

## Lecture 3 – “The Philosophy of Christ”: Erasmus & the Humanists

“By God’s design, church history goes forward. Past centuries may furnish a rich menu of admonitions, but they cannot prescribe.” David F. Wright

“For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5:20

### Background Reading

Gonzalez, ch. 1, pp. 10-13

### Prayer

From Erasmus

“O Lord Jesus Christ, you are the Way, the Truth and the Life. We pray you allow us never to stray from you, who are the Way, nor distrust you, who are the Truth, nor rest in any one other thing than you, who are the Life. Teach us, by your Holy Spirit, what to believe, what to do, and how to take our rest. Amen.”

## “The Philosophy of Christ”: Erasmus & the Humanists

### I. The Two Major Concerns of Humanism

- A. Reform of the church
- B. Recovery of the Bible

### II. The Important Humanists

#### A. Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522)

1. German Hebrew scholar
2. Pfefferkorn and the Dominicans (*Letters of Distinguished Men, Letters of Obscure Men*)

#### B. Jacques Lefevre D’Étapes (1450-1536)

1. French Bible scholar
2. Commentaries on Psalms (1509) and Pauline Epistles (1512) with clear presentation of justification by faith
3. Translation of the Vulgate into French (1530)

#### C. John Colet (1466-1519)

1. English churchman, Dean of St. Paul’s, London
2. Lectures on Romans at Oxford

Letter from Colet (probably of 1497): “I had with me yesterday evening a fellow priest, a good and learned man, both an attentive listener to [my expositions of] St. Paul, and most anxious to gain a nearer acquaintance with the Apostle himself. After chatting for a while by the fireside, he drew forth from his bosom a little book, in which were the epistles of St. Paul, carefully copied in his own handwriting. At this I smiled, and quoted approvingly the words of the Gospels: ‘Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.’ ‘There is nothing in literature,’ said he in reply, ‘that I more love or admire than the writings of St. Paul.’ And he was polite enough to add, with a touch of flattery, that I had done most to raise that liking of his for the Apostle, by my expositions the previous term. I looked at him and said, ‘I love you, brother, if you love St. Paul....Then I went on to speak at length on the merits and wisdom and divine character of St. Paul....‘I beg you,’ he cried, ‘draw forth something [from Paul’s epistles] for me now, while we are sitting at our ease.’”

#### D. Erasmus (1466-1536)

1. Life—“Erasmus of Rotterdam” and “Erasmus of Christendom”

## 2. Works

### a. Critical edition of the Greek New Testament (1516)

B. B. Warfield: “The light that was then turned upon the Word of God [in the 16th century] has been shining steadily upon it ever since. From the moment when Judea and Greece rose from the grave, in the persons of Reuchlin and Erasmus, with the Hebrew and Greek Testaments in their hands, the treasures that they brought back to the world have been kept continuously under the scrutiny of men.” (*Selected Shorter Works of B. B. Warfield* 2:30)

### b. Satirical and polemical writings—*The Praise of Folly, Familiar Colloquies, Julius Exclusus*

### c. *The Enchiridion of the Christian Soldier*

### d. *On Free Will*

## III. Erasmus versus Luther—*On Free Will and Bondage of the Will*

### A. Erasmus writes charmingly and effectively

Luther—*vox, et praetera nihil*; “Seeing the case for free will argued with such great talent, yet leaving it worse than it was before, is an evident proof that free will is a downright lie! It is like the woman of the Gospel; the more the physicians treat her case, the worse it gets.”

### B. Erasmus opposes dogmatic assertions

Erasmus—“I have so little appetite for ‘assertions’ that I could go over to the opinions of the skeptics” (unless constrained by Scripture and the decrees of the church).

Luther—“You go ahead and favor your skeptics and academics...The Holy Spirit is no skeptic, and what he has written into our hearts are no doubts or opinions, but assertions more certain and firm than all human experience and life.”

### C. Erasmus focuses on the central issue

Luther—“I exceedingly praise and laud this in you that you alone, in contrast with all others, have attacked the thing itself...and have not fatigued me with those irrelevant questions about the papacy, purgatory, indulgences and such like trumperies—in which hitherto all have vainly sought to pursue me. You and you alone have seen the hinge of things and have aimed at the throat; and for this I thank you heartily.”

### D. Erasmus sets forth the Catholic semi-Pelagian position

Erasmus—“I like the sentiments of those who attribute a little to the freedom of the will, the most, however, to grace.”

Luther—Man has a free will in respect to “what is below him. This is to say, man should know in regard to his goods and possessions that he has the right to use them, to do or to leave undone, according to his free will...However, with regard to God and in all things pertaining to salvation or damnation, man has no free will, but is a captive, servant and bondsman, either to the will of God or to the will of the devil...So it comes about that [by the choice of God]...some and indeed many are saved, whereas by the power of free choice none at all would be saved, but all would perish together.”

John A Lasco: “We must rejoice in the gifts of Erasmus, which were of a truth great and significant enough, and ought to acknowledge God in them. But if we believe we have advanced farther, let us consider that this too was only granted to us of God.”

## Questions from Class

Is there a better illustration than the reaching for the apple to explain free will?

Does Erasmus deal with personal sin?

Is Lefevre’s translation still used? What happened to it?

Did Reuchlin do a German translation?

## For Further Study

\*“Fools for Christ, Foolmakers for Christ—The Recovery of Persuasive Christian Advocacy,” by Os Guinness (*Journal of the Irish Christian Study Centre* # 3).

Guinness argues that (although his theology may have been defective) Erasmus’s way of presenting religious ideas may well have much to teach us about how to do it today.

A. One of the most popular books of the early Reformation period, *The Enchiridion: Handbook of the Christian Soldier* by Erasmus appeared in 1503 and went through twenty-six editions in eighteen years. Read the following selections from *Advocates of Reform: from Wyclif to Erasmus*, ed. Matthew Spinka (Westminster), 295-308, 378-79.

\*In chapter 1, Erasmus describes human life as a “sort of perpetual warfare.” What motivations for righteous living does he propose in this chapter?

\*What are the “weapons of the Christian soldier” that Erasmus sets forth in chapter 2? Does Erasmus believe in the inerrancy of Scripture? What is the best way of interpreting Scripture according to Erasmus?

\*In chapters 3 through 8, Erasmus presents “a sort of ‘manual of arms’” for the Christian soldier, including twenty-two general rules, beginning with doubting nothing concerning the divine promises and ending with the necessity for penitence. He continues in chapters 9-13 with remedies for “certain special vices”—lust, avarice, ambition, “elation and the swollen mind,” anger and desire for revenge.

\*What one thing would you like to say to the “recipient” of the *Enchiridion*, John the German, about what he has read in this book?