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# Ad Fontes: Desiderius Erasmus' Call for a Return to the Sources of a Unified and Simple Christian Faith

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Ad Fontes:

Desiderius Erasmus' Call for a Return to the Sources of a Unified and Simple Christian Faith

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## Introduction

Five hundred years ago, the European *corpus Christianum* united the faith under the banner of the Roman Catholic Church; today there are approximately 40,000 Christian denominations.<sup>1</sup> This variance in Christian thought began with the schism that occurred during the Magisterial Reformation though there have been other splits in Church tradition and doctrine throughout time both before and after this time period. This statistic points to a serious issue in modern Christianity: disunity. The Apostle Paul made it clear in Ephesians 4:4-6 that “There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”<sup>2</sup> Christians themselves cannot agree on many theological and doctrinal statements, however, so from the outside looking in there seem to be more differences than commonalities among them.

Desiderius Erasmus, a controversial and complex historical figure, recognized this problem early on. He desired reform for the Church in a way that would promote unity rather than fragmentation. His humanist studies led him to promote the importance of returning to the textual sources of the Christian faith in pursuit of truth. Although he sympathized with Martin Luther early on, he later saw him as schismatic and immoderate. Due to his non-sectarian positions on reform, Erasmus found himself caught between the competing forces of Catholicism and Protestantism which, against his will, eventually brought him into direct conflict with Luther. Erasmus’ life clearly demonstrated that his humanism greatly influenced his views on reform, which emphasized a return to a simpler Christianity while maintaining unity within the

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1. Mary Fairchild, “Christianity Statistics: General Statistics and Facts About Christianity Today,” *About Religion*, accessed November 13, 2016, <http://christianity.about.com/od/denominations/p/christiantoday.htm>; “World Christian Database,” *Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary*, accessed November 13, 2016, <http://www.worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/home.asp>.

2. *The Holy Bible* (NASB), (Anaheim, CA: Foundations Publishing, Inc. 1998).

Church; however, his pacifistic approach was ultimately overshadowed by the polarizing forces of the Magisterial Reformation which has continued to shape the character of Christianity even to the modern day.

### **Erasmus' Humanism and Early Influences on His Thought**

Desiderius Erasmus (1467?–1536) was one of the most famous and revered humanists of the Northern Renaissance.<sup>3</sup> He was known as the “Prince of Humanists” and was widely revered for his scholarship and wit.<sup>4</sup> However, this Humanism was only a part of his character. He was also a devoted Christian and moderate reformer of the Church.<sup>5</sup> While the two aspects of his character may seem at odds, this is not the case. In fact, Erasmus’ humanism played a big role in the development of his “philosophy of Christ” and his views surrounding reform of the Church.<sup>6</sup> The development of his humanism and its impact on his ideas regarding Christianity and the Church can be seen by looking at his life leading up to the time of the Reformation.

Erasmus’ education began at St. Leebwin’s school in Deventer which was staffed by a group of semi-monastic laymen known as the Brothers of the Common Life.<sup>7</sup> At this school he came into contact with two ideas which shaped his later thinking regarding scholarship and religion: the *devotio moderna* and humanism.<sup>8</sup> The *devotio moderna* was a program of

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3. Charles Nauert, “Desiderius Erasmus,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012 Edition), ed. by Edward N. Zalta, accessed November 13, 2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/erasmus/>.

4. Matthew Spinka, ed., “Advocates of Reform: From Wyclif to Erasmus,” *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 14 (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press), 281.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. John C. Olin, *Six Essays on Erasmus and a Translation of Erasmus’ Letter to Carondelet, 1523* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1979), 2; Charles Nauert, “Desiderius Erasmus,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed., accessed November 13, 2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/erasmus/>.

