King Henry VIII of September 4, 1523: Erasmus, Opus epistolarum, vol. 5, no. 1385, 11; a letter to Johannes Faber dated November 21, 1523: Erasmus, Opus epistolarum, vol. 5, no. 1397, 14; a letter to Paulus Bombasius dated January 19, 1524: Erasmus, Opus epistolarum, vol. 5, no. 1411, 21-25. So the delay arose partly from the fear just to increase the tumult.} On the one hand this long time is explained by the fact that Erasmus had to study many writings (again) in order to compose his book. In the first place, of course, Luther’s Assertio omnium articulorum, but also the writings of Melanchthon and Karlstadt, who also are combated in De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio. Besides, it is likely that he has read again (parts of) the works of Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus.\footnote{Cfr. also: Erasmus, Opus epistolarum, vol. 5, no. 1386, 21-23.} And finally, he had to look at the newer literature, in particular John Fisher’s Assertionis Lutheranae Confutatio.\footnote{Cfr. B. Lohse, “Marginalien zum Streit zwischen Erasmus und Luther”, Luther 46 (1975): 13-16. See for the importance of John Fisher as a theologian: R. Rex, The Theology of John Fisher. A Study in the Intellectual Origins of the Counter-Reformation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).} Probably in the winter of 1523, he reluctantly has written in five days a first draft. Erasmus sent the draft to Louis Baer for expert theological advice.\footnote{Erasmus, Opus epistolarum, vol. 5, no. 1419, 1-5. Baer replied with a notice about the distinction between “necessitas consequentiae” and “necessitas consequentis”. Erasmus, Opus epistolarum, vol. 5, no. 1420, 1-51.} A second copy of this first draft was send to King Henry VIII. If the King could assent to
the draft, Erasmus would finish the book and let it print. Further delay was possibly caused because Erasmus was troubled by a well-intentioned, but offensive letter of Luther, who offered him a truce. Erasmus pretends that he still has not written against Luther and adds, that it does not matter him, that Luther is writing against him. Finally, Erasmus himself decided to do the first move. It was well known that he was preparing a book against Luther. Erasmus was of the view that he had handled the issue so modestly that even Luther could not be discontented with it. At the end of August 1524 the book was printed in Basel and it was distributed in September. Erasmus expected a sharp reaction from Wittenberg, maybe from Luther himself.

*De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio* embodies many topics which often are found quite literally in Erasmus’ letters from the years 1518 to 1524. So Erasmus writes that one of Luther’s doctrines is under discussion. Nowhere Erasmus calls the teachings of Luther heretical. But this one “dogma” that is here under debate, is a shameful exaggeration, a paradox (in the negative sense): Wycliffe’s thesis, that all things—both be-

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122 Ibid., no. 1430, 12-20.
123 Luther, WABr 3, no. 729, 4-12.
124 Ibid., 59-62.
125 Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 5, no. 1445, 16-22.
126 Ibid., no. 1466, 58-60; cf. no. 1470, 46-47.
127 See for example the letter to Haio Hermann, dated Augustus 31, 1524: Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 5, no. 1479, 182-85. See also the letter to Thomas Wolsey from September 2, 1524: Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 5, no. 1486, 1-3.
128 Desiderius Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio*, LB 9, 1215 C (W. 3, 3-7).
129 In his *Adversus calumniosissimam epistolam Martini Lutheri* (1534) Erasmus states explicitly, that he nowhere in his writings Luther’s doctrine calls a heresy: Desiderius Erasmus, *Adversus calumniosissimam epistolam Martini Lutheri*, LB 10, 1537 D.
fore and after the gift of grace, both good and evil, and even neutral things—are done out of pure necessity.\textsuperscript{130}

Luther concurs explicitly in his \textit{Assertio omnium articulorum} with the view that all things are done out of pure necessity and that human beings therefore are merely an instrument of God, as a tool in the hand of an artisan.\textsuperscript{131} The problem is therefore whether the human will can be described as “free”, that is to say is able to choose between alternatives.\textsuperscript{132} More precisely, such as Erasmus’ definition of the free will suggests, is the problem, whether a person has a free will in respect of salvation: “further we understand by free will, a power of the human will, so that people can turn to those things, which leads to salvation, or turn away”.\textsuperscript{133}

