PREMISE / Volume II, Number 9 / October 19, 1995 / Page 6

The Foundation of Reformation Hermeneutics: A Fresh Look at Erasmus

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Introduction

An interest in the study of Erasmus and his thought is being revived, both among Roman Catholics and Protestants, spanning the fields of literature, history, biblical studies and theology. In these same fields, the dominant questions facing representative scholars are matters that are hermeneutical in nature. It is therefore appropriate to study the hermeneutics of Erasmus for a twofold reason: 1) to learn who the true Erasmus was instead of the caricature of cowardice so often presented, and 2) to learn from this pioneering figure in the field of biblical criticism and hermeneutics in order to see how his approach was developed and received in his own day, and to see how it might possibly speak to the hermeneutical concerns of the present.

Erasmus was a transitional figure who was both renaissance person and Reformer and simultaneously neither renaissance man nor Reformer. As Erasmus' concern to study the original sources increased, so his innovative hermeneutic developed. From this starting place, Erasmus drifted from his renaissance views toward a new area where he found himself calling for the reform of the church. Yet, this movement propelled him from one sphere in which he was king into another where many of his most cherished beliefs were intensely challenged. Erasmus was, then, not only a transitional figure, but also independent, seemingly ambivalent, and without a supporting community.

It was the transition initiated by Erasmus that formed the grounding and provided the significant intellectual equipment for the Reformation. The Reformation was a frightening experience for Erasmus, for it compelled him to choose sides in the religious struggle. Erasmus chose not to align himself completely with the Lutheran movement, though initially he was quite sympathetic with Luther. Instead he remained a critic of the church's wrongdoings as he sought to reform the church from within. But that choice, in the long run, was tragic for Erasmus and his followers because neither the Lutheran Reformation nor the Roman Catholic renewal could find a place for him and his ideals. Paradoxically, both movements were deeply indebted to the

thought of Erasmus for impetus and direction.

Instrumental to both movements was a hermeneutical revolution which found its source in Erasmus. Erasmus desired to seek the simple, original meaning of the biblical text and make it meaningful for the common man or woman. He thus stood in contrast to the medieval schoolmen who created elaborate systems of biblical interpretation and theology that were beyond the comprehension and interest of the common person.

The purpose of this chapter is to understand the basis of this hermeneutical revolution. In order to do so, the background of Erasmus will be examined from the perspective of his Christian humanism and biblical scholarship. The hermeneutics of Erasmus will be analyzed noting the influencing sources and attempting to show the historical development in Erasmus' hermeneutical thought. Finally, the impact of Erasmus upon Reformation and post-Reformation hermeneutics will be evaluated. This will include an attempt to discover the significance of Erasmus for hermeneutical studies in our own day.

Erasmus as Christian Humanist and Biblical Scholar

A. Christian Humanist. The leading Christian humanist of the Reformation era, who wished to reform the church through scholarly effort was Desiderius Erasmus (ca. 1466/9-1536).[1] Erasmus was the most distinguished of many humanists who sought to simplify Christianity, to exalt reason and to emphasize morality rather than ritual. The New Testament was the authority for bringing about this much needed reform.

Erasmus, the illegitimate son of a Dutch priest, became a scholar of international reputation honored by Popes, princes and university scholars as a genius, prophet, and servant of Christ.[2] In 1516, he published his critical edition of the Greek New Testament, a momentous event in the history of biblical scholarship because it was a necessary tool for anyone who wished to move beyond the Latin Vulgate. Also, he laboriously prepared painstaking translations of the early Christian Fathers, a work which made it possible for scholars to compare the church in the sixteenth century with the church of the first four centuries.[3]

Brilliantly he showed his abilities to write literature of various genres ranging from the ironic and witty, *Praise of Folly* (1509) to the serious and challenging manual for Christian discipleship, "The Enchiridion" (translated "The Christian Soldier's Handbook," 1501) to the *Colloquies* and *Adages* (of which there more than 4,000) in which he exposed human weakness, vice, superstitions and legalistic approaches to Christian piety.[4]

Erasmus, a cautious and careful reformer, attempted to provide his students and readers with a *philosophia Christi* that represented a clear account of genuine Christianity as he understood it. In this philosophy of Christ, Jesus

serves as pattern to be imitated and followed. For Erasmus, Christianity was a simple matter, not perfunctory legalistic acts of devotion or complicated scholastic systems of theology. It was Erasmus' goal to purge the church of these errors that obscured, even obviated, what he believed to be the simplicity of New Testament Christianity. He maintained that the primary means for bringing about this task included education, illumination and persuasion.