8. Ibid.

evangelical piety characteristic of the Brothers of the Common Life.<sup>9</sup> It was a movement with an inward, mystical focus and contrasted directly with the *devotio antiqua* of the scholastic period. It was not unorthodox, but it did stress spiritual communion with God over intellectualism<sup>10</sup> The Brethren did not love education for its own sake because they believed it led to pride.<sup>11</sup> However, they used it to draw schoolboys to the Bible and other devotional books in such a way as to teach them to practice the Christian religion by imitating the apostles.<sup>12</sup> Although Erasmus disliked many of the features of the Brothers' approach to education, their influences on him shaped many aspects of his own religious beliefs, such as his aversion to ritualism, sacramentarianism, scholasticism, and dogmatism.<sup>13</sup> His time at St. Lebwin's was certainly one source of his conviction that the Christian religion must be experienced inwardly rather than through outward ritualistic expressions.<sup>14</sup>

The second formative idea he encountered while learning under the Brothers of the Common Life was humanism. Although the Brethren themselves were not humanists, toward the end of his stay at the school, Alexander Hegius, a noted humanist, became the headmaster.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the most celebrated humanist of the day, Rudolph Agricola, delivered a lecture that left a deep impression on Erasmus.<sup>16</sup> This early education seeded in Erasmus a love of classical learning and a proclivity for emphasizing the Christian life over specific Christian doctrines. His

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9. Ibid.

10. Spinka, 281.

11. Ibid., 282.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Nauert, "Desiderius Erasmus."

15. Olin, *Six Essays*, 2.

16. Ibid.

ideas began to coalesce during his ongoing education in the Augustinian monastery at Steyn and later as he pursued his doctorate of theology in Paris.<sup>17</sup> What he came to call the “philosophy of Christ” was also cultivated through his interactions with other great thinkers and reformers of the day such as John Colet, Thomas More, and Jean Vitrier.<sup>18</sup> John Colet in particular greatly impressed Erasmus; this meeting and his time in England became a turning point in his life.<sup>19</sup> He praised Colet’s “combination of learning, eloquence, and moral integrity.”<sup>20</sup> His meetings with these men and others, such as John Fisher, encouraged Erasmus to focus on studying the Bible directly rather than relying on the interpretations of others.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Humanism of Erasmus and Its Influence on His Ideas of Reform**

Erasmus, as a Christian humanist, focused on scholarship in Latin and the classics.<sup>22</sup> Erasmus was especially drawn to study the early Church Fathers. He believed that Jerome was the best proclaimer of the doctrine of Christ and that Origen stood even higher than Jerome as a “master of allegorical exegesis.”<sup>23</sup> Like Jerome and Origen, Erasmus sought to “achieve a synthesis of Christianity and ancient civilization.” He strove to unite the *bonae litterae*, the study of ancient civilization and the way life connected with it, with the *sacrae litterae*, the Scriptures and other biblical literature.<sup>24</sup> He saw that many of the humanists of his day had rejected the

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17. Ibid., 2 -3.

18. Spinka, 282.

19. Cornelius Augustin, *Erasmus: His Life, Works, and Influence*, trans. J. C. Grayson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 32-33.

20. Christine Christ-on Wedel, *Erasmus of Rotterdam: Advocate of a New Christianity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 49.

21. “Erasmus, Desiderius (1469–1536),” Online Library of Liberty, accessed November 16, 2016, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/pages/erasmus-desiderius-1469-1536>.

22. Augustin, 37.

23. Ibid., 100.

24. Ibid., 104.

study of theology because the practice was broken, but he wished to reunite Christianity with culture through a restoration of theology.<sup>25</sup>

Erasmus firmly believed that the study of theology needed to be holistic; however, in his time “the study of the Bible, systematic theology, and devotional reading had become separate from one another.”<sup>26</sup> He believed this to be wrong and had additional doubts about the ways in which each of these were practiced.<sup>27</sup> He criticized Bible scholars who claimed to study the Bible directly but who could not even read it properly in Latin, let alone in its original languages.<sup>28</sup> He chastised the systematic theologians for posing absurd questions that had nothing to do with the Bible instead of beginning their studies with Scripture.<sup>29</sup> With regard to devotional reading, he disdained those whose sermons were so lofty that the average person could not gain anything from listening to them.<sup>30</sup> He laments:

[seeing] how simple people, who hang open-mouthed on the lips of the preacher, yearn for food for the soul, eager to learn how they can go home better people. And then such a pseudo-theologian . . . shows off his knowledge of some stupid and complicated subject from Duns Scotus or Ockham. He shows off what he has learned at the Sorbonne, and with that showing off he is chasing popular favour.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, the devotional practices of the day failed in basic pastoral practices, in spreading the Gospel, and in the promulgation of knowledge which could aid in the improvement of Christian lives.<sup>32</sup>

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25. Ibid., 104.

26. Augustin, 102.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 102-103.

29. Ibid., 103.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., 103-104.

32. Ibid., 104.

Erasmus worked toward his goal of reuniting Christianity with culture through his humanistic studies and translations of the works of the early Church Fathers including Cyprian, Arnobius, Hilary, Ambrose, Augustine, Chrysostom, Irenaeus, and Origen.<sup>33</sup> His scholarship did not stop with the works of those who had come before him, though; he, too, contributed to the totality of Christian scholarship and literature. His interactions with many of the other scholars and reformers of Europe led Erasmus to pursue the study of Greek. He had already become a master Latin stylist, but decided to master Greek as well in order to more directly encounter the Holy Scriptures instead of relying on the thoughts and interpretations of others in understanding the Scriptures.

The result of this study was his New Testament translation in the original Greek, published in 1516, which corrected over 600 errors from Jerome's Latin Vulgate.<sup>34</sup> Erasmus wrote to a close friend in Flanders that it was his hope "to restore the whole of Jerome as great as it is, corrupted, mutilated, confused by the ignorance of the theologians," and he linked this project with his restoration of true theology.<sup>35</sup> He believed that restoring Jerome's Vulgate could lead to a reopening of Scripture and a truer Christian scholarship.<sup>36</sup> According to one scholar, "The influence of this work on the Reformation was incalculable."<sup>37</sup> In addition to his Greek Translation of the New Testament, he wrote a commentary on the New Testament (excepting Revelation) which Queen Catherine Parr eventually had translated into English and was

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33. Ibid.

34. "Erasmus: Pious Humanist Who Sparked the Reformation," *Christianity Today*, accessed November 16, 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/scholarsandscientists/erasmus.html>.

35. Olin, *Six Essays*, 4.

36. Ibid., 5.

37. Spinka, 289.



distributed to every church in England and Wales under the rule of King Edward VI.<sup>38</sup> These studies, translations, and writings reflected Erasmus' belief in *Ad Fontes*—a return to the sources.<sup>39</sup> This return was an integral part of his desire to restore Christianity to its roots in Christ, the Gospel, and the writings of Holy Scripture.<sup>40</sup>

### Erasmus and the Philosophy of Christ

Erasmus wasn't simply a critic. He sought to offer up something in place of the common biblical scholarship of the day. In the dedication of his first edition translation of the New Testament, Erasmus writes to Pope Leo X:

For one thing I found crystal clear: our chiefest hope for the restoration and rebuilding of the Christian religion . . . is that all those who profess the Christian philosophy the whole world over should above all absorb the principles laid down by their Founder from the writings of the evangelists and apostles, in which that heavenly Word which once came down to us from the heart of the Father still lives and breathes for us and acts and speaks with more immediate efficacy, in my opinion, than in any other way. Besides which I perceived that that teaching which is our salvation was to be had in a much purer and more lively form if sought at the fountain-head and drawn from the actual sources than from pools and runnels.<sup>41</sup>

This dedication encapsulates Erasmus' views on the need for reform and what the Christian religion should look like. As already discussed, Erasmus felt a strong need for Christians to return to the sources of the Christian faith found in the Scriptures themselves and the works of the early Church Fathers. This was but one part of the reform he wished to see in the Church, though. His instance upon a return to the sources was because he believed that the “philosophy

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38. Ibid.

