

11-1-1970

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### Recommended Citation

Krodel, Gottfried G. (1970) "Erasmus-Luther: One Theology, One Method, Two Results," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 41, Article 61.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol41/iss1/61>

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# Erasmus—Luther: One Theology, One Method, Two Results\*

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LUTHER AND ERASMUS WERE BOTH BIBLICAL HUMANISTS, BOTH AFFIRMED THE grace of God as central, but each constructed a different theological system. Erasmus always regarded theology as a descriptive task, best advanced by continuous disputations. Luther saw the Gospel as the crystal-clear center of Scripture, the saving knowledge revealed by God. Because of this conviction, Luther viewed theology as the task of making assertions, of boldly confessing one's faith.

\* The following is a revised and annotated text of a lecture delivered on April 28, 1970, at Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Ill. In the notes the following abbreviations have been used: Allen (volume, number of letter, line): *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. P. S. Allen, et al. (Oxford, 1906 to 1958), 12 vols.—Clericus: *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opera Omnia*, ed. J. Clericus (Leiden, 1703—1706; reprint: Hildesheim, 1961 to 1962), 10 vols.—Himelick: *The Enchiridion of Erasmus*, trans. and ed. R. Himelick (Bloomington, 1963).—Holborn: *Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus, Ausgewählte Werke*, ed. H. Holborn (Munich, 1933).—Kohls: E. W. Kohls, *Die Theologie des Erasmus* (Basel, 1966), 2 vols.—LW: *Luther's Works*, American Edition (Philadelphia and St. Louis, 1955— ).—Rupp-Watson: *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, trans. and ed. E. G. Rupp, Ph. S. Watson, et al., Vol. XVII in the *Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia, 1969).—S-J: *Luther's Correspondence*, ed. P. Smith, Ch. Jacobs (Philadelphia, 1913—1918), 2 vols.—WA: *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar, 1883— ).—WA, Br (volume, number of letter, line): *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Briefwechsel* (Weimar, 1930— ).—Walter: *De libero arbitrio diatribe sive collatio per Desiderium Erasmus Roterodamum*, ed. J. von Walter (Leipzig, 1935).

On May 18, 1517, Luther, filled with the pride of a young academician, wrote to his friend John Lang, who was then teaching at the University of Erfurt:

Our theology and St. Augustine are progressing well, and with God's help rule at our University. Aristotle is gradually falling from his throne, and his final doom is only a matter of time. It is amazing how the lectures on the *Sentences* are disdained. Indeed no one can expect to have any students if he does not want to teach this theology, that is, lecture on the Bible or on St. Augustine or another teacher of ecclesiastical eminence.<sup>1</sup>

And about a year later, on March 21, 1518, Luther wrote to Lang that "our University is getting ahead. We expect before long to have lectures on the two, or rather three [classical] languages, on Pliny, mathematics, Quintilian, and other excellent subjects, after the absurd courses [on the Scholastic logicians] and on Aristotle are dropped."<sup>2</sup>

Between these letters fall two very important events in Luther's theological career: the disputation against Scholastic theology (Sept. 4, 1517), and the *Ninety-five Theses*. Furthermore, a few weeks after Luther had written the second letter, the famous Heidelberg disputation took

<sup>1</sup> WA, Br I, 41:8 ff.; LW 48, 42.

<sup>2</sup> WA, Br I, 64:41 ff.

place (April 26, 1518). On May 18 Luther reported about this disputation to his friend George Spalatin:

The doctors [of the Heidelberg faculty] . . . debated with me in such a fair way that they have my highest esteem. Theology seemed to be some strange thing to them. . . . My theology is like rotten food to [my former teachers at] Erfurt. [One of them, Jodocus Trutvetter,] has condemned all my statements; he has written me a letter in which he has accused me of being an ignoramus in dialectic, not to speak of theology. . . . They obstinately cling to their neat little distinctions, even when they confess that these are confirmed by no other authority than that which they call the wisdom of natural reason, which for us is the same as the abyss of darkness. We preach no other light than Jesus Christ, the true and only light.<sup>3</sup>

One of the men who were present in the refectory of Heidelberg's Augustinian monastery, where the disputation took place, was a former Dominican from Schlettstadt by the name of Martin Bucer. He voiced his reaction in a May 1 letter to Beatus Rhenanus (who was then working for the famous Froben press in Basel, which in 1516 had published the Erasmus edition of the New Testament); he summarized his feelings by stating: "[Luther] agrees with Erasmus in all matters."<sup>4</sup>

Erasmus and Luther are one.<sup>5</sup> This was

<sup>3</sup> WA, Br I, 75:23 ff.; LW 48, 61-62.

<sup>4</sup> A. Horawitz and K. Hartfelder, eds., *Briefwechsel des Beatus Rhenanus* (Leipzig, 1886; reprint: Hildesheim, 1966), No. 75; S-J I, No. 57.

<sup>5</sup> E. W. Kohls, "Erasmus und die werdende evangelische Bewegung des 16. Jahrhunderts," *Scrinium Erasmi*, I (1969), 203 ff., has demonstrated how Biblical humanism and the early Reformation stood in continuity. See also

the commonly held opinion of the day, once Luther had entered the arena of theological controversy on a nationwide scale; and this opinion was voiced either with admiration and approval (so by the reform-zealous humanists), or with disgust (so by the witch-hunting traditionalists). Prior to the Leipzig disputation Luther and Erasmus themselves did nothing to dispel this opinion.<sup>6</sup> The famous April 14, 1519, letter written by Erasmus to Elector Frederick the Wise regarding the Luther case documents Erasmus' attitude toward Luther.<sup>7</sup> And Luther's letters to Reuchlin (Dec. 14, 1518), to Erasmus (March 28, 1519), and to other humanists document his open admiration for the humanists and his efforts to have them side with his own cause.<sup>8</sup> While these letters are well known, equally well known are the bitter controversy between Luther and Erasmus regarding the will and the biting remarks Luther made about Erasmus and Erasmus about Luther.<sup>9</sup>

B. Möller, "Die deutschen Humanisten und die Anfänge der Reformation," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, LXX (1959), 46 ff.

