

## **The Philosophy of Christ: Erasmus and the Humanists**

I will talk about several people in this lesson, but the most important is the great Dutch scholar, Erasmus. I will begin with a prayer from Erasmus. Even though I will have some criticism for Erasmus in this lesson, as I read the prayer from him, I am inspired and blessed by the faith of this man. So as we begin our study of the humanists, let us join together in prayer with the words of 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.”*

Before Luther nailed his 95 Theses on the church door in Wittenberg in 1517, other Reformers had long been working to accomplish the task that almost everybody wanted to see accomplished, which was changing the deplorable status of the church. We often call those earlier reformers humanists. That word is not used the way it often is today. We use it today to talk about atheistic humanists or secular humanists. In the sixteenth century, however, it meant that those people were committed to the study of the humanities. The humanist movement actually began not in the sixteenth century but in the fourteenth century during the Renaissance. Scholars, particularly those from northern Italy, began to develop interest in the humanities and began to study the humanities—including language, history, and literature. Thus when I refer to those people today as humanists, do not think of them as anti-religious. They were committed to the church and to the reform of the church.

There were two great concerns that motivated the humanists. One was to reform the church. We know now that almost everybody was saying that the church needed to be reformed. One of the pictures that appears frequently in the art and cartoons of that period is the image of the church as a ship. The ship was pictured as in trouble because there was a storm. The ship was being tossed to and fro because of the waves of the times. People realized that unless something was done the ship could sink. The church could go down. So the humanists were just as concerned as Luther and some others were that something should be done about the deplorable condition of Christianity.

Not only did the humanists work to reform the church, but they were also concerned to recover the Bible. The Bible was around, of course, but it was in Latin. It was the *Vulgate*. Not many people had copies, and not many people could read or understand it. The humanists were concerned to get the Bible more accurately translated. They also wanted to get it into the minds of the people as a means of reforming the church.

The greatest of the humanists was Erasmus, and those two themes are evident in his life. Before I talk about Erasmus, however, I will talk about three of his contemporaries. These are great humanists and people we ought to know about, even if their names are not as familiar. One of them was a German, one was French, and one was English. After I talk about them I will talk about the great Dutch humanist, Erasmus, who is sometimes called the “prince” of the humanists.

One thing that the sixteenth-century humanists did for the church was to preserve the Hebrew Old Testament. The hero of that courageous work of preserving the Hebrew Old Testament for the church was the German scholar Johannes Reuchlin. Reuchlin was the most accomplished Hebrew scholar among the humanists. He was probably the most able Christian Hebrew scholar for 1000 years, since Jerome. Not many people learned Hebrew in those days. They read the Old Testament in the Latin

*Vulgate*. It was Reuchlin who said it is important to preserve the Hebrew text and to study Hebrew so we can read the Old Testament in the original language. That was not an easy accomplishment for Reuchlin. He was resisted by a Jewish Christian convert named Pfefferkorn and by the German Dominicans who said that the Hebrew Bible is the book of the Jews and ought to be destroyed. They said that since they had the Latin translation they did not need the Hebrew. There was a mighty battle in Germany that went on for some time with people taking both sides of the issue. There were two great books that came out of that battle. One was called *Letters of Distinguished Men*, which included letters from scholars who supported Reuchlin and said that Hebrew needed to be studied, and the Hebrew Old Testament needed to be preserved as part of Christian heritage. A second book was called *Letters of Obscure Men*. Some of Reuchlin's students and disciples wrote that rather biting satire pretending to be opponents of Reuchlin. The letters in that book make the opponents seem rather backward and ignorant. Those two books helped to turn the general sentiment in favor of Reuchlin and the Hebrew Bible.

Humanism also pioneered the translation of Scripture into the vernacular languages. The Roman Catholic Church did not absolutely forbid the translation of the Bible into the languages of Europe, but they did discourage it. They preferred to keep the Bible in the hands of scholars. They argued that if the Bible was translated into English, French, or German then there would be no control over who would read it and what they might think about it. So the Catholic Church discouraged and limited such translations.