39. Jacob J. Prahlow, “Erasmus on Reform and the Philosophy of Christ,” *Pursuing Veritas: Reflections on Theology, History, and Culture* blog, May 15, 2016, accessed November 16, 2016, <https://pursuingveritas.com/2014/05/15/erasmus-on-reform-and-the-philosophy-of-christ/>.

40. Ibid.

41. Augustin, 89.

of Christ” could best be lived out when a person obtained a better understanding of these sources.

Erasmus characterized his views on religion as a “philosophy” because of his more humanistic approach to religion and his sincere belief that Christianity should be more a way of life than anything else.<sup>42</sup> The concept of a “philosophy of Christ” communicated that connection between religion and culture that he was trying to restore through his stress on a return to the biblical and patristic sources.<sup>43</sup> This echoed many of the influences from his encounters with the Brethren of the Common Life and the *devotio moderna*. Like the Brethren, he stressed an inner piety over outward religious expressions and ritualism:

Erasmus had the vision of an inward religion and he wanted to offer a corrective for what he had come to see as the common error of all those who were turning religion into an empty ceremonialism. He believed that religion consists primarily not of outward signs and devotions but of the inward love of God and neighbor.<sup>44</sup>

He advocated for a simplification of Christianity to its most essential doctrines in order to leave the rest open to private opinion.<sup>45</sup> He believed that in order for people to sincerely seek and find truth, they must be free to speak their mind without fear, and that wherever truth could be found it should be viewed as Christianity because ultimately all truth is God’s truth.<sup>46</sup>

In order to further elucidate his ideas on what the Christian life should look like he wrote the *Enchiridion Militis Chrsitiani* as a sort of handbook for Christian living.<sup>47</sup> The *Enchiridion* is

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42. Spinka, 282.

43. Ibid.

44. Robert M. Thornton, “Erasmus, Reform, and the Remnant,” edited by the Foundation for Economic Education (Covington, KY, March 12, 1967), accessed November 16, 2016, <https://fee.org/articles/erasmus-reform-and-the-remnant/>.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. Desiderius Erasmus, *The Enchiridion*, trans. Raymond Himelick (Bloomington: Indiana University, Press, 1963).

written around two central themes which sprout from Erasmus' "philosophy of Christ": (1) the greatest weapon against sin in the Christian life is a thorough knowledge of the Holy Scriptures; and (2) true religion consists of inner piety and a love of God and neighbor.<sup>48</sup> The *Enchiridion* sets forth twenty-two rules for Christian living.<sup>49</sup> It is no surprise, given Erasmus' Christian humanism that the first of these rules is a thorough understanding of the Holy Scriptures.<sup>50</sup> He urged Christians to set Christ before them as their only goal, against the growing Protestant current of the time, and emphasized the great dignity of man.<sup>51</sup>

With his characteristically biting wit, he openly chastises those who do not focus on an inward love of God but rather seek to be outwardly religious:

You venerate saints; you are glad to touch their relics, But you contemn what good they have left, namely the example of a pure life. No worship of Mary is more gracious than if you imitate Mary's humility. No devotion to the saints is more acceptable and more proper than if you strive to express their virtue. You wish to deserve well of Peter and Paul? Imitate the faith of one, the charity of the other—and you will hereby do more than if you were to dash back and forth to Rome ten times . . . and although an example of universal piety be sought most fittingly from Christ, yet if the worship of Christ in his saints delights you very much, imitate Christ in the saints, and to the honor of each one change one vice, or be zealous to embrace a particular virtue. If this happens, I will not disapprove those things which are now done in public.<sup>52</sup>

This more than anything encapsulates Erasmus' "philosophy of Christ" as a pure, simple Christian life focused on the imitation of Christ and the saints rather than on religiosity and dogmatic doctrine.

### **Peace and Unity in the *Corpus Christianum***

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48. Olin, *Six Essays*, 5.

