Erasmus and Luther: A Brief Presentation

MAURICE DOWLING

Irish Baptist College, Dublin

ABSTRACT. The article looks at Erasmus and Luther as representatives of, respectively, Renaissance humanism and the Reformation. It compares their beliefs—particularly regarding the doctrines of sin and the freedom of the will—and also their attitudes to the Church. Some contemporaries saw Luther as developing Erasmus' criticisms of the Church. However, although he was much indebted to humanism Luther’s perception of what was wrong in the Church—and what needed to be done—was very different. Erasmus found himself fitting into neither world: he could not embrace the Reformation and the Catholic Church found the Erasmian ethos increasingly unacceptable.

KEYWORDS: humanism, Reformation, free will, Erasmian, Catholic

Erasmus and Luther represent two different approaches to “reform”. Superficially they had much in common. Martin Bucer once said: “What Erasmus only insinuates, Luther openly teaches”,¹ and many contemporaries believed that “Erasmus laid the egg and Luther hatched it”.² However, they belong to different worlds.

¹ J. Atkinson, The Great Light, 47.
² O. Chadwick, The Reformation, 39. Reardon comments that this well-known saying was a matter of some embarrassment to Erasmus, and he quotes his retort to it: “I laid a hen’s egg, but what Luther hatched was a bird of a quite different sort”. See B. Reardon, Religious Thought in the Reformation, 25.
The “Prince of Humanists”
Erasmus (born c. 1466)\(^3\) attended the school of the Brethren of the Common Life in Deventer, and Luther went to their school in Magdeburg\(^4\). In Erasmus’ case, however, this early training left him with a keener interest in the classics and in humanism than was the case with the young Luther. Both entered the ranks of the Augustinians and were ordained as priests, Erasmus in 1492 and Luther in 1507. However, “Luther entered the monastery to save his soul by good works, Erasmus to enlighten his mind by good books”\(^5\). “There was a great contrast between the cultured and tolerant scholar and the emotional German with his passionate conviction of his own and the world’s sin”\(^6\).

While Luther (born in 1483) was still a youth, Erasmus was acquiring a considerable reputation. By 1514 he had studied or taught in Paris, Oxford, Italy, Louvain and Cambridge. He was well versed in the classics, the Scriptures, the early Fathers, the scholastics, and the humanists. He had an impressive list of publications, e.g., *Adages* (1500)—a collection of Latin and Greek proverbs; *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* (“Handbook of a Christian Soldier”, 1504), on the value of scholarship for Christian piety; *The Praise of Folly* (1511), a bitter satire on the corruptions of the Church\(^7\). No one could rival Erasmus when it came to lampooning clerical vices. Many were clamouring for reform, but “Erasmus expressed, and brilliantly, what they were barely articulating; and educated Europe laughed (…). More than any other single man, he lowered the European reputation of popes and clergy, monks and friars, and (above all) of the theology-

---

\(^3\) The uncertainties surrounding the date and place of Erasmus’ birth, and his parentage, are discussed in R. J. Schoeck, *Erasmus of Europe*, vol. 1: The Making of a Humanist, 1467-1500, 260-263.

\(^4\) G. Rupp, *Luther’s Progress to the Diet of Worms*, 10.


\(^6\) V. H. H. Green, *Renaissance and Reformation* (1st edn), 47.

\(^7\) *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, art. “Erasmus”.

PERICHORESIS 6.2 (2008)
ans”\(^8\). While Luther was still a little-known professor in a new university, Erasmus was being read everywhere and was on close terms with innumerable people of importance.

Also important was Erasmus’ edition of Lorenzo Valla’s *Notes on the New Testament*. “In Valla’s timid critical notes Erasmus found the encouragement he would need to embark on his own critical Greek text of the New Testament”.\(^9\) Erasmus’ own edition of the Greek NT with a fresh Latin translation appeared in 1516 (*Novum Instrumentum*). It underlined the value of critical study of the original languages, and was used by Luther and Tyndale. Erasmus believed in making Scripture available to the common people. In the introduction to his New Testament he wrote: “I would that even the lowliest women read the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles. And I would that they were translated into all languages (...). Would that, as a result, the farmer sing some portion of them at the plough, the weaver hum some parts of them to the movement of his shuttle, the traveller lighten the weariness of the journey with stories of this kind!”\(^10\).