It was the humanists like the great French scholar Jacques Lefevre who encouraged and even pioneered the translation of the Bible into vernacular languages. Lefevre was a French scholar who wrote commentaries. He wrote a commentary on the Psalms, and later he wrote a commentary on the Pauline Epistles in 1512. It is remarkable that in his commentary on the Pauline Epistles the doctrine of justification by faith alone is presented as the teaching of Paul. That was several years before Luther came to the same conclusion. Among French Protestants, the Reformation is often dated to 1512 rather than 1517 because they go back to the teaching of Lefevre in his commentary on the Pauline Epistles. Lefevre also translated the Bible into French. He actually translated the *Vulgate*, so he translated from Latin into French. He did that in 1530. His translation was a good and useful French version of the Bible for people who could not read Latin. He faced significant opposition in doing that. Some of the Catholic authorities opposed him bitterly. Lefevre responded, "If it was fitting for the Romans to have the Bible translated into Latin in the first place, why can the people of France not have the Bible translated into French so they can read it?" His opponents said that if people in France started reading the Bible then they might develop any number of heresies. Lefevre's answer to that was, "It is not the simple people who read the Bible who produce the heresies. It is the scholars who read the Latin who are coming up with the heresies." So Lefevre made his stand. As an old man he met the young John Calvin. He met William Farel. He inspired those younger French scholars to greater determination in their work of reform.

Humanism also promoted the study of Greek. One of the people who was instrumental in promoting the study of Greek was John Colet, who was dean of Saint Paul's Cathedral in London. Colet had been preaching mighty sermons in Saint Paul's on the reformation of the church. He said the church had so conformed to the world that the face of the church was marred, dirty, and disfigured. He said the church's influence was destroyed far more than by the persecutions of the early church and even more than by the heresies that came in later. People in London were hearing great sermons from John Colet. Later, Colet went to Oxford and gave a series of lectures on the book of Romans, using Greek as his basis. He was so taken with Greek that he said, "Without Greek, we are nothing." Few people knew Greek, but they were challenged by Colet to start learning it. The lectures of Colet at Oxford were based on an historical-grammatical exegesis. Thus, even when we read those lectures today, we can affirm that

he was a man who understood what Paul really meant. There was a power and an excitement associated with his lectures. It is difficult for us to imagine how a preacher giving lectures on the book of Romans at the University of Oxford could generate such excitement. Yet people had not heard such teaching before.

It was Colet who inspired Erasmus to study Greek. Erasmus had studied some Greek, but he had not learned much. Once he met Colet in England he began to study Greek more earnestly. He was 33 years old when he began to study Greek seriously. Yet he became the most important Greek scholar of his time and one of the most important Greek scholars of all time. Erasmus was indeed the prince of the humanists. He is sometimes difficult to understand, and he has often been misunderstood. He was a man who loved to study and write; he made some significant contributions to the reform of the church through his study and writing.

The life of Erasmus can be divided into two parts: Erasmus of Rotterdam and Erasmus of Christendom. He was the illegitimate son of a priest. Of course, any son of a priest was illegitimate. He studied at the schools of the Brothers of the Common Life. He became an Augustinian monk and was ordained as a priest in 1492. Erasmus did not make a good monk. He enjoyed comforts too much. He was eventually enabled by permission of the pope to abandon the monastery, and he spent the rest of his life as a scholar and writer. He appeared in various places throughout Europe, teaching and writing.

His greatest work was the critical edition of the Greek New Testament, which he produced in 1516. It was one of the first critical editions of the Greek New Testament. For his critical edition he compared different Greek manuscripts and produced a composite edition based on what he believed was the most accurate reading in any case. With a critical Greek version of the New Testament, scholars had a more authentic New Testament Bible to study in Greek and to translate the New Testament into other languages. As B. B. Warfield has said, we owe a great debt to both Reuchlin and Warfield, for their Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament were gifts that they gave the church.