49. Erasmus, *Enchiridion*, 7-9.

50. *Ibid.*, 85.

51. *Ibid.*, 173.

52. *Ibid.*, 111; Olin, *Six Essays*, 5.

When it came to the pursuit of these reforms regarding the Christian religion, Erasmus desired peace and unity. He detested either/or zealotry as part of his belief that true Christianity should be a form of inner piety rather than a system of dogma and rituals.<sup>53</sup> While many men of his time were concerned with rooting out and destroying heretics and heretical doctrines, he was most concerned with pointing people toward piety and Christ.<sup>54</sup> He preferred to focus on reform as a matter of individual change and as something best done from within the Church rather than from without, which is why he never left the Catholic Church.<sup>55</sup> This was particularly influenced by his pacifism. Erasmus firmly believed that Christianity means peace and that “The sum and substance of [Christianity] is peace and concord” because “God is the author not of dissension but of peace.”<sup>56</sup>

This firm belief that Christianity should promote peace was integral to his position on reform. He strongly believed in the liberty of the individual to develop their own convictions. Erasmus’ efforts were focused on healing that which was tearing Christianity apart and on bridging the gap between reformers and traditional Catholicism. As such, he resisted alignment with either side of the Reformation debate. This unfortunately earned him disfavor on both sides of the aisle. Part of Erasmus’ desire to remain moderate in the face of such a polarizing debate stemmed from his personality.<sup>57</sup> He looked at the world with a skeptical gaze and held all beliefs with a sort of intellectual humility that reminded him that he could always be wrong.<sup>58</sup> This made it difficult for others to understand his position and difficult for him to understand their

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53. Thornton, “Erasmus, Reform, and Remnant.”

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.

56. Olin, *Six Essays*, 19.

57. Ibid., 60.

58. Ibid.

certitude. His moderation and eventually led him into conflict with the increasingly polarizing forces of his day.

### **Erasmus versus Luther: A Clash of Reformations**

It is unfortunate that Erasmus and Luther were never able to resolve their differences in order to pursue reform together. Erasmus could have been a moderating force on Luther's passion and Luther could have emboldened Erasmus to face up against the forces that were pressuring him to withdraw much of his criticism of the Church and its practices. Early on, Erasmus sympathized with Luther's cause and even "agreed on the necessity of reforming church and clerical practices, opposed the sale of indulgences, and [was] highly critical of ecclesiastical and political corruption, especially in the Vatican."<sup>59</sup> He went so far as to defend him to the Elector Prince Frederick of Saxony, saying that Luther's ideas were not heresy and urging him to resist outside pressures to surrender Luther to enemies.<sup>60</sup> He even went so far as attempting to broker a peace between the German princes and Holy Roman Emperor Charles V regarding the matter.<sup>61</sup>

However, Erasmus grew to despise what he perceived as Luther's immoderation and arrogance.<sup>62</sup> Because Erasmus' love of peace and unity, he thought that no good would come from Luther stirring up people and causing dissension within the Church by his immoderate writings.<sup>63</sup> Erasmus wrote:

I detest dissension because it goes both against the teachings of Christ and against a secret inclination of nature. I doubt that either side in the dispute can be suppressed

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59. "Erasmus, Desiderius (1469–1536)."

60. Nauert, "Desiderius Erasmus."

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

63. Daniel Preus, "Luther and Erasmus: Scholastic Humanism and the Reformation," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 46, no. 2-3 (April–June 1982), 220-221.

without grave loss. It is clear that many of the reforms for which Luther calls are urgently needed.<sup>64</sup>

Despite the fact that Erasmus once said, “I have taught almost everything Luther teaches,” Luther’s zealotry was a different approach to reform than Erasmus was willing to take.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, he was beginning to experience outside pressure from the Louvain theologians to renounce Luther.<sup>66</sup> Erasmus, however, felt that the attacks against Luther were, at their heart, attacks against humanist efforts to reform.<sup>67</sup> This caught Erasmus between two increasingly polarizing opponents.

