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Luther and Erasmus: Scholastic Humanism and the Reformation

Daniel Preus

It was said by contemporaries of Erasmus and Luther that "Erasmus laid the egg of ecclesiastical reform" and that "Luther hatched it."¹ In a sense, this statement may be considered true, for there is no doubt that both of these men were dismayed by the abuses prevalent in the church of their day and were concerned that the church in some manner be reformed. It is true that Erasmus and Luther had a great deal in common. Both were scholars and both were committed to the advancement of learning. Both criticized obscurantism and the general ignorance of the monks. Both abhorred the immorality and the simony so prominent in the Roman Catholic Church at that time, and both advocated a return to the study of the Scriptures. In studying the relationship between Erasmus and Luther, however, it is probably more crucial for an understanding of their relationship to note the differences which existed between them, differences in personality, in goals, in ideals, and especially in convictions and loyalties. It is appropriate that these differences be studied, for, in spite of all that Erasmus and Luther may have had in common, they were never united in pursuit of the same cause. In spite of all that both friends and enemies could do, Erasmus and Luther would choose different paths.

Arthur McGiffert defines humanism as "the revival of interest in Greek and Roman antiquity" characterized "first and foremost by a new enthusiasm for the classics."² Erasmus was a humanist. He had rebelled against the prevailing scholasticism of his day. He had left the monastic life, so poorly suited for one who wished to study. He was disappointed also with the College de Montagu in Paris, where learning was suppressed and scholasticism was the daily fare. Erasmus devoted himself to the study of what he called the *bonae literae*.³ He was thoroughly educated in Latin and Greek, having taught himself the latter. His letters, books, and pamphlets were written exclusively in Latin. During a great part of his life, Latin was more familiar to him than Dutch, his own native tongue. He did not take the time to learn any modern

languages. Erasmus was interested in the classics and like the other humanists of his day reformed his own Latin according to the classical models. The humanists considered a good Latin style a necessary mark of an educated man, and Erasmus was generally recognized as the most talented stylist of his time. Whatever else Erasmus might have done or been, he always remained a humanist.⁴

But Erasmus also considered himself a "Christian humanist." Along with his concern for a return to the classics went a concern for the return to the simple faith of the apostles and of the early church. Erasmus once stated his whole purpose in life to be twofold: "to stimulate others to cultivate *bonae literae* and to bring the study of *bonae literae* into harmony with theology."⁵ Erasmus' goal and purpose in life was to advance the study of Scripture and the knowledge of God.⁶ His commitment to the study of Scripture is evident in many of his letters where he condemned the clergy for having obscured the gospel. He was especially critical of the church for having made so many additions to the simple teaching of Christ and the apostles. It would be a mistake, however, in view of all that Erasmus did, to equate humanism with a better understanding of Jesus and Paul or the Scriptures as a whole. Much of medieval theology was closer to the Scriptures than was the humanism of Erasmus.⁷

Nevertheless, there were many who supposed that the peaceful humanism of Erasmus and the sweeping evangelicalism of Luther were compatible. For three years after Luther's posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses*, it was still not an impossibility in the eyes of some that Luther and Erasmus should join forces.⁸ It is probable that the attempts of both friends and enemies to place Luther and Erasmus into the same camp were deciding factors in precipitating the clear break which eventually came about between them.

It is difficult to describe the relationship which existed between Luther and Erasmus before Erasmus' diatribe, *On the Freedom of the Will*, and Luther's subsequent publication, *On the Bondage of the Will*. To say the least, it was marked by ambiguity. Erasmus had a great deal of respect for much of what Luther was doing. Luther was criticizing abuses in the church as Erasmus had done. As late as 1523 Erasmus would say, "I have taught almost everything Luther teaches."⁹ Erasmus identified closely his cause with that of Luther. At the same time that Erasmus commended Luther, however, he also criticized him. Erasmus was a peace-loving man and thought that no good could come to the church or

to the gospel by stirring up the people and causing a commotion in the church, and Luther was doing just that by his immoderate writing. Luther's polemic always bore the brunt of Erasmus' criticism of him. Thus, Erasmus respected much of *what* Luther said but disapproved of the *way* he said it.