Erasmus’ way of argumentation in \textit{De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio} is to undo this idea of the “mera necessitas” (pure necessity), and the several related paradoxes (such as Luther’s “immense exaggeration” of the consequences of original sin\textsuperscript{134}) from those things, that Luther has taught in a pious and Christian way, that is, to scrap all confidence in one’s own merits and power, and to put all trust in God and his promises.\textsuperscript{135} Repeatedly Erasmus argues that this trust in God’s promises has to be learned by carefully listening to the Holy Scripture without reading in it the paradoxes Luther learns.\textsuperscript{136} For Luther himself attributed in the past, so Erasmus, a little to the free will, but was made by the heat of the battle to remove it entirely.\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{130} Erasmus, \textit{De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio}, LB 9, 1217 E (W. 9, 20-10, 2).
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 1229 E-F (W. 45, 28-46,14).
\textsuperscript{132} Although “liberum arbitrium” literally better can be translated as freedom of choice, is here nevertheless followed the common translation of “free will”.
\textsuperscript{133} Erasmus, \textit{De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio}, LB 9, 1220 F-1221 A (W. 19, 7-10).
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 1246 BC (W. 87, 10-25).
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 1248 C (W. 91, 12-18).
\textsuperscript{136} Cfr. for example: Erasmus, \textit{De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio}, LB 9, 1239 F-1240 A (W. 73, 4-12).
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 1244 A (W. 82,20-24).
Erasmus does not mention the writings in which Luther would have assigned a part to the free will, but this statement from *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio* is not the first time, that he is making a distinction between what he seems to regard as the core of Luther’s doctrine and its subsequent paradoxes.

As in September 1524 *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio* was published, Erasmus did know that it was the definitive rupture with Luther. On September 6, 1524 he writes to King Henry VIII of England: “the die is cast: the booklet on the free will has seen the light”.  

After the publication of *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio* in September Erasmus waited during the last months of 1524 in intense for the responses his *Diatribe* would evoke. The reactions from “Catholic” quarters were in the first instance fairly positive. But in some of the letters doubts are raised about the impact of the *Diatribe* on the opponents. In addition, Erasmus was reproached that he indeed had condemned Luther’s way of taking action several times, but that in his writings from before 1524 not sufficiently was brought out that Erasmus has rejected what Luther taught. When Erasmus had written earlier against Luther, the “Lutherans” would never be able to appeal to him.

The reaction to the publication of *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio* on the part of Luther and his followers was quite resigned. Melanchthon informed Erasmus, that the book was received in Wittenberg very calmly. In particular Melanchthon liked very much the very moderate tone. He does Erasmus

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138 Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 5, no. 1493, 4-7.
140 Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 5, no. 1526, 227-229.
141 Ibid., no. 1503, 1-8.
142 Ibid., no. 1520, 18-33.
know that Luther is favorably disposed towards him and that he has promised that his answer will be written in the same moderate tone. Maybe in this way an investigation into the free will is not such a bad idea.\textsuperscript{143} But at the same time the position of Melanchthon, is clear: he agrees with Luther for the “dogmas” on the basis of the Holy Scripture.\textsuperscript{144}

In the winter of 1524/1525 however a growing polarization was displayed. By both sides Erasmus was plucked, and by both sides he was attacked. What he had fought for many years, faded completely in the background, because the only thing left was the question whether people was in favour of or against Luther. The risk to the \textit{bonae litterae} could, according to Erasmus, only be warded off, when peace and quiet would be restored.\textsuperscript{145} The ordinary medicine, namely suppression of aberrant opinions by violence, did not work well in this case, according to Erasmus.\textsuperscript{146} One had to try something else.\textsuperscript{147} Erasmus did feel quit not well in this situation. He felt frustrated by Luther’s opponents, who took offence at him, in his opinion unjustly, because he, unlike them, had written against Luther. But he was also irritated by the “Lutherans”.\textsuperscript{148} Erasmus realized that when Luther would go down, the violence on the part of his opponents would only increase. He has not affiliated to any of the parties, but remained consistently going his own (middle) course.\textsuperscript{149}