Luther was not anti-academic. He shared the humanist concern for “good letters” and used the latest tools of scholarship. In the Reuchlin controversy Luther was unreservedly on the side of the great Hebraist.\(^11\) He also had much respect for Erasmus—even in *De servo arbitrio* he acknowledged his skill and influence: “You are a great man, adorned with many of God’s noblest gifts—wit, learning and an almost miraculous eloquence (...). By your studies you have rendered me also some service, and I confess myself much indebted to you”.\(^12\)

However, Luther came to believe that more was needed than “good letters” and brilliant satire. At first Erasmus wrote letters in support of Luther to Frederick the Wise, Archbishop Albert

---

\(^8\) Chadwick, *The Reformation*, 32f.
\(^10\) A. G. Dickens, *The German Nation and Martin Luther*, 52.
\(^11\) G. Rupp, *Luther’s Progress to the Diet of Worms*, 76.
\(^12\) *The Bondage of the Will*, translated by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, 319.
of Mainz, Cardinal Wolsey and other distinguished figures. However, as Luther’s language against Rome became more heated, particularly in the three great “Reformation writings” of 1520, Erasmus became more diffident. Erasmus’ criticisms of the Church and the papacy were always accompanied by belief in the necessity of these institutions. “The entire spirit of Erasmus was inclusive”; he did not see why Luther and the Catholics could not co-exist within the one body. Erasmus admitted that Luther’s criticisms were mostly valid, but no doctrines were worth the dividing of Christendom.

Luther in turn felt that Erasmus was not equipped for the battles now being fought. In April 1524 Luther wrote: “Although you might have profited the cause much by your ability, genius and eloquence, yet as you had not the courage it was safer for you to work at home”. Luther wrote to Oecolampadius at about the same time: “[Erasmus] has performed the task to which he was called—he has reinstated the ancient languages (...). Perhaps, like Moses, he will die in the land of Moab, for he is powerless to guide men to those higher studies which lead to divine blessedness (...). He has done enough in exposing the evils of the Church, but cannot remedy them, or point the way to the promised land”.

The Conflict
Differences in outlook eventually became open conflict. Matheson speaks of Erasmus being “caught in the glaring searchlight of publicity as the flak of criticism flew at him from all sides”, and of his “struggle for credibility and independence in a rapidly polarising world”. Erasmus was under considerable pressure to enter the lists against Luther. He himself was unwilling to become embroiled in bitter controversy; he was not a fighter,

---

14 Ibid., 238.
15 Rupp and Drewery, Ibid., 127.
16 Ibid., 112f.
but a scholar, a man of the Renaissance. He had moved in 1521 from the Low Countries to Basel in order to avoid being caught up in the bitterness of the conflict.\textsuperscript{18} But even there he was not free from pressure, and his efforts to play the conciliator were fruitless.

By 1524 it was obvious that Erasmus would have to make a definite stand. His fame was his own undoing as pressure was brought to bear on him from all sides. He was in danger of being outstripped and relegated to a secondary position by the changing times. “He was accustomed to the highest seat, and the little monk of Wittenberg had dethroned the mighty philosopher of Rotterdam. He must then, by some bold step, recover the position he had lost”.\textsuperscript{19}

\textit{De Libero Arbitrio}
Erasmus chose to argue with Luther over “free will”, and in September 1524 his \textit{Diatribe seu collatio de libero arbitrio} appeared. Erasmus could write about this without displaying too much sympathy for Luther’s enemies. To have hurled all the traditional dogmas at Luther would have placed Erasmus among the theologians whom he had so often satirised. Erasmus did not attack Luther for his views on the papacy, indulgences, the priesthood, the mass, or even justification. Instead, he chose an issue on which Luther was in almost complete agreement with the Church’s great doctor Augustine of Hippo. Léonard quotes the Catholic historian F. X. Kiefl as saying, “Erasmus, with his concept of free, unspoiled human nature was intrinsically much more foreign to the Church than Luther”.\textsuperscript{20} As late as February 1521 Aleander wrote that Erasmus “has written worse things against our faith than has Luther”.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{18} R. Bainton, \textit{Erasmus of Christendom}, 208f.
\textsuperscript{20} E. G. Léonard, Ibid., 134.
\textsuperscript{21} Rupp and Drewery, Ibid., 55.
Following the “semi-Pelagian” tradition Erasmus took the view that, although sin has weakened man, it has not made him incapable of meritorious action. He echoed the Scholastic distinction between congruent merit and condign merit: the first was that which a man attained by his natural abilities, and it made him fit for the gift of grace. Then, after grace was given, he could use it to do works of a quality of goodness previously out of his reach; the merit which these works secured was meritorious in the strict sense, as God was under obligation to reward them\textsuperscript{22}. In Scripture man is constantly called upon to make a choice, therefore his will must be free to make that choice.