Luther also had a great deal of respect for Erasmus. Even after Luther had received Erasmus' *On the Freedom of the Will*, Melancthon could say in a letter to Erasmus, "Luther is well disposed toward you," and "Luther reverently salutes you."¹⁰ Luther considered Erasmus a great scholar and defended him against those who scorned scholarship and a good education. Luther appreciated Erasmus' knowledge of Greek and was especially thankful for the publication of a Greek New Testament by Erasmus. On the other hand, Luther was suspicious of Erasmus' doctrine. He believed that Erasmus was more dedicated to his *bonae literae* than he was to the propagation of the truth. Already in October of 1516 Luther had written to Spalatin and told him that he disagreed with Erasmus' interpretation of the righteousness of the law and with his view on original sin.¹¹ Luther furthermore requested that Spalatin share this opinion with Erasmus.

In spite of these differences, Luther and Erasmus remained on friendly terms with each other. Neither wrote outspokenly against the other. Erasmus, as a matter of fact, found himself defending Luther in much of his correspondence. Two factors account primarily for this defense. In the first place, Erasmus, as a humanist, wished above all that scholarship be allowed to thrive and that education be allowed a free course. The attacks on Luther had often been made by men who had not even read his works. Luther was accused of heresy and his recantation was demanded before he had even been heard. Erasmus was afraid of the oppression of sound learning which would undoubtedly follow Luther's demise. The threat against Luther was also a threat against the humanistic reform program of Erasmus. Erasmus stresses over and over again that, if one is in error, he should be corrected rather than put to death. It is also necessary to understand Luther in order to refute him.¹² Secondly, Erasmus was impressed by the purity of life which he saw in Luther. In many of his letters Erasmus points out the good example which Luther sets by his pious living, especially in contrast to many of his accusers. His respect for Luther's piety is expressed in one of his letters to the Elector Frederick of Saxony:

No one who knows the man does not approve his life, since he is as far as possible from suspicion of avarice and

ambition, and blameless morals even among heathen find favor The best part of Christianity is a life worthy of Christ. When this is found we ought not easily to suspect heresy Whoever accuses another of heresy, ought himself to show a character worthy of a Christian, charity in admonishing, gentleness in correcting, fairness in judging, mercy in condemning. As none of us is free from error, why should we be so hard on other men's slips? Why should we prefer rather to conquer a man than to heal him, to crush him rather than to teach him? Even he who alone is free from all error does not break the bruised reed nor quench the smoking flax.¹³

In most of the letters in which he refers to Luther, Erasmus defends either Luther's piety or his right to be heard. A slight change of attitude can be seen in Erasmus following the Leipzig Debate in July of 1519. Luther did not defend himself against the charge that he was a Hussite. Erasmus in no way wanted to be connected with the Hussite heresy and becomes more critical of Luther after the Leipzig Debate. He was afraid of the turmoil which Luther would cause in the church with his immoderate tongue.¹⁴ Erasmus does continue to defend Luther, but often in a much more indirect way. In March of 1521 Erasmus wrote, "Certainly I should prefer him corrected than slain But I do not object if they wish Luther roasted or boiled; the loss of one man is small. And yet we ought to think of the public peace."¹⁵

Erasmus' defense of Luther was always two-sided, however. He defended the man Luther, but not what he taught. Almost every letter defending Luther's right to be heard or piety of life disclaims any knowledge of his writings. Erasmus saw from the very beginning the dangers imminent in what he termed Luther's immoderation. The opponents of Luther grouped Erasmus together with the cause of Luther. Thus, the more Luther was attacked, the more Erasmus' ambitions were damaged, and Erasmus resented anything which hindered the humanist advance toward wider knowledge.¹⁶ As a result, Erasmus made it well known that he had not read Luther and was not responsible for anything which Luther had written. Peace was a necessity if Erasmus were to carry out his reforms in the church, but Luther was creating an upheaval in the church. At all costs, Erasmus was determined to steer a middle road in order that order, peace, and reform might be brought to the church.

