

64. ERASMUS

Before we talk about the Reformation, I want to tell you about Erasmus. In chapter 62, we discussed the rise of humanism in Italy. We saw how the learned men who had fled from Constantinople founded schools in Italy where they taught Greek and Roman pagan 'wisdom'. Humanism brought about a new way of looking at science.

Away with all those old-fashioned doctrines the church taught! They no longer believed in *that*. The main purpose of this life was: Let us eat, drink and be merry, enjoy the good of this world to the fullest, and pursue vain and worldly amusements. "Let us eat and drink and be merry!" they put into practice. And why not? "Tomorrow we die anyway!"

The seriousness of life?
The approaching eternity?
The coming final judgment?

They laughed about it and mocked it. Eternal things no longer had any value for the people. Humanism in Italy was worldly and dangerous. It increased the deep apathy and wickedness and helped the people to readily accept the humanist ideas.

This new trend was not limited to Italy but also spread to other European countries. Humanism came to France, Germany and England. And, of course, humanism penetrated the Netherlands, too.

Erasmus was a humanist.
But he was very different from the Italian humanists. They were pagan humanists. However, Erasmus was a *biblical humanist*.
Is that even possible?
Yes, of course. The Biblical Humanists renewed the teachings in the Bible. They, including Erasmus, studied God's Word and gave the passages they read new or different explanations from the generally accepted explanations the Roman Catholics taught.

SCAFFOLDING

This work of Erasmus opened the eyes of tens of thousands of people to the terrible errors of the Roman Catholic doctrine. He clearly showed how unscriptural their doctrines were.

These new teachings brought them into conflict with the Roman Catholic doctrine.

Erasmus' work has been of great significance for the Reformation. Yet, this man was not a Reformer, nor a forerunner of the Reformation. He later proved to be an *enemy* of the Reformation.

Scaffolding belongs with every construction. Builders cannot complete most buildings without scaffolding. It is indispensable and renders excellent service, but it does not belong to the building itself.

We may compare Erasmus with scaffolding. He has stood *next* to the building of God's church. He rendered invaluable service to the church, yet he was not a living stone of that church.

WHO WAS ERASMUS?

Erasmus was born in 1466 at Rotterdam. His father was a Roman Catholic priest. His mother was the daughter of a surgeon. When he was four years old, he was already going to school at Gouda. When he was nine, his parents registered him as a student at the religious school of Deventer. After that, he attended the Brethren of the Common Life school at s'Hertogenbosch.

During those years, both his parents died. This sad event left Erasmus an orphan. His next of kin



Desiderius Erasmus 1466-1536
Painting by Hans Holbein the Younger.

placed him in a monastery in Gouda. But he did not like it there. He did not feel at home in that monastery. How glad he was when he could leave! Yet he studied hard as a monk. At the age of twenty-six, the church ordained him as a priest.

After that, he travelled to Paris. At that time, there was a famous university there. But Erasmus was poor and could not pay for those expensive studies. However, some of his friends helped him and occasionally gave him some money. He used that to pay for his studies and lived from what was left. You understand that he was not rolling in wealth. But he persevered, despite suffering great hardships to satisfy his thirst for knowledge.

Finally, he became a famous scholar. Yes, he became the most outstanding scholar of his time. Yet Erasmus was not happy. He was a wanderer and could not settle anywhere. He wandered from one country to the next.

He was born in the Netherlands but lived in Italy, England, Belgium and Switzerland. He had a strong dislike for the Netherlands. He thought the Dutch were too uncivilised and rustic.

During his life, Erasmus wrote many books. Thousands read them, and he became quite famous.

HIS SENSE OF HUMOUR

Do you know what he was very good at? Ridiculing the stupidity and the sinful life of the monks! He did this simply and comically so that even the most unlearned people understood his message.

For example:

When children at school must learn a psalm, text or catechism, they must put effort in. But when someone tells them a joke, they remember it just like that! After hearing that joke once, they may even remember it years later!