B. Biblical Scholar. Erasmus represented a break with medieval theology and thus the beginning point of the Reformation and contemporary biblical studies. With Erasmus we find the first flowering of New Testament exegesis, based on criticism and philology,[5] through which the Renaissance--while restoring the link with the Alexandrian school of interpretation--was to prepare the way for contemporary exegesis. Erasmus represents a departure from the typical medieval hermeneutic and his hermeneutic must be defined as a fresh endeavor. This fresh approach, unlike Luther's hermeneutic, was not a deliberate reaction against medieval traditions,[6] but an attempt to return to the earlier sources, thus bypassing the medieval schoolmen.

Erasmus was renaissance man, a product of the movement. As the word renaissance indicates, Erasmus was devoted to the rebirth of antiquity. Beyond this, he desired to Christianize the renaissance movement so that the result would be not only an intellectual awakening but a genuine spiritual rebirth for the people of his times.[7] This new age was to be an age combining the very best of the classical and the Christian world, a classical world molded into a Christian pattern, a Christianized classical world.

Erasmus began his scholarly career as a thorough-going renaissance person, totally immersed in the ideas of antiquity. But he moved definitely and deliberately toward a Christian humanism, even to the point that he could be classified under the renaissance movement only with certain reservations; that is, that classical studies rather than being the *summum bonum* of literature must be adapted or made serviceable to Christianity. For Erasmus, the deepest meaning of cultured literature was not found in its intrinsic value but in its benefits for theology.[8]

Following his initial visit to England in the years 1499-1500, a definite change took place in Erasmus' thinking. The change did not move him away from his commitment to the original sources (*ad fontes*), but there was shift toward the Holy Scriptures as the chief among sources. This shift was occasioned primarily by the influence of John Colet, with whom Erasmus had studied during his time at Oxford. Colet had been lecturing on the Pauline letters at Oxford since 1496. He determined to discover the historical meaning of the biblical texts and this hermeneutical approach shaped the formation of Erasmus' pioneering hermeneutics.[9]

Erasmus as Biblical Interpreter

A. The Sources of Erasmus' Hermeneutics. The two primary influences upon Erasmus' approach to biblical interpretation came from his study of the Church Fathers and from his association with John Colet. Erasmus enthusiastically approached the ideas of Colet. During his days at the University of Paris, he had been introduced to the idea of original meanings of authors. His association with Colet encouraged him to direct his attention to the Scriptures. His reading of the Church Fathers had greatly influenced and shaped his developing theology which was grounded in a "spirit-letter" or "spirit-flesh" dichotomy, a tradition that can be traced back to Origen and the Alexandrian Fathers. It will be helpful for us at this stage to understand the approaches of these two significant figures, Origen and Colet.

1. Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185-254). Several important Christian writers of the second and third centuries engaged incidentally in New Testament studies, but the first important scholarly interpreter was Origen. He brought "the touch of a master to what had hitherto been nothing much more than the exercise of amateurs."[10] Origen understood biblical inspiration in the Platonic sense of utterance in a state of ecstatic possession. Therefore it was appropriate that the words imparted in this way should be interpreted mystically if their inner significance was to be made known.[11]

Whereas Erasmus contended that there was letter and spirit in the Bible just as there is flesh and spirit in men and women,[12] Origen distinguished three senses of Scripture--literal, moral and allegorical--as corresponding to the three aspects of men and women, body, soul and spirit.[13] Although Erasmus was aware of Origen's threefold division of humanity and on occasion enumerates these three senses, he does not clearly incorporate the tripartite approach into his hermeneutics, rather combining the allegorical and moral.

As Erasmus' hermeneutical method developed, he distanced himself from Origen and moved toward a Jerome-type model (who had a twofold approach), stressing the literal over the allegorical. Yet it should be recognized that in the "Enchiridion," Erasmus named Origen as the interpreter, next to Paul, who best disclosed the hidden meaning of Scripture. So it is apparent that Erasmus never completely abandoned certain aspects of the allegorical hermeneutics, even while developing his *sensus literalis* concept of Scripture.[14] Yet, it is the literal-grammatical-historical sense that most excited Erasmus and shaped his pioneering hermeneutics.

2. John Colet (ca. 1467-1519). Erasmus' career as biblical interpreter was influenced more by John Colet than by any other person, ancient or contemporary. Colet received the bachelor of arts and master of arts degrees at Cambridge. Following his study at Cambridge, he traveled in Italy and then returned to lecture at St. Paul's College at Oxford while working on his doctoral degree.[15] Whether Colet developed his hermeneutical system at Cambridge or elsewhere is difficult to know for sure. What is known for sure is that Colet's

treatments of the biblical materials in his 1499 lectures were a departure from the medieval system of interpretation.