In 1525 Erasmus was waiting in great tension for Luther’s response to \textit{De libero arbitrio Diatriba sive Collatio}. Luther was a mystery for Erasmus. He wondered whether Luther was not two different persons; sometimes he seems to write out of an apostolic spirit, than he writes full of sarcasm. On the one hand

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., no. 1500, 42-54.
\textsuperscript{144} Erasmus, \textit{Opus epistolarum}, vol. 5, no. 1500, 37-39.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., no. 1514, 3-5; cf. vol. 6, no. 1564,32-34.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., vol. 5, no. 1515, 37-40; cf. vol. 5, no. 1526, 172-177.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., vol. 5, no. 1534, 23-27.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., vol. 6, no. 1603, 1-6.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., no. 1578, 22-27.
he contemns emperors and popes and on the other he can to react with anger without distinction to the gossip of unimportant and not particularly respectable people. He complains about Luther’s short-tempered character. He reproaches Luther, that he does not know when to stop and that he makes an issue of everything. Moreover it is not clear to him what Luther really wants; where Luther wanted to come to, Erasmus did not know.

**Luther’s De servo arbitrio**

Luther has responded late. As *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio* was published, he was working at *Wider die himmlischen Propheten* (Against the Heavenly Prophets) and *Adnotationes ad Deuteronomium Mose* (Annotations on Deuteronomy). Then he became involved in the Peasants War. It was not until September 1525—one year after the publication of *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio*—we read in a letter to Nicholas Hausmann that Luther spends all his time rebutting Erasmus. Luther denies however that this was the reason of its late answer: Luther took offence at *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio*. Luther’s reply was published in December 1525, under the title *De servo arbitrio* which he derived from Augustine’s *Contra Iulianum* (Against Julian). In contrast to Erasmus, who in his *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio* as little as possible would like to irritate, is Luther not afraid of the controversy and his tone is often mordant and sharp. This would for Erasmus lead to write a justification, called *Hyperaspistes* (Shield above the Diatribe against Martin Luther’s (book) *On the Bondage of the Will*).

From the above we must conclude that *De servo arbitrio* certainly was not hasty work. One may certain exaggerations in *De servo arbitrio* not soften by bringing forward in excuse that the

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150 Ibid., no. 1678, 26-32.
152 Ibid., no. 1523, 23-34.
153 Martin Luther, *WABr* 3, no. 926, 5.
154 Martin Luther, *De servo arbitrio*, 1525, WA 18, 601, 29-32.
book is written in a tearing hurry and out of a controversy. Moreover Luther himself denies that his doctrine of the bound will is originated from anger about *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio*.155

Not only because Luther here talks about what he calls the heart of the matter,156 is *De servo arbitrio* a undeniable rich book, but above all because Luther here bring issues on the carpet such as the relation between faith and reason, the doctrine of the Holy Scripture, his thoughts about the Church, his views on the hidden and revealed (will of) God, the doctrine of predestination, and the distinction between Law and Gospel in the context of his doctrine of the bound will.

After Luther’s *De servo arbitrio* was published at the end of December 1525, it last until February 1526 before Erasmus got a copy in hand. Erasmus presumed that this was deliberately, because in this way the answer of Erasmus would not appear before the autumn market in Frankfurt.157

Erasmus was very shocked when he read the book: he thought that *De servo arbitrio* was an impertinent book, full of sneering comments and defamation. According to Erasmus the most disturbing is that he by Luther is abused to be an atheist like Lucian, because he would not believe that there is a God, a pig from the herd of Epicure, because he would not believe that God has the affairs of the common mortals at heart, a despiser of the Holy Scripture, to be someone who has rejected the

155 Martin Luther, *De servo arbitrio. 1525*, WA 18, 756, 1-9. According to Erasmus Luther had been seduced, departing from a justified criticism on the much too high value which was ascribed to the good works in the practice of confession and indulgence, to deny all merits of the saints and the good works, see Desiderius Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio*, LB 9, 1246 F; W. 88, 23-32, then to reject confession and purgatory and to assert that the sentences of Popes, Councils and Bishops are heretical. See Desiderius Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio*, LB 9, 1246 F-1247 A; W. 88, 32-89, 15.