The conflict with Luther finally came to a climax when Erasmus caved under pressure to confront Luther on his most contentious of issues: human will. This became a fiery debate that brought out the worst in both parties. Erasmus’ desire to avoid the conflict was evident in the issue he decided to attack—something that, at the time, was considered more of an academic question than a subject that would arouse strong emotions, unlike in modern times where the debate over human will is at the core of many disagreements within the Church.<sup>68</sup> His aversion to this conflict is evident in his dispassionate argument made in *The Free Will (De libero arbitrio)* in September 1524.<sup>69</sup> Luther’s response, *The Bondage of the Will (De servo arbitrio)*, was full of attacks not only on Erasmus’ arguments but on Erasmus as a person.<sup>70</sup>

Ultimately, Erasmus’ inability to take a stand of his own and his half-hearted confrontation of Luther drove the wedge between Catholicism and Protestantism even deeper.

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64. “Erasmus: Pious Humanist.”

65. Preus, “Luther and Erasmus,” 220.

66. Nauert, “Desiderius Erasmus.”

67. Ibid.

68. Augustin, 135.

69. Ibid.

70. Ibid., 136.

Luther's reforms took greater hold than did Erasmus' ideas because he was able to mobilize more people to his cause and garner large popular support. While many of Luther's reforms were sorely needed and his passion was invaluable to the implementation of these reforms, his role as a firebrand was rightly criticized by Erasmus, who condemned those who "pour oil on the flames."<sup>71</sup> In the end, it was less a matter of doctrine that separated Erasmus and Luther as it was a matter of personal style; Luther was bold and unrelenting while Erasmus was a more moderating force and at times a bit timid.

### **Modern Day Application of Erasmus' Reformation Ideas**

Although Luther's ideas regarding the Reformation are the ones that took the deepest root and were later built upon by other reformers, there are still many lessons that can be learned from Erasmus and his views on Church reform. The differences between various Christian sects have been exacerbated by time, politics, and deep-seated emotions. While there will always be a time for boldness, there is also a time for a peaceful and unifying approach. As Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, "There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven."<sup>72</sup> Perhaps it is time to recall the lessons of Erasmus.

"The Erasmian concept of reform as a matter of individual change," according to Wedel, is unpopular in our age of political action and mass movements. The interest today is not changing ourselves but other people, preferably in great numbers."<sup>73</sup> Each individual Christian ought to carefully examine the speck in their own eye and seek personal change before attempting to change the views of their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Erasmus' call to a

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71. Christine Christ-on Wedel, *Erasmus of Rotterdam: Advocate of a New Christianity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 169.

72. *The Holy Bible*.

73. Thornton, *Erasmus, Reform, and Remnant*.

simpler Christianity of internal reverence—one that focuses more on a love of Christ and an authentically Christian lifestyle than on outward displays of piety—and his call for a return to the sources are both important lessons to be learned for the average Christian seeking truth in the age of information.

There are incalculably many commentaries on every theological subject known to humanity, but the best and most reliable way to understand Christ, the Gospel, and the Scriptures is to return to the biblical and patristic sources as a foundation for all religious inquiries. Erasmus' interaction with Luther demonstrates the importance of both speaking the truth in love—as both men at times failed to do—and taking a stand for what one believes in no matter the consequences. Erasmus' moderation and search for unity was admirable and necessary in a time as contentious as the Magisterial Reformation, while Luther's unwavering conviction in the face of his enemies should inspire all Christians to boldness for Christ.

Erasmus' humanism greatly shaped his view of Christianity. He developed a "philosophy of Christ" that led him to seek peaceful reforms from within the Church while attempting to maintain unity. He was a consummate scholar and inspiring figure of his time. Unfortunately, his interactions with Luther did not bring out the best in him, or in Luther for that matter, but there is still much to be learned by modern Christians from Erasmus' views on reform that can be applied to the modern Church.



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