Well then, scholars had written many books against the errors of the Roman Catholic Church.

But the general population did not read those books because they could not understand them. However, when Erasmus made a "joke" about those same errors, those same people understood it very well! They never forgot that!

Many others had written and spoken about the licentious life of the monks in the monasteries. But most of the time, their words were too learned. Erasmus used words like "glutton", which

was so simple that even a child understood. With that one word, he perfectly sketched the lives of the monks.

He ridiculed the ignorance of the priests and mocked the doctrines of the Roman

Catholic Church. He was very clever at poking fun in a simple way. For example, he wrote:

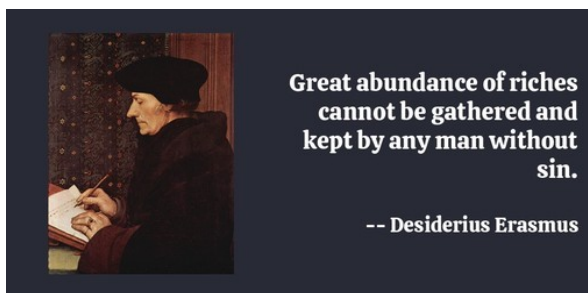
"The relics of the cross of Jesus altogether would make up a shipload of wood."

This means:

All the 'cross' relics together on show in the many churches and monasteries would fill a ship to the brim.

Naturally, one cross cannot possibly fill a whole ship! The people understood very well what he meant, and it made them laugh.

With this one sentence, he mocked the entire relic worship of the Roman Catholic Church.



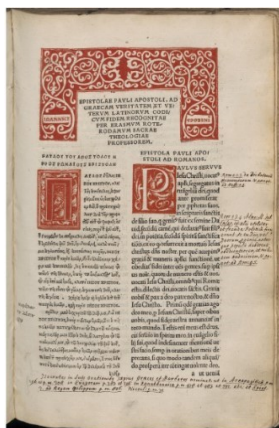
Erasmus' book 'The Praise of Folly'

He wrote a book called "The Praise of Folly". In it, he cleverly ridicules the so-called good works of the monks. In that book, the monks 'boast' about their good works. One monk points to his big belly and proudly tells us that he has "fasted" faithfully.

Another monk developed a stomach ailment because of all his fasting.

There is much more, but these examples give us an idea of how he exposed the entire Roman clergy. What he wrote was not slander or lies. Everyone who read it had to agree that it was all true. They all saw those things happening every day.

ERASMUS' OTHER WORK



Erasmus new translation from a complete Greek text into a Latin text.
<https://www.leidenspecialecollectionsblog.nl/articles/erasmus-new-testament-edition-of-1516>

But Erasmus could do more than just ridicule. He was the first scholar to put together a complete text of the New Testament in Greek! He re-translated this New Testament from his Greek version into Latin. This text was printed and made available to any scholar or church leader who could afford it. This Greek text became the standard resource for the church leaders at the time of the Reformation.

He also wrote a brief explanation of the texts (footnotes), which gave a totally different explanation of those texts than what the priests taught. His sincere desire was that the Bible would be read by everyone — by men and women, by Jews and Mohammedans. He wrote:

"The people are entitled to a copy of the Bible so they can study it."

By making this new translation available to the public he opposed the Roman Catholic Church who only allowed the clergy to have a Bible.

The Roman clergy were furious with Erasmus. That was not surprising, as he exposed their foolishness and made them look ridiculous. Thankfully, they were not able to do him any harm as Erasmus enjoyed the protection of the pope. This was puzzling but true.

On March 1, 1516, Erasmus' new translation came from the printing press of Johann Froben at Basle. It contained a new Latin version of the New Testament, the first published edition of the Greek text, and extensive explanatory notes on the translation. Erasmus' aim in publishing this work was not primarily, as is often assumed, to publish the editio princeps of the Greek New Testament, but to present the New Testament in better, more classical, more elegant Latin than that of the traditional bible, the fourth-century Vulgate. The Greek was added to allow readers to check whether the alarmingly new wording and phrases in Erasmus' version were justified in the light of the Greek. The new translation immediately met with great enthusiasm and vehement opposition.