Erasmus was also famous for his satire. His writings are witty, biting, and sarcastic. He was writing about reform of the church, but rather than producing learned tomes regarding problems of the church, Erasmus used a very sharp pen to poke fun at the church. Soon people in many places were reading what Erasmus wrote and laughing at what he had to say. It was an effective way for Erasmus to begin to point at the need for reform. One of his books is called *The Praise of Folly*. With a tongue-in-cheek approach, he praises folly. He observes how good it is that we do many foolish things. For instance, he says that monks know that the heart of religion is in how many knots they tie in their sandals and in the shape of their haircuts and in the color of their garments. He says that the monks have wonderfully defined the truth of Christianity. He also talks about theologians. They argue and quibble over everything imaginable. When they finish with that, they argue and quibble over nothing. They are so fierce, so dogmatic, and so sure of themselves that it would be wonderful if a whole army of theologians could be gathered to fight the Turks. The Turks would certainly flee from that great group of people.

Even the pope does not escape the biting satire of Erasmus. Another of the books of Erasmus is called *Julius Exclusus*. Julius was one of the popes, one of the "Renaissance six." Julius II was a Renaissance pope, the "warrior pope," and the pope who began construction of the new Saint Peter's in Rome. In Erasmus' book he imagines Julius going to heaven. As Julius approaches the gate, Saint Peter says, "I see someone coming. Who is he? He is a man who wants to be regarded as next to Christ. He is a man who wants to be regarded as equal to Christ. But what I see is a man submerged in the filthiest of all things by far: money, power, armies, and wars." The whole book supposes Peter's reasons for refusing to allow the pope into heaven, and Peter sends him somewhere else. It was not a favored book in Rome.

Many other people, however, thought it was very funny. The point that Erasmus was trying to make was made very strongly throughout Europe.

In his *Familiar Colloquies*, Erasmus does the same thing. He writes stories about how things are in the church. By making fun of those things, Erasmus points to what is wrong in the church. In *Familiar Colloquies* Erasmus points to the folly of trusting in the saints. He does that by telling the story of a shipwreck. A ship encountered a storm. The waves were rising almost up to the moon and then came crashing down almost to hell itself. The ship was about to be destroyed. Many of the passengers were praying to the saints and to the Virgin Mary for help. A Frenchman called in a loud voice to the statue in Paris of Saint Christopher, the patron saint of travelers, and he said, "O, Saint Christopher, if you only deliver me from this I will give you a candle as big as the statue of yourself in the cathedral in Paris." Somebody else on the ship said, "Do not promise too much. That is quite a lot that you are promising to Saint Christopher." The Frenchman responded, "Hush. Do not make a lot of noise. Keep quiet. I do not mean it. If I get out of this storm I will not give him anything." The storyteller was asked if he would pray to the saints. He said, "No, because if I started praying to the saints, the first one to hear would probably be Saint Peter. While he was going to check with God, I might go to the bottom of the list. I will go straight to God Himself with my prayers." When the ship broke up, one man took hold of a wooden, worm-eaten image of the Virgin that soaked up the water and took him to the bottom. A woman with a little child was strapped to a stout plank, and she got to shore. So did the storyteller, of course, because he preferred a barrel of pork to a golden candlestick. That story gives you something of the flavor of Erasmus.

Another of the writings of Erasmus, a different kind of writing, is *The Enchiridion of the Christian Soldier*. The word *enchiridion* has two meanings. It can either mean "the handbook" or "the sword" of the Christian soldier. It was Erasmus' attempt to set forth the Gospel and what it means to be a Christian, to fight the good fight of faith. I will read some of this as a sermon from Erasmus. I do not know if Erasmus ever actually preached these words, but if you can imagine Erasmus preaching, it might sound something like this.

Do not tell me that charity consists in being frequently in church, in prostrating oneself before signs of the saints, in burning tapers, in repeating such and such a number of prayers. God has no need for all of this. Paul defines love as to edify one's neighbor; to lead all to become members of the same body; to consider all one in Christ; to rejoice in a brother's good fortune in the Lord just as you would concerning your own; to heal his hurt as you would try to heal your own hurt, compassionately; to rebuke the erring; to teach the ignorant; to lift up the fallen; to console the downhearted; to help the toiler; to support the needy; in the highest degree to bring all your wealth, all your zeal, all your care to bear on this: that you may benefit as many as you possibly can in Christ.