Prior to Colet, the medieval exegete had concentrated upon organizing a body of doctrine, point by point, based on a conflation of biblical texts and supporting quotes from the Church Fathers. Colet went to the text of Scripture itself and its direct interpretation. He focused upon the document and the author rather than the doctrine and the tradition.[16]

Erasmus greatly admired this approach and sought to add his characteristic emphasis of the original sources, which in this case was the Greek New Testament. Colet lectured from the Latin Vulgate, but Erasmus wanted to move beyond the Vulgate to interpret the Greek and Hebrew texts. So at this stage in his life, Erasmus devoted himself to the mastery of the Greek language. By the time that Erasmus had penned the "Enchiridion," he had a vision for the reform of Christianity and biblical studies that would be accomplished by calling the church back to the Bible, the sourcebook of its faith. In order to understand Erasmus' hermeneutical contributions, it is necessary not only to see the insights derived from Colet concerning the historical meaning of Scripture, but also his dependence upon Origen's spiritual sense, even though this aspect of Erasmus' hermeneutics declined as his views developed and matured.

B. The Two-Sided Aspect of Erasmus Hermeneutic.

1. *Sensus Literalis*. To discover the philological-historical meaning of a biblical passage, one must first apply the method of textual criticism. The original words of the author must be recovered as far as possible by the restoration of the text. Erasmus sought to do this by emending the text of the New Testament, which had suffered considerable textual corruption since the time of Jerome. The result of this effort was a fresh translation, the *Novum Testamentum* (1516), the first critical edition of the New Testament.[17]

One of the oft-neglected elements in the study of Erasmus' approach to textual criticism is its Christological significance. Since Erasmus saw the sources as the means by which reform could be initiated, he realized too that *more* was needed than merely the conscientious study of the sources if the reform was to be implemented. This "more" was Christ himself. The *philosophia Christi* was the purest source for reform. But only through studying the sources, could the desired reform be accomplished, for it is in the sources that Christ lives, breathes and speaks.[18]

Erasmus established hermeneutical principles beyond the initial steps of textual criticism, which as far as possible sought to determine the meaning of the actual words of the text. These hermeneutical principles included aspects of literary and historical criticism. When interpreting any biblical passage, Erasmus noted that the interpreter:

1) should weigh not only what is said but also by whom it is said.

2) should observe to whom the words were said.

3) should see what words were used at what time and on what occasion.

4) should note what precedes and what follows the words under consideration, that is, the historical and literary context must be known.

5) should have a knowledge of Hebrew, Greek and Latin as well as the disciplines of dialectic, arithmetic, music, natural science, history and especially grammar and rhetoric (both of which were preferred to dialectic).[19]

6) should handle the ambiguities and apparent contradictions by textual emendation and knowledge of grammar. If difficulties still remain, then obscure passages should be correlated with other passages to bring illumination to the problematic texts, which often led to allegorical interpretations. Also, these difficult passages should be viewed from within the circle of orthodox Christian doctrine, the teachings of Christ and common sense (= law of nature; for Erasmus, the law of Christ and the law of nature were in essential agreement).[20]

7) should at this point look to the Fathers[21] (the Greek Fathers are preferred to the Latin Fathers) and the classical writers for additional insight for the literal *and* spiritual meaning of the text.[22]

Following these principles, the interpreter should be able to discern the original sense of the biblical author. However, it is vital to realize that Erasmus was willing to acknowledge that even after applying these principles and the tools of philology and grammar, the meaning of some passages still remained obscure. Erasmus differed with certain Reformers at this point who stressed the perspicuity of Scripture, Erasmus remained willing to live with the tension of some unanswered problem texts. He did not want to remove the text from its historical setting simply for the sake of harmonization, but rather preferred to wrestle with the meaning of the text as it stood. He declared that some texts remained obscure and for this reason various interpretations existed among the Fathers. Because of the difficulties that remained in the interpretations of some passages, in spite of Erasmus' genuine optimism for philological-historical hermeneutics, he maintained a cautious reverence for the mystery of the biblical text.

2. Spiritual-Allegorical-Tropological Hermeneutics. The obscurity of certain passages was increased by the fact that texts have not only a simple, historical sense, but also a deeper, spiritual sense.[23] However, Erasmus, like Origen, failed to recognize that figures of speech interpreted figuratively were, in reality, the literal sense. In fact, Hugh of St. Victor (ca. 1096-1141) had

recognized and established that figures of speech belonged to the literal sense of interpretation.[24]

Whenever the words, interpreted literally, remained obscure or in conflict with the teachings of Christ, Erasmus suggested that the literal meaning must be shifted to the allegorical sense. Especially was this the case with the stories, primarily in the Old Testament, that contain morally offensive acts. Also, accounts, which while not morally offensive, were less valuable if interpreted literally rather than allegorically such as the story of Eve and the serpent (Gen. 3) and the historical accounts in the Kings and Chronicles.