Luther's opinion of Erasmus was changing already before the Leipzig Debate. In a letter to John Lang in 1517 he says:

I am reading our Erasmus, and my opinion of him becomes daily worse. He pleases me, indeed, for boldly and learnedly convicting and condemning monks and priests of inveterate ignorance, but I fear that he does not sufficiently advance the cause of Christ and God's grace, in which he is much more ignorant than Lefevre d'Etaples, for human considerations weigh more with him than divine The opinion of him who attributes something to man's will is far different from the opinion of him who knows nothing but grace.¹⁷

Not only was Erasmus decreasing in the eyes of Luther, but already in 1517 Luther had detected in Erasmus the position on free will that would ultimately bring about the great confrontation between them.

It was inevitable that this confrontation should come. The more the Lutherans attempted to exhibit Erasmus as a supporter of their cause, the more the Roman Church pressured Erasmus to condemn Luther and clear himself of any connection with the Lutheran heretics. Erasmus' enemies, the opponents of humanism, deliberately placed Erasmus into Luther's camp in order to malign the humanistic program and to place on all humanists the suspicion of heresy. Erasmus was pressured on both sides to declare himself.

Luther was not unaware of the pressure being exerted on Erasmus. He certainly must have known that Erasmus had repeatedly refused to write against him, but by April of 1524 Luther feared that Erasmus might give in under the pressure. Accordingly, he wrote Erasmus a letter to warn him not to enter the fray against him. Luther in this letter criticizes Erasmus for his lack of courage. He says that he has never tried to influence Erasmus to side with him or to endanger himself in any way by promoting Luther's cause. He has even restrained some who wanted to write books against Erasmus. He sympathizes with Erasmus because he knows that great hatred and pressure have been directed at him, but he encourages him to remain on the sidelines and not to become involved in the conflict: "I beg that meanwhile, if you can do nothing else, you will remain a spectator of the conflict, and not join our enemies, and especially that you publish no book against me, as I shall write none against you."¹⁸

Luther's letter apparently did not have the desired effect. Erasmus answered him promptly and for the first time indicated that it might actually be for the good of the gospel if he would take up his pen against Luther. He told Luther that those who were

pressuring him would not allow anyone to be an on-looker of this tragedy. His reluctance to write against Luther was apparent even at this late date. Four months later his *On the Freedom of the Will* would appear.

Early in September of 1524 Erasmus completed his diatribe. On September 6 he wrote letters to Melanchthon and Duke George of Saxony explaining to both why he had published this treatise. To both he insists that he did not write of his own accord, but had been pressured into action by those who would not permit him to remain silent. To both he indicates that Luther's letter to him had necessitated his decision to write against Luther.¹⁹ Luther's warning to Erasmus not to write against him had been interpreted as a secret agreement between them not to write or publish against each other. Erasmus, in order to clear himself of the charge of collusion with Luther, had finally committed himself to the cause of the Church of Rome.

Luther did not answer at once. At the time he was occupied with writing against the "heavenly prophets." He had to make his position concerning the Peasants' Rising clear. He had also married and found that the responsibilities of marriage demanded more of his time.²⁰ In the meantime, Melanchthon had responded to Erasmus. His diatribe had been received calmly in Wittenberg. He thanked Erasmus for the moderation he had shown in its composition and assured him that Luther's reply would be equally moderate. Fifteen months later Luther replied with *The Bondage of the Will*. The relationship between Luther and Erasmus would be friendly no more.

It was not Luther's desire to engage in battle also with Erasmus. In his last letter to Erasmus, he had said that they should take care not to eat each other up. He had agreed not to write against Erasmus, if Erasmus would also restrain himself. But when Erasmus turned his pen against Luther, Luther replied with more than equal enthusiasm for the debate. The insults and sarcastic statements directed against Erasmus are abundant. Erasmus attacked Luther's position, but refrained from attacking Luther himself. Luther, in attacking Erasmus' position, made Erasmus' intelligence, logic, and motives also the object of his criticism. Nor does Luther hesitate to indicate where Erasmus is not even Christian in his writing and his thinking.