\textit{De Servo Arbitrio}

In December 1525 Luther’s \textit{De servo arbitrio} appeared. Luther regarded this issue as vital. Towards the end of this book he said (addressing Erasmus): “You alone (…) have attacked the real thing, that is, the essential issue. You have not wearied me with those extraneous issues about the Papacy, purgatory, indulgences and such like (…); you, and you alone, have seen the hinge on which all turns”\textsuperscript{23}. Luther’s book is four times the length of Erasmus’ \textit{Diatribe} and throughout shows his passionate concern over this topic. Luther argues that one cannot defend human free will and merit while maintaining the reality of divine sovereignty and grace. The distinction between “congruent” and “condign” merit is a false one, and the original Pelagian doctrine of merit is much more honest than Erasmus’ teaching\textsuperscript{24}. Scripture teaches the universality of sin and the man’s inability to save himself. Being called upon to make choices does not prove that man is capable of making that choice of his own free will. Luther sets out what he believes to be the biblical teaching that the will is in bondage, that salvation, which is by the grace of Christ through faith alone, has no reference to previous en-

\textsuperscript{22} Packer and Johnston, Ibid., 48f.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 319.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 293.
deavour, and that it is a great comfort to know that salvation does not depend upon one’s own will.

*De servo arbitrio* is a major treatment of what Luther saw as the very heart of the Gospel. He himself said that of all his writings only this one and his *Children’s Catechism* were worthy of preservation.²⁵

**Conclusion**

Erasmus’ reply, *Hyperaspistes*, made no impact at all. His two works did not win the victory which his Catholic friends expected from him. Furthermore, Erasmus’ own criticisms of the Church still held good, and he continued to make them²⁶. He lived at Basel until 1529, in which year the Reformation was established there and Erasmus felt it prudent to move to Freiburg. Erasmus wrote continually, maintained contact with leading scholars, and kept a close eye on the changing religious scene, hoping that reconciliation of the opposing parties would be possible. But his voice was no longer being heard as before²⁷; he found favour with neither side in the great religious divide. Evangelicals were disappointed by what they saw as his failure to support their cause.²⁸ As for the Catholics, in 1527 the University of Paris censured his teaching. Erasmus died in 1536

²⁵ Ibid., 40; M. Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521-1532*, 235.
²⁷ G. R. Potter comments that, following the dispute with Luther, “the remaining ten years of Erasmus’ life were those of a former captain now without a team and unable to obtain a post as a manager.” See Zwingli, 294.
²⁸ The first known use of the term “Nicodemite” occurred before the Erasmus-Luther debate, in 1522, in a letter by a Dutch evangelical commenting sourly on Erasmus’ stance: “I am very annoyed that day by day Erasmus is cooling off and, as far as I can judge, is secretly reconsidering what he seems once to have said or written more freely, and I recognise a childish fear, which has more respect for the approbation of men than the glory of God. But such Nicodemites among us are in great number”. The text is quoted in Andrew Pettegree, *Marian Protestantism: Six Studies*, 89f. Evangelicals continued to see Erasmus in this light.
and his writings were placed on the Index by Pope Paul IV in 1559, although the Council of Trent somewhat modified this ruling.\textsuperscript{29}

In terms of writings “by” and “about” them, Luther must be declared the winner. Erasmus has not been without influence and devotees. In his prime he was the “prince of humanists” but towards the end of his life he was as “one who outlives his generation”\textsuperscript{30}. The English Elizabethan settlement was, in a sense, Erasmian, and the Pietists found much to their liking in his devotional writings.\textsuperscript{31} It may also be true that Protestantism today has become “more Erasmian than Lutheran”\textsuperscript{32}. But is this identity of spirit actually due to the influence of Erasmus? The significance of Erasmus, other than his being a paradigm of an “attempt to achieve comprehension through minimal doctrinal demands”,\textsuperscript{33} lies in the preparatory work which he did. “Erasmus did much to prepare the tools of scholarship which the Reformers were to use to attack the edifice of the old Church”.\textsuperscript{34} And that is surely no mean legacy. Martin Brecht comments: “[Erasmus] became caught between the fronts. Thus his role was and remains disputed—even today”.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{30} Bainton, \textit{Erasmus of Christendom}, 303.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 330ff.
\textsuperscript{32} Packer and Johnston, Ibid., 63.
\textsuperscript{33} Bainton, \textit{Erasmus of Christendom}, 332.
\textsuperscript{34} O. U. “Renaissance and Reformation” Units, 20 & 21, 69.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation}, 418.