156 Luther, *De servo arbitrio. 1525*, WA 18, 786, 30.

157 Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 6, no. 1678, 16-20. Cfr. vol. 6, no. 1679, 74-78; no. 1667, 4-13; no. 1683, 12-15.
Christian religion, an enemy of Christendom, a felonious hypocrite. Erasmus had little congeniality with the content of *De servo arbitrio*. In the letters he nowhere takes notice of the content. He complains that the argumentation is scholastic and presumes that Luther did use this argumentation on purpose, because Erasmus was not well trained in the scholastic method.

When writing *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio* Erasmus still hoped that the fight would remain restricted to a purely theoretical struggle. In *De servo arbitrio* Luther makes clear that he does not convey the issue of the free will as a noncommittal problem. This means that the intention which Erasmus had when writing the *Diatribe*, was not achieved. Luther did not want an open discussion. Erasmus cannot understand that Luther in such a way took action against him.

Even more as by the amount of insults which were thrown at him in *De servo arbitrio*, Erasmus was run down in Luther letter from April 1526. In this letter, which, unfortunately, has been lost, written immediately after the publication of *De servo arbitrio*, Luther rubs further salt into the wounds. One can derive the contents from the summary Erasmus has made in a letter to Cardinal Wolsey, dated April 25, 1526. Firstly he mentions the circumstances in which Luther has composed his book. Writing about the marriage of Luther, which took place in June 1525, he points out: “I once have written that he is just a wild beast, so untamed, that a woman is unable to tame them. But I

158 Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 6, no. 1670, 24-36. Repeatedly appears from Erasmus’ letters how deeply Luther has hurt him. Cfr. vol. 6, no. 1672, 114-115; no. 1677, 7-8; no. 1678, 9-10; no. 1679, 71-73; no. 1686, 30-32; no. 1687, 39-41; no. 1688, 12-16; no. 1690, 18-22; no. 1697, 8-11; no. 1704, 14-15; no. 1716, 27; no. 1717, 42-43; no. 1719, 22-23; vol. 7, no. 1891, 212; no. 1987, 12-14.

159 Ibid., 6, no. 1679, 80-82.

160 Preserved is yet Erasmus’ reply. Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 6, no. 1688.

161 Ibid., no. 1697.

162 Ibid., no. 1653, 9-10.
was totally mistaken, because it is precisely during his honey-
moon that Luther has composed that book so devoid of any le-
niency. This is not a problem. He imagines that he is moderate. 
“In fact”, Erasmus continues: “Luther is asking me almost to 
thank him for the sensitivity he has shown in many places and 
for the sake of our friendship; and he assures me, and would 
like to convince me from his complete correctness in the face of 
me. So has a woman tamed our man?”¹⁶³ Further Luther has 
written, that he has dealt with Erasmus kindly and that he oth-
erwise would have written, if he had to do with an enemy.

Erasmus has immediately responded to Luther’s letter, as is 
proved by the end of his letter: “Basel, 1526, 11 April, the day 
on which your letter is handed to me”.¹⁶⁴ “Your letter came too 
late—to obstruct the publication of Hyperaspistes I: D. A.—and 
even if it would have been in time, it would not have under-
mined in any way to my determination”.¹⁶⁵ In his answer to 
Luther Erasmus complains on the personal and insulting tone 
of De servo arbitrio. He reproaches Luther, that his arrogant, de-
fiant and rebellious tone brings the whole world in the lime-
light, brings the bonae litterae at risk and that Luther gives we-
apons for riot to those who long for reform.¹⁶⁶ Erasmus’ indigna-
tion turns into a complaint: why are Luther’s irascible tempe-
rament, which he uses as an argument to justify himself, and 
his malicious rage, only aimed at Erasmus, whose Diatribe is a 
polite discussion, whereas the controversial-theologians Jo-
hannes Cochlaeus and John Fischer in particular have attacked 
Luther? Especially the constant accusations of atheism, skeptic-
ism and blasphemy do not bring the debate a step forward.