Luther's opinion of Erasmus' *On the Freedom of the Will* is evident already in his introduction. As far as Luther is concerned, Erasmus has accomplished nothing except that he has confirmed Luther in what he already believed:

For though what you think and write about “free will” is wrong, I owe you no small debt of thanks for making me surer of my own view; as I have been since I saw the case for “free will” argued with all the resources that your brilliant gifts afford you — and to such little purpose that it is now in a worse state than before. That itself is clear proof that “free will” is an utter fallacy. It is like the woman in the Gospel; the more the doctors treat the case, the worse it gets (cf. Mark 5:26). So it will be the highest token of gratitude that I can give you, if I bring conviction to you, as you brought assurance to me.²¹

Luther’s intention is clear. He hopes to teach Erasmus, and he intends to destroy the teaching of “free will.” The attitude of condescension toward Erasmus evident throughout the entire *Bondage of the Will* was not caused by animosity toward Erasmus, although Luther does indicate that he was annoyed that Erasmus considered him ignorant enough to employ stupid arguments against him. Luther writes as harshly as he does against Erasmus because he has come to see from Erasmus’ own words how far apart they stand in what they believe.

Luther’s first quarrel with Erasmus concerns Erasmus’ dislike for assertions. Erasmus had stated:

So far am I from delighting in “assertions” that I would readily take refuge in the opinion of the Sceptics, wherever this is allowed by the inviolable authority of the Holy Scriptures and by the decrees of the Church, to which I everywhere willingly submit by personal feelings, whether I grasp what it prescribes or not.²²

Luther, on the other hand, responds:

... one must delight in assertions to be a Christian at all Away, now, with Sceptics and Academics from the company of us Christians; let us have men who will assert, men twice as inflexible as very Stoics! Take the Apostle Paul — how often does he call for ‘full assurance’ which is, simply, an assertion of conscience, of the highest degree of certainty and conviction. In Rom. 10 he calls it ‘confession’ — ‘with the mouth confession is made unto salvation’ (v. 10). Christ says, ‘Whosoever confesseth me before men, him will I confess before my Father’ (Matt. 10:32). Peter commands us to give a reason for the hope that is in us (1 Pet. 3:15). And what need is there of a multitude of proofs? Nothing is more familiar or characteristic among Christians than assertion. Take away assertions, and you take away Christianity. Why, the Holy

Spirit is given to Christians from heaven in order that He may glorify Christ and in them confess Him even unto death — and is this not assertion, to die for what you confess and assert? Again, the Spirit asserts to such purpose that He breaks in upon the whole world and convinces it of sin (cf. John 16:8), as if challenging it to battle. Paul tells Timothy to reprove, and to be instant out of season (2 Tim. 4:2); and what a clown I should think a man to be who did not really believe, nor unwaveringly assert, those things concerning which he reprov'd others! I think I should send him to Anticyra!

But I am the biggest fool of all for wasting time and words on something that is clearer to see than the sun. What Christian can endure the idea that we should deprecate assertions? That would be denying all religion and piety in one breath — asserting that religion and piety and all dogmas are just nothing at all. Why then do you — you! — assert that you find no satisfaction in assertions and that you prefer an undogmatic temper to any other?²³

Erasmus believed that it was not always wise to speak the truth. Sometimes it should be withheld for the sake of peace. Luther says, "Doctrinal truth should be preached always, openly, without compromise, and never dissembled or concealed."²⁴