Erasmus was careful not to *prove* important doctrines on the basis of allegorical interpretation, but believed they could be used to *confirm* certain theological truths. For example, the vision of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37 interpreted literally refers to the regathering and renewal of the people of God. Yet, Erasmus believed that a spiritual interpretation of this passage could usefully serve as a confirmation of the truth of the resurrection.[25]

J. B. Payne has outlined Erasmus' purposes in using a spiritual-allegorical hermeneutic:

1) to veil mysteries from the impious;

2) to exercise the minds of the pious since they are more avid for what is hidden and acquired with labor than for what comes to them easily;

3) to fix the divine truth in their (the pious) memory through imagery.

4) to lead by degrees to perfect knowledge.[26]

Erasmus, always the teacher, affirmed a pedagogical theme in the use of allegorical interpretation. The Old Testament, through types and enigmas, prepared the world for the light of the gospel. This approach paralleled the world for the light of the gospel. This approach paralleled the teaching method of Christ who gradually revealed to his disciples the more sublime mysteries, not immediately, but through the progression of aphorisms, parables, signs and wonders. In so doing, Jesus led them from a recognition that he was a teacher--to the fact that he was a prophet--to the truth concerning his messianic office. This pedagogical theme followed the accommodation concept in Origen's understanding of allegory.[27] Thus, God, in Holy Scripture, accommodated himself to the weaknesses of his children, babbling and stammering with them as a parent to the infants.[28]

As we would expect from the moral theologian, Erasmus was ultimately concerned with the application of piety and therefore stressed the tropological meaning of the biblical texts. The goal of exegesis, as understood by Erasmus, was not the gathering of information, but the transformation of character that

took place in the interpreter through the process of interpretation and learning. [29]

So important was the tropological/moral sense for Erasmus that he was seemingly willing to disallow the historical meaning of a text in order to receive pious truth. The moral teaching, however, must be consistent with some other portion of Scripture if it is not consistent with the present context being considered by the interpreter. Erasmus attempted not to violate the literal-historical sense, yet the dominant consistency in his interpretation was the moral sense of the passage. The tropological sense was exceedingly more important and simultaneously easier to grasp. It did not require the imagination required of the allegorical interpretation.[30]

For Erasmus, certain passages were difficult to interpret historically because of the ambiguities or obscurities in the passage or because of the seemingly immoral acts in the stories of biblical characters. Not all passages can be interpreted allegorically for numerous reasons. However, all passages can be accommodated to the tropological sense of Scripture and moral principles can be discerned. Therefore, the interpreter needs not only training to use the tools of literary and historical criticism or the imagination and insight to determine allegorical meanings, but a clean heart and pure mind to seek the ultimate goal of Scripture.

3. The "Both/And" Tension. It is important to remember that the "early" Erasmus emphasized the spiritual-allegorical sense of Scripture. In the "Enchiridion," Erasmus placed so much emphasis upon the spiritual meaning of the text, that the literal was almost entirely de-emphasized.[31] With his increasing preoccupation with philological and historical exegesis, his appreciation for the literal sense was heightened and developed.[32] This literal-historical sense was present in the preface of the *Novum Instrumentum* (1515) where he affirmed that the literal should not be scorned for it serves as the foundation upon which the spiritual can be built.[33] In his mature writings, Erasmus wanted to understand carefully the historical meaning of the text before proceeding to the allegorical, seeking to demonstrate the unity between the letter and spirit, the historical and allegorical.[34] Erasmus only rejected the historical sense when seeking to discern literary, historical or moral difficulties, considering such a rejection a moral necessity.

In the "later" Erasmus, the stress was placed upon the historical sense while calling for prudence and restraint, as well as simplicity in allegorical interpretation. In the "Ecclesiastica" (1535), Erasmus sought balance between the two aspects of his "both/and" hermeneutic. He observed that those on the verge of moving to a Christianity similar to legalistic Judaism excluded tropes and allegories from the Scripture, making the letter the law, calling that spiritual which Paul called carnal. Likewise he chided those who subverted the foundational meaning of Scripture, who rejected it because it was supposedly the lowest sense, when there was no necessity to do so.[35]

Erasmus did not simply return to the Alexandrian exegesis of the brilliant Origen, neither did he exceed the allegorizing of Origen nor neglect the strengths of Origen altogether. At the same time, the historical interpretation developed from John Colet was not employed to the extent that the allegorical or tropological sense was ignored. There was development from the early Erasmus in the "Enchiridion" who praised Origen without qualification to the later Erasmus who used Origen's method primarily out of necessity. The mature Erasmus attempted to retain the literal and spiritual senses, while stressing the priority of the moral sense. He combined in a tension-filled manner the philological-historical concepts of Colet and the allegorical approach of the Platonizing Origen. It was because of the richness and soundness of Erasmus' method that he became the positive influence for Reformers (Luther and Calvin), Puritans (Tyndale, who had been his student), and contemporary biblical scholars as well.