The second part of the letter is more of a declaration of war: 
“You think you have disarmed me. I have more supporters than 
you think”.¹⁶⁷ He wants not to focus on the personal aspects of

¹⁶³ Erasmus, Opus epistolarum, vol. 6, no. 1697, 12-16.
¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 45.
¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 1-2.
¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 28-34.
¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 30-33.
this tragedy. “But what me and any decent person hurts, is that you with your brutal, arrogant, and riotous character the whole world throws in a deadly mischief, that you decent men and devotees of the *bonae litterae* hand over to the rage of some of the Pharisees, villains and revolutionaries arms for uprising, that you in short, so look after the cause of the Gospel, that you the sacred and profane completely confuse”.168 Luther is trying to destroy what Erasmus always has been trying to build: “what hurts me is the disastrous state of the society and the incurable confusion in which everything is moving, which simply and solely is to due to your uncontrolled character, which is not admissible for good advice of friends, but is extremely pliable for certain worthless and obscure figures ... I would wish you a better disposition, was it not that you like yours so much. You may wish me what you want, but not if it is your disposition—unless the Lord has changed it”.169

**Erasmus’ Hyperaspistes**

Erasmus could not and would not leave unanswered Luther’s attack on his *Diatribe*. He had to work quickly to ensure, that his answer still was to obtain on Frankfurt’s autumn market.170 He wanted to ensure that to prevent, that people would think that he is knuckling under.171 Early March 1526, less than two weeks, after Erasmus was handed Luther’s *De servo arbitral*, his reply was printed and ready for shipment.172 This answer, which Erasmus had given the title *Hyperaspistes Diatribae adver-

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168 Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 6, no. 1688, 30-33.
169 Ibid., 37-42.
170 Ibid., no. 1683, 12-17; cfr. also: vol. 6, no. 1674, 33-34; no. 1678, 16-20; no. 1679, 74-78.
171 Ibid., no. 1697, 16-18.
172 Ibid., no. 1667, 9-14; vergelijk ook: vol. 6, no. 1674, 33-34; no. 1678, 16-20; no. 1679, 74-76; no. 1683, 12-17.
sus Servum Arbitrium Martini Lutheri, Liber I,\textsuperscript{173} was only a response to the first part of De servo arbitrio.

In De servo arbitrio Luther had provoked Erasmus to defend his own position and not to hide himself behind the opinions of others. Luther’s blunt attack in the foreword of De servo arbitrio, in which he described Erasmus as an atheist or Epicurean, did Erasmus boiling with anger. In De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio Erasmus has chosen to defend for the sake of the unity of the faith just the view, which he thought was that of Augustine. If he would be forced to choose between the theological opinions, which oppose each other, then—says Erasmus in De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio—he would prefer Augustine’s view, that the fallen will of the human being had to be freed by God’s grace, before he is free to choose the right (because this view is sufficiently probable).\textsuperscript{174} The Augustinian expression in De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio can largely be attributed to Erasmus’ willingness to give in as far as possible for the sake of the unity of the faith Luther’s view, namely that the human being not could trust in his own power. Where Erasmus himself stands, is not clear.

It would take until September 1527 before Erasmus’ reply on the rest of Luther’s De servo arbitrio was published under the title Hyperaspistes Diatribae adversus Servum Arbitrium Martini Lutheri, Liber II. That it took so long till the publication of the second part of the Hyperaspistes, is connected with the fact that


\textsuperscript{174} Desiderius Erasmus, De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive collatio, LB 9, 1224 BC. “Satis probabilis” is the highest form of certainty which could be achieved on earth with respect to the heavenly matters.

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Erasmus’ attention was compelled by other things. He has immediately after the publication of *Hyperaspistes I* started in February 1526 writing *Hyperaspistes II*.\(^\text{175}\) He hoped to wind up the book before August 1526.\(^\text{176}\) But in June 1526 he had to endure attacks from Paris on the part of Noël Bede and Peter Sutor, and he was sick to make matters worse. As a result, the completion of *Hyperaspistes II* was postponed. Soon, again the rumor was that knuckled under.\(^\text{177}\) In particular, Thomas More\(^\text{178}\) and Cuthbert Tunstall\(^\text{179}\) urged him to keep his promise. Jerome Emser finds it suspicious, that the publication of *Hyperaspistes II* is still pending and writes Erasmus that it is for the best to meet his promise to write the remaining part of *Hyperaspistes*.\(^\text{180}\)