That is beautiful language, and a noble aspiration. It is a beautiful description of the Christian life. The problem is that there is not much grace in it. There is not much grace in the writings of Erasmus.

The weakness of most of the humanists, and certainly Erasmus, was their grasp of grace and their understanding of the theology of salvation. The Erasmians were not good at theology, and they also simply did not like it. Because of that aversion to theology, there was a break in the ranks of the Reformers. In the early years of the sixteenth century the Reformers were united, but eventually there was a division between the humanists and the group we could call the Lutherans. It was not the only division we will study as we look at the sixteenth century, but it was one of the first on the Protestant

side. It is difficult, however, to describe the humanists as Protestants since most of them remained loyal to the Catholic Church, as Erasmus did.

The break came with two great books. In 1524 Erasmus wrote a book called *On Free Will*. The more Martin Luther read in that book, the more disturbed he became, and the more he disliked it. Finally he wrote an answer to it, which is called *On the Bondage of the Will*. In comparing Erasmus' *On Free Will* and Luther's *On the Bondage of the Will*, we have a prime illustration of the parting of the ways between Erasmus and the humanists and Luther and the other Reformers. Luther appreciated the charm and style of Erasmus. Luther said he could not match Erasmus in the way he wrote. Yet Luther had his own way of communicating. He could tell good stories, and he could hit hard when he needed to do so. Luther said the voice of Erasmus sounded to him like the song of a nightingale, so beautiful that it is almost out of this world. Yet Luther said he was in search of substance, not form. He felt bound to confess that his experience in reading Erasmus was much like that of the wolf in the fable who was charmed by the singing of a nightingale. That wolf could not rest until he had caught it and greedily devoured it, only to remark disgustedly afterward, in Latin, "*vox et praeterea nihil*," which means "a voice and nothing more." So Luther said Erasmus made beautiful sounds, but there was nothing there to provide sustenance or nourishment.

Luther continued to oppose the attitude of Erasmus, who said they should not argue about theology. Erasmus said they ought to rather simply agree that the church needed to reform and then continue with that business. He thought that as soon as people started nitpicking and splitting hairs they would get into all sorts of trouble, and things would return to the state they were in when they started. Erasmus disliked assertions. Luther countered by saying that if one did not have any pleasure in assertions, then it was the same thing as saying one was not a Christian. He said the Christian is made up of assertions, teachings that cannot be set aside. One thing Luther appreciated about Erasmus, however, was that Erasmus had focused on the main point. Erasmus was not talking about indulgences, purgatory, the pope, or those kinds of issues. The main point was how a person was saved and how God's grace worked. Luther thanked Erasmus for going right to the heart of the matter, which allowed Luther to go right to the heart of the matter. When Luther wrote his book, *On the Bondage of the Will*, he saw it as his statement on salvation. It was a book that Luther put his heart into. He loved the book, and in an excusable way, he was proud of it. Lutherans feel somewhat ambiguous about that book, but Luther never did.

Erasmus, in his book, had presented with great beauty, great skill, and great persuasion the Roman Catholic semi-Pelagian doctrine that the sinner has power within to do good things. We do not do good things all by ourselves, of course, for God helps us with His grace. Yet we can contribute to our salvation. We can do good things, and those good things have merit in the sight of God. Our salvation depends on us doing those good things. Erasmus said, "I like the sentiment of those who attribute a little to the freedom of the will, but most, however, to grace." He was not a Pelagian, but he wanted to have some place for the freedom of the will. He sometimes used the illustration of an apple placed before a little child on a high table. The child tries to reach the apple but cannot reach it. Then grace comes along in the form of the Father who lifts the child up and raises him higher, and then the child, of his own free will and energy, can reach higher and get the apple. So for Erasmus, it was grace and human effort that brought us salvation.