Seen from the point of view of the history of culture, the significance of Erasmus' Novum Instrumentum' (new translation) and its four revised editions until 1535, cannot be overestimated. With this new version and his annotations, Erasmus made his readers realize that the Vulgate of old was not the only possible, incontestable text of the New Testament: its wording could be criticized on text-critical, linguistic and stylistic grounds; it was susceptible to discussion and the admission of alternatives. Erasmus made it clear that a translation can always be critically re-examined in the light of its source text. He explained that a new era required a new translation and that the value of each translation depends on various factors, such as its objective, its intended readership and their educational level. By publishing a Greek text Erasmus, for the first time in history, made it possible for substantial numbers of interested persons to read the New Testament in its original language and to experience the particularities and nuances of its idiom. Ultimately, however, Erasmus wanted his new translation to contribute to the moral reform of Europe. The Leiden University Library possesses two copies of the Novum Instrumentum. The picture shows the beginning of the Greek and Latin texts of Paul's Epistle to the Romans (Erasmus, Novum Instrumentum omne, Basle, Froben, 1516. Leiden, Univ. Libr., 754 A 1, p. 1 after p. 324). **Post by Henk Jan de Jonge, Emeritus Professor of New Testament and Early Christian Literature, Leiden University.**

By poking fun at the Roman errors and by translating the Bible and writing books, Erasmus paved the way for the Reformation.

Then the Reformation finally came. God raised Luther, about whom we hope to tell you in the following chapters. When Luther started going public, Erasmus mockingly said: "That Luther, he does a bad thing. He attacks the crown of the pope and the belly of the monks."

Again, such a phrase made the people laugh. Erasmus supposed that this monastic dispute would soon settle. He didn't think it would amount to much but viewed Luther's labour as a "monastic quarrel". He did not see that *God* was using Luther - and later the other Reformers - as a means in His hand to deliver the Church of the Lord from the false doctrines of Rome. With all his wisdom, Erasmus did not see the golden thread of *God's* providence. That's why he spoke about a "monastic quarrel". He wanted to make a joke out of it.

But the Reformation was no joke. The Reformation was a serious matter. It was the work of the LORD, and the powers of hell would do their very best to, if possible, destroy that work.

The Reformation brought all of Germany, Europe, and the Roman Catholic Church into turmoil. The struggle between Rome and the Reformation caused much upheaval and violence. It was a struggle that would cost streams of blood. The Roman clergy blamed *Erasmus* for it all because *he* had opened the eyes of thousands through his writings. He had made those 'stupid' people wise by giving them the Bible.

ERASMUS CHOOSES WRONGLY

The Reformers were counting on Erasmus to openly choose their side and join them. But Erasmus was undecided. He hesitated to join either the Reformation or remain with the Roman Catholic Church. However, he would have to make a choice.

Regrettably, he did not choose the way of Moses. Moses would rather suffer affliction with the people of God than enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season.

But Erasmus recoiled from that. Suffer affliction, oppression, and persecution? Oh no, that did not appeal to Erasmus at all. He just wanted to live quietly and peacefully. He wished to remain good friends with everyone, but especially with influential people, like the pope of Rome, the emperor of Germany, and other rulers and nobles of Europe. He wanted their favour and friendship.

Suffer affliction?

The exceptionally educated Erasmus trembled at the thought. No, no, not that! Not that! And that's why he chose the side of the Roman Catholic Church. He said:

"I do not desire to risk my head for the truth."

Another time he wrote:

"I prefer to err than to draw the sword for the truth."

Erasmus did not care if the truth was sacrificed, as long as he could live quietly and peacefully and stay good friends with everyone. Erasmus did not dare to choose the side of the Reformers because he did not want to suffer affliction. That did not appeal to Erasmus at all.