Erasmus as Model for Biblical Interpretation

A. The Reformers. In Erasmus, it has been said that Greece rose from the dead with the New Testament in her hand. Erasmus brought a breath of fresh air to biblical studies with his decided emancipation from untenable traditions. The English martyr, Bilney, owed his conversion to the Erasmus' edition of the Greek New Testament. Tyndale, Coverdale, and Luther all used it as well. Erasmus' famous words were quoted by his disciple, Tyndale, as he faced the disputation with the church theologians, "If God spare my life ere many years, I will cause the boy that driveth the plough to know more of Scripture than thou dost." One has to recognize the time period in which Erasmus first uttered that statement for its impact to be grasped. It was in an era when even Luther was 26 years old before he read a complete Bible. Erasmus was calling for a bold reformation where even common persons could read for themselves the wonderful news of God's gospel.[36]

In a certain sense, Erasmus had a right to reject the ridicule, *Erasmus lutherissat*. When his influence is properly understood, it can be affirmed that *Luther erasmissat*. Erasmus made an important break with medieval scholastic approach to theology and hermeneutics, but not in a reactionary manner. The break was through a combination of Christian commitment, renaissance scholarship and the implementation of John Colet's hermeneutical insights. The genius and ability of Erasmus as a biblical scholar and moral theologian served as a model for Luther and other Reformers, thus paving the way for the acceptance of Luther's German translation of the Bible and the accompanying hermeneutical principles.

That Luther is the father of Protestant biblical interpretation is affirmed,[37] but the way was paved by Erasmus. Luther advanced Erasmus' hermeneutics, especially focusing upon the perspicuity of the text's message and the reference of all Scripture to Christ.[38] Luther published hermeneutical

principles in 1521 and 1528 with his German translations of the Bible. These two lists can be summarized as follows. He insisted:

1) on the necessity for grammatical knowledge;

2) on the importance of taking into consideration the times, circumstances and conditions;

3) on the observance of the context;

4) on the need of faith and spiritual illumination;

5) on keeping what he called the "proportion of faith" for maintaining the perspicuity of Scripture (often called the analogy of faith principle);

6) on the reference of all Scripture to Christ.[39]

Luther's commitment to the necessity for grammatical knowledge, the consideration of circumstances and conditions, the observance of the context, and the reference of all Scripture to Christ certainly reflects Erasmus' hermeneutics. Luther's stress on the christological aspects of interpretation, which included the themes of justification and redemption in Christ, differed from Erasmus' christological principle that focused on the teachings of Jesus. Moreover Luther's primary goal as interpreter was to overthrow the fourfold medieval exegesis.[40] As much as Luther disliked allegorical interpretation, even going so far as to refer to it as the harlot and dirt of the earth, he was not always faithful to his commitments and principles.[41] Perhaps, the most consistent interpreter among the Reformers was John Calvin who best reflected the *sensus literalis* of interpretation developed by Colet and Erasmus.

In contrast to Calvin, Luther's interpretations tended to be subjective, directed toward the individual believer. Accordingly Luther's hermeneutical principles at times led to extremes and subjectivism. Luther stressed the religious feeling or the existential dimensions of subjective faith over against the object of faith, thus often loosing sight of the historical sense.[42] Erasmus differed from the Reformation hermeneutics, though he provided the framework and impetus for it. Yet the path that Luther and Calvin followed, which was previously rugged and troublesome, had been prepared and made smooth by Erasmus.

B. Significance for Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics. In post-reformation theology since F. Schleiermacher (1768-1834), there has been no area of study that has aroused more interest for student and scholar alike than that of biblical-theological hermeneutics.[43] Having developed the hermeneutic of Erasmus and shown its relation to the Reformation, it will also be helpful to note Erasmus' impact upon post-reformation thought. Such an examination will not solve the current hermeneutical debate, but it will provide insight concerning the present-day discussions.[44] The present-day debate can be

seen, in an oversimplified sense, as a discussion between objective hermeneutics and descriptive hermeneutics. The two outstanding representatives of these approaches are E. D. Hirsch, Jr.[45] and H. G. Gadamer.[46] Hirsch advocates an objective hermeneutic based upon the author's original intention. Gadamer is concerned to deal with the text, apart from its author, as a mediation of meaning. It is beyond the scope of this essay to develop this section fully, but it is important for our purposes to note that both the objective (literal-historical sense) and the descriptive (spiritual-allegorical) are represented in Erasmus.[47]