Much of the content in Erasmus' writing is good advice, but it is not good news. That is what Luther understood. This can be illustrated by the story of a man who was preaching once in a rescue mission to many people there who were homeless and had come in off of the street. They were people who had been overcome by alcohol and drugs and other things. As the man preached, he began to quote Kipling's famous poem, "If," to those people. "If you can keep your head when all about you / Are losing theirs

and blaming it on you [...] If you can fill the unforgiving minute / With sixty seconds worth of distance run [...] And—which is more—you will be a man, my son.” Finally one of the derelicts had heard enough, so he shouted in reply, “But what if I cannot?” That was the idea behind Luther’s *Bondage of the Will*—“What if I cannot?” Even if grace picks me up, I cannot reach the apple, because I do not want to reach for it. I will need to describe that teaching further at a later point in this class. Luther’s position on the bondage of the will is set forth with great force in his book.

How should we view Erasmus? He ended his life with no friends on either side. The Catholics did not like him because of his criticism of the church. Most Protestants did not like him, either, because he did not go far enough in their view, and he broke with Luther. John A Lasco wrote some words about Erasmus that provide a good view on the prince of the humanists. A Lasco said, “We must rejoice in the gifts of Erasmus, which were of a truth great and significant enough, and we 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.” So we thank God for Erasmus. He went along a path a certain distance, and he did some good things. His Greek New Testament is certainly something for which we ought to be thankful. His writings alerted people to the problems in the church. If Luther, Calvin, and Knox went further, we can still thank God for Erasmus because he helped them go further.

Erasmus studied first at the Sorbonne in Paris. He studied the Scholastics, which was a dry and dead sort of theology. He discovered he did not like that kind of theology. He preferred the humanists. He liked the beautiful style in the writings of the early humanists. So he had a taste of theology, but it was not very good theology. It was medieval Scholastic theology, which could be quite minute in its focus. Erasmus eventually even makes fun of it, saying that the theologians tried to figure out whether the Godhead could have become incarnate not as a man but rather as a cucumber. You can see why he had a bad taste of theology. Luther was saying, however, that it was a poor argument to say that just because there was bad theology there should not be any theology. Luther said the Holy Spirit is not a skeptic. Erasmus replied that rather than being a skeptic he would prefer to throw everything out, but the church told him he could not. So the church was keeping him within bounds. Like many modern people, Erasmus simply thought that theology was not only not useful but also positively harmful.

Erasmus did deal with the issue of personal sin, but his response was that people ought to try harder. Erasmus would have said that God’s grace needed to be involved. One should pray and ask for God’s help, but in the end the person must do something about sin. Luther would say that a person must do something about it too. Yet Luther would say that the person has to do something about it because God has enabled him to do something. Erasmus would say something like God helps those who help themselves. Luther would rather say that God helps people who must then do what God enables them to do.

There were people working on translating the Bible earlier than the ones I have mentioned in this lesson. Wycliffe translated from the Latin *Vulgate*. He did for English what Jacques Lefevre did later for French. Then with Tyndale there was an English translation of the Bible directly from the Hebrew and Greek, as there was in German from Luther. Wycliffe and Lefevre are among the last to translate Scripture from the Latin. It was the work of Reuchlin, Erasmus, and others that has helped to convince us today of the importance of working from the original languages. The Roman Catholic Church did not agree, because for them the *Vulgate* was more important than the original languages. They believed that the *Vulgate* was based upon more authentic manuscripts than were available in the sixteenth century. Thus the *Vulgate* was said to preserve an earlier form of the Greek and Hebrew. That view cannot be maintained today, but it was held in the sixteenth century.

Reuchlin did not produce a translation into German. He was a Hebrew teacher, and Luther's translations profited greatly from Reuchlin. Reuchlin's grand-nephew was Philipp Melanchthon. So there was a connection between Reuchlin, who remained a Roman Catholic—as did Jacques Lefevre, John Colet, and Erasmus—and Philipp Melanchthon, who became Luther's great colleague in Wittenberg.

“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God shall stand forever” (Isaiah 40:8).