Erasmus had therefore to continue, although he did not see the good of it at some stage. In a detailed reply to a letter of Thomas More, which was written to find out, why *Hyperaspistes II*, in which Erasmus would refute Luther’s arguments for the “necessitas absoluta” (absolute necessity), still not yet was published, Erasmus give several insignificant reasons for the delay. But the main reason was that it was not easy to find a good strategy for continuation of the debate with Luther. Luther would simply just become more irritated.\(^\text{181}\) Moreover, there is according to Erasmus no point to dispute with someone, who recognizes only the Holy Scripture, but interprets it in accordance with its own measure.\(^\text{182}\) Further Erasmus had given offence to both parties by publication of the *Diatribe*. When Erasmus would write now in the spirit of the monks and the theologians, who ascribe too much to the free will, because it is to

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\(^{175}\) Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 6, no. 1683, 55-56.

\(^{176}\) Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 6, no. 1723, 63-64.

\(^{177}\) Ibid., no. 1853, 34-47; cfr. vol. 6, no. 1770, 23-26; vol. 7, no. 1804, 47-48; no. 1815, 56-58.

\(^{178}\) Ibid., no. 1770, 12-16.

\(^{179}\) Ibid., vol. 7, no. 1804, 1-2. Tunstall’s letter is not preserved.

\(^{180}\) Ibid., vol. 6, no. 1773, 14-25.

\(^{181}\) Ibid., vol. 7, no. 1804, 5-7.

\(^{182}\) Ibid., no. 1804, 55-56.
their benefit, he would go against his conscience and deliberately darken the honour of Christ. If he only ascribes a little bit to the free will, and many to God’s grace, he would only irritate both sides, as has happened with *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive Collatio*. When he finally would follow Paul and Augustine, there would be left very little of the free will: for in the two books which Augustine wrote at the end of his life to Valentine, he adhered to the free will, but he has magnified God’s grace so much, that Erasmus does not see, what is left over for the free will to do. If he would ascribe all to God’s grace, it would promote the spiritual laxity. But in spite of that, the promise had to be fulfilled to complete *Hyperaspistes*.  

In the foreword of *Hyperaspistes II* Erasmus writes that he did not enjoy working on the publication of *Hyperaspistes II*. He rather had not dealt with an opponent, who did not want to listen to the Fathers of the Church, the decisions of the Councils and the unanimous Tradition, who did interpret the Holy Scripture at his discretion, who did every time surprise with new words, statements, concepts and paradoxes and who, moreover, wrote so scornfully. But Erasmus wanted to reply Luther, because some people thought that his fight with Luther was just a game. Luther did not think it necessary to formulate a further response to the *Hyperaspistes*. Luther was finished with Erasmus.

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183 Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 7, no. 1804, 75-102.
185 Ibid., 6-18.
186 Ibid., 19-33.
Last Remarks
A final reaction must be mentioned. In response to a “furious letter” from Luther to Amsdorf, full of insults meant for Erasmus, Erasmus wrote *Purgatio adversus epistolam non sobriam Martini Lutheri* (*Purgation against Martin Luther’s not sober letter*, 1534). After reading the pamphlet Johann Koler (Choler) writes on May 25, 1534 to Erasmus, that he was far too lenient. “But what I particularly regret in your *Purgatio* is to see you write that you never have quit loving Luther. How is it possible for you to love Luther, who made you always so many terrible and offensive blames …? I am not going so far in my Christian attitude; I am very much exceeded with your patience”.

With regard to Luther, he has until the end of his life uttered insults to the address of Erasmus. The *Tischreden* contain many insults. “Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote many excellent things because he had talent and leisure, was without worries and official duties, didn’t preach or lecture, and was no businessman. In his manner of life he was without God, lived with a sense of great security, and died the same way. When he was in the agony of death he didn’t ask for a minister of the Word or for the sacraments. It’s a fabrication that in the agony of death he may have spoken these words of confession, ‘O Son of God, have mercy on me!’” But there are also more moderate utterances which are attributed to Luther and are doing more justice to Erasmus: “Erasmus is an eel; no one can grasp, except Christ alone”.

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187 Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum*, vol. 6, no. 2937, 15-18; 34-35.
189 Ibid., 1, no. 131, 55, 32-33.


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