Erasmus' principles for a literal-historical hermeneutic stressed historical meaning, context, occasion, intent and tone of the work.[48] So, likewise, the contemporary interpreter in the objective school sees the primary task of interpretation as historical, in the sense that he or she endeavors to discover what texts and contexts meant to their authors in their relationship with their readers.[49]

Even as Erasmus moved from the allegorical principles of Origen toward a more objective interpretation, he did not neglect the descriptive hermeneutic entirely. Erasmus maintained that the text was capable of deeper meanings beyond the historical sense.[50] In the same way, the descriptive hermeneutical school maintains that the text is not a fixed, univocal depository of meaning, but an exposition of something that exceeds it. The text has a fullness of meaning which by its very nature can never be exhausted. Thus it is not only possible, but is sometimes the case that the meaning mediated by the text actually exceeds the conscious intention of the author.[51]

Though I reject Gadamer's hermeneutic, I appreciate the emphasis on helping modern readers find meaning--or what I would prefer to call "significance"--in the text. Thus in Erasmus there is a groundwork for an avenue toward "understanding" in the present hermeneutical debate. The author's meaning in the writings can be determined through dedicated effort to reach back and read the text in its original context and setting. But at the same time, the biblical text is a word to bring transformation to the lives of the present members of the believing community. Both dimensions of the hermeneutical task must be affirmed. In doing so, following Erasmus, two interrelated phases should be implemented: 1) the literary-historical and 2) the spiritual-theological.[52] The first is prior and deals with the external features of the text and the situation in which the text has been placed by its authors. The second is concerned with the inner life of the text, that is, how the text impinges on the members of the community, past and present.

In this view, the norms and principles essential to historical and literary methodologies are incorporated into the spiritual-theological interpretation, serving to guide and oversee the spiritual or moral sense. Erasmus has established a paradigm for contemporary biblical studies in establishing the historical sense as foundational to, but not separate from, the spiritual aspect

of Scripture. The task of the contemporary interpreter, standing upon the shoulders of Erasmus, is to go to the author's meaning in the historical situation before coming back again to speak to the present.

Conclusion

Erasmus' work was the contribution of an innovative pioneer moving beyond tradition and supplying impetus for Reformation and post-reformation studies. His brilliance and courage paved the way for the direction of biblical studies for the following four hundred years. He exposed the religious abuses of the church and the excesses in the theology and biblical interpretation, though he remained an ally of Popes and Cardinals. He was prince of the renaissance humanists, yet a conceptual and reforming theologian. He delivered biblical exegesis from the dictatorship of the Church tradition, yet he was a premier student, translator and editor of the patristic writers. He was a pious moralist, yet a scholarly biblical critic. His words were more powerful than deeds and his many-sided abilities are worthy of appreciation.

As the chief founder of modern biblical criticism and reformation hermeneutics, he must always hold a cherished position among the interpreters of Scripture. With Erasmus, we find an innovator in his historical sense of scriptural interpretation and in his attachment to the human content of biblical theology. His conception of critical philology was the basis of his hermeneutics and biblical research.

Erasmus was the finest example of renaissance scholarship emphasizing the original sources. The ultimate source to which he returned was the Greek New Testament. Coupled with the return to the sources was a truly historical understanding of ancient texts. But Erasmus sought not just the historical or literal meaning of texts, but he desired that the texts bring edification to the readers through the moral-spiritual sense of Scripture. Yet, while holding this "both/and" tension of the literal and spiritual senses of Scripture, Erasmus' hermeneutics developed toward a more critical-historical and philological approach as his method matured. In the "both/and" hermeneutics of Erasmus, we find the groundwork for the advances that have occurred in contemporary biblical studies, as well as a paradigm for determining historical meaning and contemporary significance in the current hermeneutical discussions.

ENDNOTES

[1] His Dutch name was Gerrit Gerritszoon, but he gave himself the Latin name, Desiderius Erasmus. For interesting biographical accounts of Erasmus, cf. J. P. Dolan, editor, *The Essential Erasmus* (New York: Meridian, 1964), 7-23; R. D. Jones, *Erasmus and Luther* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); R. H. Bainton, *Erasmus* of Christendom (New York: Crossroad, 1969); P. Smith, *Erasmus* (New York: Ungar, 1923); R. Clouse, "Erasmus" *New*

International Dictionary of the Christian Church, edited by J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 350-51.