The difference between Luther and Erasmus on the necessity of assertions was at the heart of the entire controversy between them. For Erasmus, who thought assertions undesirable, it was not unnatural to conclude that the Scriptures were obscure. But to Luther, who held assertions so dear, it was necessary to maintain the perspicuity of Scripture. Luther reprov's Erasmus for his unwillingness to make assertions himself or to allow anyone else the right to do so. He accurately analyzes Erasmus' position in these words: "In a word, what you say comes to this: that you do not think it matters a scrap what anyone believes anywhere, so long as the world is at peace."²⁵ To Erasmus, the humanist, doctrine meant little. Erasmus emphasized life rather than dogma. For Erasmus, piety consisted in following Christ, and Christ had come to teach us to love. What God wanted to be clear, above all else, were "the precepts for the good life."²⁶ Thus, Luther and Erasmus disagreed on the meaning of the gospel itself. For Luther, the gospel was the message of God's grace in Christ which proclaims the sinner's pardon without any merit or worthiness on his part (*Begnadigung*). For Erasmus, the gospel was a series of evangelical counsels. With the aid of divine grace man

was able to keep these counsels and to make himself acceptable in God's eyes. Grace was not so much God's favor for Christ's sake as it was a superadded gift which enabled man to do good works (*Begnadung*).²⁷

It was not difficult, therefore, for Erasmus to downgrade the importance of free will. It was not important to know whether or not man's will was free. What was necessary was to follow Christ. Luther, however, believed that nothing could be more important than to determine whether or not man had a free will. Erasmus felt that the effort to establish the freedom or bondage of the will was irreligious, idle, and superfluous. Luther responded:

If it is "irreligious", "idle", "superfluous"—your words—to know whether or not God foreknows anything contingently; whether our will is in any way active in matters relating to eternal salvation, or whether it is merely the passive subject of the work of grace; whether we do our good and evil deeds of mere necessity — whether, that is, we are not rather passive while they are wrought in us — then may I ask what does constitute godly, serious, useful knowledge? This is weak stuff, Erasmus; it is too much. It is hard to put it down to ignorance on your part, for you are no longer young, you have lived among Christians, and you have long studied the sacred writings; you leave me no room to make excuses for you or to think well of you. And yet the Papists pardon and put up with these outrageous statements, simply because you are writing against Luther.²⁸

Luther insists against Erasmus that the human will is in bondage, that man has no ability whatsoever to do anything active in matters which pertain to eternal salvation. He describes man's will as a beast which stands between two riders. "If God rides, it wills and goes where God wills If Satan rides, it wills and goes where Satan wills. Nor may it choose to which rider it will run, or which it will seek; but the riders themselves fight to decide who shall have and hold it."²⁹ Luther emphasizes that he is speaking only of matters which pertain to salvation when he speaks of the bondage of the will. Man has a "free will" in regard to his money and possessions, as Luther says, "in respect, not of what is above him, but of what is below him."³⁰

Erasmus argued that if man's will was in bondage and man was thus of necessity compelled to do evil, then God would be unjust to condemn man for the evil which He Himself had brought about in man. But Luther's reply points out Erasmus' faulty view of original sin and the fallen state of man:

Let none think, when God is said to harden or work evil in us (for hardening is working evil) that he does it by, as it were, creating fresh evil in us, as you might imagine an ill-disposed innkeeper, a bad man himself, pouring and mixing poison into a vessel that was not bad, while the vessel itself does nothing, but is merely the recipient, or passive vehicle, of the mixer's own ill will. When men hear us say that God works both good and evil in us, and that we are subject to God's working by mere passive necessity, they seem to imagine a man who is in himself good and not evil, having an evil work wrought in him by God; for they do not sufficiently bear in mind how incessantly active God is in all his creatures, allowing none of them to keep holiday. He who would understand these matters, however, should think thus: God works evil in us (that is, by means of us) not through God's own fault, but by reason of our own defect. We being evil by nature, and God being good, when he impels us to act by his own acting upon us according to the nature of his omnipotence, good though he is in himself, he cannot but do evil by our evil instrumentality; although, according to his wisdom, he makes good use of this evil for his own glory and for our salvation.³¹

Thus, it is inevitable for man to do evil and to come under the condemnation of God, because God cannot suspend His omnipotence on account of man's perversion and man cannot alter his perversion. All of Luther's subsequent arguments against Erasmus are presented to prove that man's will is in bondage, but at the same time man himself, who is forced to act by the omnipotence of God, willingly chooses to do evil and justly incurs God's condemnation.