He could have been a real support for the Reformers, but he didn't dare. Mockingly he said: "I'm afraid that at the first suggestion of accusations, I would soon follow in the footsteps of Peter."

We know that when Peter was questioned, he denied his Master.

Erasmus believed he would also deny the truth if he got into difficulties. Sadly, Erasmus *did* deny the truth. He was terrified that the Roman Catholics would consider him a heretic, for then they would persecute him. Then there would be no peace for him anymore. That's why he wrote a book called: 'The Free Will.' In that book, he wrote:

"Jesus is only a good *example*! We must imitate that example. We must improve ourselves. We must climb the ladder of good works in our own strength."

No, Erasmus, that is a lie. We cannot improve ourselves. Only *grace* can save us. Here Erasmus taught the same as Pelagius did ages ago. See chapter 25.

That's how Erasmus opposed the Reformation.



The statue of Erasmus in Rotterdam.

On the plaque is written:

"Here the great sun rose, and it set in Basle!"

Luther broke with the Roman Catholic Church. Erasmus tried to stay good friends with the Roman Catholic Church at the cost of the truth. When persecution erupted, and the stakes smoked, burning the martyrs because they held on to the truth, Erasmus daily visited the palace of Emperor Charles V, that great persecutor. He ate at the same table with the enemy of God's people and became a friend and companion to him.

Later, when the pope excommunicated Luther, Erasmus wrote a friendly letter to the pope in which he promised he would no longer have anything to do with Luther. That was Erasmus! He was a *coward*!

But the monks remained Erasmus' greatest enemies. They never forgave him for publicly ridiculing them. For fear of the monks, he fled to

the Swiss city of Basle and there he finally died in 1536. His last words were: "Dear God".

It was all very well for Erasmus to *say* that, but that "dear God" is also a consuming fire and an everlasting flame, a *righteous* God Who summoned him before His fearful judgment seat. Sure, he had said many true and pointed things; he had done God's church an excellent service, but he did *not* belong to that church. He was *scaffolding*!!!

They erected a statue of him in Rotterdam. On the plaque is written:

"Here the great sun rose, and it set in Basle!"

That means that he was born in Rotterdam and died in Basle.

But Erasmus did *not* deserve the honourable name of "The great sun". He was neither hot nor cold but *lukewarm*, so God would spew him out of His mouth. He showed he was an *enemy* of the oppressed, afflicted people of the Lord. That's why we would write on his plaque:

"Weighed in the balance and ... found wanting!"

QUESTIONS

1. What form did humanism take in Northern Europe?
2. What is Biblical Humanism?
3. Explain how the author compares Erasmus with scaffolding.
4. Summarise Erasmus' early life before he became a famous scholar.
5. How did Erasmus regard his own country?
6. Explain how Erasmus attacked the church. Give three examples of his methods.
7. What was his purpose in translating the Bible from Greek into Latin?
8. How did he view the work of Martin Luther? What did he fail to recognise?
9. Why did Erasmus choose to remain in the Roman Catholic Church?

10. What did he mean when he said: "I prefer to err than to draw the sword for the truth"?

11. What errors can we find in his book about the freedom of the will?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. How did God use Erasmus to benefit the Church of the Reformation?

2. Erasmus stated: "I do not desire to risk my head for the truth." How does that show that the truth was in his head rather than his heart?

3. What prevents true children of God from arriving at the same conclusion Erasmus did when he refused to suffer for the truth?

4. Should trouble or tribulation take God's people by surprise, or does the Bible give evidence that God will test the faith of His people? Find proof in God's Word for the answer you give.

5. Does it surprise you that Erasmus returned to the church so completely that he promised the pope to have no further connection with Luther and that he ate with Emperor Charles V, the persecutor of God's people? Explain your answer.

6. Why would the righteous sentence of the Lord fall more heavily on Erasmus than many others of his time?