[2] Erasmus' influence was immense. In England, John Colet (ca. 1467-1519), Dean of St. Paul's at Oxford and Thomas More (1478-1535) were in warm sympathy with his aspirations. In fact, they were involved in influencing and shaping Erasmus' thought on these matters. Cf. Frederick Seebohm, *The Oxford Reformers: John Colet, Erasmus and Thomas More* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1896); and W. E. Campbell, *Erasmus, Tyndale and More* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1949). In France, he was admired by Guillaume Bude (1468-1540) and Lefevre d'Etaples (1455-1529). In Spain, Cardinal Ximenez was one of his most ardent patrons. In Germany and in Holland, Erasmus' influence had a crucial contribution to make in the development of both Protestantism and reforming Roman Catholicism. Perhaps one of the great tributes to Erasmus was found engraved on the tomb of Andrew Zebrzydowski, bishop of Krakow, who died in 1560, where the words *magni illius Erasmi discipulus et auditor* were found. After studying with Erasmus in 1528, he considered himself among the disciples of Erasmus. Indeed John Colet said following the publication of the Greek New Testament in 1516, "The Name of Erasmus will never perish." Cf. J. C. Olin, editor, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Selected Writings of Erasmus* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 1.

[3] See the survey in R. T. Jones, *The Great Reformation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1985), 24-26; also cf. J. Huizinga, *Erasmus and the Age of Reformation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957).

[4] A fine summary of these writings can be found in W. R. Estep, *Renaissance and Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 78-93.

[5] Note the creative discussion in H. J. DeJonge, "Novum Testamentum A Nobis Versum: The Essence of Erasmus' Edition of the New Testament," *Journal of Theological Studies* 35 (1984), 394-413; also see the contribution by Edwin Yamauchi to this discussion.

[6] L. Bouyer, "Erasmus in Relation to the Medieval Biblical Tradition," *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, 3 vols., edited by G. W. H. Lampe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 2, 492-93; R. F. Surburg, "The Significance of Luther's Hermeneutics for the Protestant Reformation" *Concordia Theological Monthly* 24 (1954), 241-61.

[7] D. Erasmus, "The Paraclesis," *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, 94-95.

[8] P. S. and H. M. Allen, editors, *Opus Epistolarum Erasmi*, 11 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1906-47), 2136-185, *"Prouexi linguas ac politores litteras, magno rei theologicai bono*."

[9] Cf. J. H. Bentley, *Humanist and Holy Writ* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 115-17.; also cf. J. W. Aldridge, *The Hermeneutics of Erasmus* (Richmond: John Knox, 1966), 16, who observes that Erasmus maintained multiple sources including classical philosophy and the Church Fathers, but the Scriptures were the chief source.

[10] R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (London: SCM, 1959), 360. It should be noted that the most inclusive work to date on Erasmus' hermeneutic, Aldridge, *The Hermeneutics of Erasmus*, generally ignores this allegorical/spiritualistic aspect of Erasmus' hermeneutic.

[11] F. F. Bruce, "The History of New Testament Study," *New Testament Interpretation*, edited by I. H. Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 26.

[12] B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford, 1952), 1-25; also see the "Enchiridion" *Essential Erasmus*, 47-49.

[13] Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 235-37; J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, revised, 1978), 73.

[14] Erasmus, "Enchiridion," *The Essential Erasmus*, 37, 39.

[15] Cf. the innovative work by W. R. Godfrey, "John Colet of Cambridge," in *Archiv fur Reformationgeschicte* (Stuttgart: Mohr, 1974), 65, 6-18.

[16] A. Rabil, *Erasmus and the New Testament: The Mind of a Christian Humanist* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1972), 43-44.

[17] Cf. K. W. Clark, "Observations on the Erasmian Notes in Codex 2," *Studia Evangelica* 53 (1959), 749-56; also cf. J. H. Greenlee, *Scribes, Scrolls and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

[18] Aldridge, *Hermeneutics of Erasmus*, 14.

[19] Erasmus was careful to examine the idiomatic expressions (particularly Hebraisms) proper to the language of the Bible which are particularly confusing when encountered in New Testament texts: hyperboles and other expressions to be taken in a wide sense. He did not forget that irony must be taken into consideration, including certain sayings of Jesus. He also insisted on the danger of taking words in a sense they may have had in Classical Greek, but which was not the way they were used in the New Testament. Cf. Bouyer, "Erasmus and Medieval Biblical Tradition," 504.

[20] This Christological center should be differentiated from Luther's Christological method by observing that Erasmus' focus was upon the teaching

Christ in the gospels and for Luther the emphasis was upon the redeeming Christ of the epistles. Cf. I. D. K. Siggins, *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970) and J. B. Payne, *Erasmus: His Theology of the Sacraments* (Bratcher, 1970), 54-70.