Luther argues in this way not to bring man to despair, but to bring man from despair to hope. Only he who realizes that he is lost and helpless and incapable of doing anything to merit his eternal salvation, will look to the free grace of God in Christ as an answer to his dilemma. Erasmus, on the other hand, who sought to give man some free will in order that he might have some hope of saving himself, has only forced man to despair because he cannot perfectly keep the "evangelical counsels" of God.

It was impossible that the relationship between Luther and Erasmus should remain unimpaired after the publication of *The Bondage of the Will*. Too many arguments had been propounded by both men, too many criticisms had been made, too many basic disagreements had become evident. Neither Erasmus

nor Luther would view the other in the same light that he had in previous years. Luther had come to know the spirit and the theology of Erasmus too well, and Erasmus had been exposed too much to the criticism, sarcasm, and "obstinacy" of Luther. Erasmus, in a letter to Luther in April of 1526, reveals his bitterness for the way in which Luther has treated him. "The whole world knows your nature; truly you have so guided your pen that you have written against none more rabidly and (what is more detestable) more maliciously than against me."³² He says that all of the confusion in the Church is due to Luther's barren genius, which is "not amenable to the counsels of your best friends but easily turned in any direction by the most foolish swindlers."³³ He concludes with the following insult to Luther: "I would wish you a better disposition were you not so marvelously well satisfied with the one you have. Wish me any curse you will except your disposition, unless the Lord change it for you."³⁴

Luther's condemnation of Erasmus following their confrontation was also outspoken. In a letter to Justus Jonas in 1527 Luther describes Erasmus as a viper with deadly stings.³⁵ In another letter to Jonas in the same year, he describes Erasmus as a Judas.³⁶ In 1529 Luther would still be speaking of the stupidity of Erasmus, "a light-minded man, scoffing at all religion."

The friendly, or at least peaceful, relationship which had existed between the humanist and the reformer had come to an end. Luther and Erasmus would no longer be seen as defenders of the same cause. Their beliefs were different; their ways had parted.

FOOTNOTES

1. Albert Hyma, *Erasmus and the Humanists* (New York: F.S. Crofts and Co., 1930), p. 10.
2. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), II, 379.
3. Gottfried G. Krodel, "Luther, Erasmus and Henry VIII," *Archiv fur Reformationsgeschichte*, LIII (1962), 74.
4. McGiffert, p. 379.
5. Carl S. Meyer, "Melancthon as Educator and Humanist," *CTM*, XXXI, 9 (September, 1960), p. 535.
6. P. S. Allen, *The Age of Erasmus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914), p. 134.
7. Albert Hyma, *Renaissance to Reformation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951), p. 247.
8. J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston, *The Bondage of the Will* (Fleming H. Revell Company, 1957), p. 25.
9. Preserved Smith, *Luther's Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1913 - 1918), II, 198.

10. *Ibid.*, II, 255.
11. *Ibid.*, I, 42.
12. *Ibid.*, I, 371.
13. *Ibid.*, I, 179-181.
14. Krodel, p. 72.
15. Smith, I, 494.
16. Allen, p. 163.
17. Smith, I, 54-55.
18. *Ibid.*, II, 228-230.
19. *Ibid.*, II, 249-251.
20. Packer, p. 39.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
22. Gordon Rupp, ed., *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* ("Library of Christian Classics," XVII; 1969), p. 37.
23. Packer, pp. 66-67.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
26. Rupp, p. 40.
27. F. E. Mayer, "Human Will in Bondage and Freedom: A Study in Luther's Distinction of Law and Gospel," *CTM*, XXII, 10 (October, 1951,) p. 719.
28. Packer, p. 74.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 103-104.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
32. Smith, II, 369.
33. *Ibid.*, II, 370.
34. *Ibid.*, II, 370.
35. *Ibid.*, II, 416.
36. *Ibid.*, II, 420.
37. *Ibid.*, II, 481-482.

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