[21] It is of interest to observe that Erasmus was not afraid to differ with and be independent of the Fathers, even those he greatly admired like Ambrose, Jerome, and the highly esteemed Origen. The Fathers were never the final authority in the interpretation of Scripture for Erasmus. Though the Fathers were given a place of high esteem and value by Erasmus in interpreting Scripture and though they remained the standard for interpretation, they were never the final authority. The Holy Scriptures were the final irrefutable authority for Erasmus. While Erasmus held to a high view of Scripture and emphasized biblical authority, he did not equate biblical inspiration with biblical infallibility and noted some minor errors or mistakes in Scripture, but he sought to deal with these difficulties through allegorical interpretation. Cf. Aldridge, *Hermeneutics*, 93-95.

[22] These principles are summarized and expanded in J. B. Payne, "Toward the Hermeneutics of Erasmus" in *Melanges, Scrinium Erasmianum*, vol. 2, edited by J. Coppens, cited in Payne, *Erasmus: His Theology*, 45, 46, 252.

[23] The medieval scholastics distinguished four senses of Scripture: the historical or grammatical, the allegorical, the tropological, and the anagogical without distinction. Payne notes that Erasmus, while quite methodical, was inexact in his terminology, cf. Payne, *Erasmus*, 48-49.

[24] Smalley, *The Bible in the Middle Ages,* 93-101. This was perhaps Erasmus' only digression in the development of his hermeneutical method.

[25] Payne, *Erasmus*, 49.

[26] Ibid., 49-50.

[27] Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 224-231.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Again, here he followed Origen who maintained the moral meaning of Scripture as the most important level of interpretation. Cf. J. L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 1, 220.

[30] Payne, *Erasmus*, 52.

[31] Erasmus, "Enchiridion," 47-49.

[32] Aldridge, *Hermeneutics*, 98ff.

[33] According to Smalley, *Bible in the Middle Ages* 95, Hugh St. Victor was perhaps the first to emphasize the historical sense as the foundation for the allegorical sense and to criticize the Gregorian tradition with its sublime disregard for the literal meaning of Scripture. Cf. also, B. Smalley, 'The Bible in the Medieval Schools," *The Cambridge History of the Bible* 2, 197-220. Origen did not regularly stress the need to build the allegorical upon the literal, cf. Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 242-58.

[34] H. R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 92-94; Bruce, "History of New Testament Study," 25.

[35] Erasmus, "Ecclesiastica," LB, V, 1028c, cited in Payne, *Erasmus*, 51.

[36] For discussions of this information, see F. W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 316-17. Erasmus' statement can be found in the "Paraclesis."

[37] A. S. Wood, "Luther as Interpreter of Scripture," *Christianity Today* 3 (November 24, 1958), 7; cf. B. L. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids; Baker, 1970), 53-57.

[38] Luther's "Christological Principle" was founded upon the ideas of justification and redemption (see note #20). Cf. J. S. Preuss, "Luther on Christ and the Old Testament," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 43 (1972), 490-93; and H. Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, edited by V. I. Gruhn (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966).

[39] Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, 232.

[40] It is important to note that Erasmus never dealt with the eschatological or analogical aspects of interpretation. The finest work on the fourfold hermeneutic of the medieval schoolmen is B. Smalley, *The Bible in the Middle Ages*.

[41] Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament* 248; cf. J. T. Mueller, "Luther and the Bible," *Inspiration and Interpretation*, edited by J. F. Walvoord (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957); also W. J. Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible*, translated by J. Schmidt (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961).

[42] T. D. Parker, "The Interpretation of Scripture: A Comparison of Calvin and Luther on Galatians," *Interpretation* 17 (1963), 68-69.

[43] S. N. Gundry, "Evangelical Theology: Where Should We Be Going?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22 (1979), 13, states, "Hermeneutics is the unfinished item on our agenda of theological prolegomena. It must be seriously addressed by all evangelical theologians and biblical scholars in the

immediate future. Without a hermeneutical consensus, any hope for a consensus in theology and ethics is merely wishful thinking."

[44] Cf. the inquisitive discussion, "Was Erasmus a 'Modernist' Before the Event?" in L. Bouyer, *Erasmus and the Humanist Experiment* (London: Chapman, 1959), 137-51.

[45] E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

[46] H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by G. Borden and J. Cummings (New York: Crossroad, reprint, 1985). On page 473 of this work, Gadamer observes that nowhere is the debate over contemporary hermeneutical problems so lively as in the area of modern theology.

[47] In the present debate, there are some who seek to hold the "both/and" tension in a way similar to Erasmus without neglecting either side, e.g. A. Thiselton, *Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) who wants to affirm an objective reading of the text in its historical setting while recognizing descriptive (reader-response) reading for contemporary interpreters.

[48] Bouyer, "Erasmus and the Medieval Biblical Tradition," 502.

[49] R. M. Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 186.

[50] Bouyer, "Erasmus and the Medieval Biblical Tradition," 503-04.

[51] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 264.

[52] Cf. the discussion in W. G. Doty, *New Testament Interpretation* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1972).

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