<sup>6</sup> For details see G. G. Krodel, "Luther, Erasmus, and Henry VIII," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, LIII (1962), 60 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Allen III, 939; S-J I, No. 141.

<sup>8</sup> WA, Br I, 120 (S-J I, No. 104); 163 (LW 48, 117 ff.). In this connection the Luther-Capito correspondence of 1518/19 is of special importance (WA, Br I, 91 [S-J I, No. 78]; 147 [S-J I, No. 127]), as well as Capito's April 8, 1519, letter to Erasmus (Allen III, 938).

<sup>9</sup> For the most recent literature on the controversy on the will, see H. J. McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong? An Ecumenical-Theological Study of Luther's Major Work, The Bondage of the Will* (New York and Minneapolis, 1969); for a review of this important work see especially *Dialog*, VIII (1969), 231 ff. For the Erasmus-Luther relationship in general, the controversy on the will in particular, see

Until recently, Protestant Erasmus scholars generally have looked at Erasmus from hindsight,<sup>10</sup> that is, from the fact that Erasmus rejected the Reformation. It is the great merit of Ernst Wilhelm Kohls to have concentrated, in his two-volume work on Erasmus' theology, on the *beginnings* of the theology of the great humanist.<sup>11</sup> This essay makes some observations on the theology of Erasmus and the theology of Luther by taking as point of departure the theology of Erasmus prior to his involvement with the Luther case, that is, approximately prior to or shortly after the Leipzig disputation.<sup>12</sup>

## I

It is the result of the upswing in Erasmus studies,<sup>13</sup> an upswing which occurred parallel to the Luther renaissance, that we have to look at Erasmus primarily as a theologian and not as a moralist or a pietist or a linguist. Even though one can still read that Erasmus does not have a theo-

G. Rupp, *The Righteousness of God. Luther Studies* (London, 1953), pp. 259 ff.; H. Bornkamm, "Erasmus und Luther," *Lutherjahrbuch*, XXV (1958), 3 ff.; O. J. Mehl, "Erasmus contra Luther," *Lutherjahrbuch*, XXIX (1962), 52 ff.; A. Siirala, *Divine Humanness* (Philadelphia, 1970).

<sup>10</sup> Paul Mestwerdt (*Die Anfänge des Erasmus. Humanismus und Devotio Moderna* [Leipzig, 1917]) was one of the few exceptions in Europe, while in America it was especially Albert Hyma who called attention to the theological beginnings of Erasmus. For details see Kohls I, 1 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Kohls I, II. See also G. G. Krodel, "Erasmus-Theologian," *Cresset*, XXX (October 1967), 11 ff., where Kohls' work is analyzed. For reviews of Kohls' work see *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, LVIII (1967), 250 ff.; *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, XCIV (1969), 358 ff.; *Lutherjahrbuch*, XXXVI (1969), 127 ff.

<sup>12</sup> See n. 6.

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed review see Kohls I, 1 ff.

logy,<sup>14</sup> or that in his thought the substance of Christian dogma has been lost,<sup>15</sup> since Kohls' work on the theology of Erasmus it should be next to impossible to bypass theology as the organizing principle of Erasmus' work. To be sure, Erasmus was also a great linguist and pedagogue, a man of satire and feuilleton. But these activities were all marginal when compared with the activities of Erasmus the theologian. And his greatest contribution to theology was his 1516 edition of the Greek text of the New Testament,<sup>16</sup> to which he added a critical-exegetical commentary (the *Adnotationes*),<sup>17</sup> and a theological and methodological introduction (the *Paraclesis* and the *Methodus*).<sup>18</sup> With these publications

<sup>14</sup> A. Auer, *Die vollkommene Frömmigkeit des Christen nach dem Enchiridion militis Christiani des Erasmus von Rotterdam* (Düsseldorf, 1954), would be a good example of this type of argument.

<sup>15</sup> See J. Lortz, "Erasmus-kirchengeschichtlich," *Aus Theologie und Philosophie. Festschrift für Fritz Tillmann zu seinem 75. Geburtstag* (Düsseldorf, 1950), pp. 271 ff.

<sup>16</sup> For general information see A. Bludau, "Die beiden ersten Erasmus-Ausgaben des Neuen Testaments und ihre Gegner," *Biblische Studien*, VII (Freiburg, 1902), Heft 5; B. Reicke, "Erasmus und die neutestamentliche Textgeschichte," *Basler Theologische Zeitschrift*, XXII (1966), 254 ff.; H. F. Moule, "The Greek Text of Erasmus," *The Expositor* (Series VIII), XI (1916), 421 ff.; C. C. Tarelli, "Erasmus' Manuscripts of the Gospels," *Journal of Theological Studies*, XLIV (1942), 155 f.

<sup>17</sup> Clericus VI.

<sup>18</sup> 1516 text of the *Paraclesis* and *Methodus*: Holborn, pp. 139 ff.; text of the 1519 (fundamentally reworked) edition of the *Methodus*: Holborn, pp. 177 ff. English translation of the *Paraclesis*: J. C. Olin, ed., *Christian Humanism and the Reformation. Desiderius Erasmus: Selected Writings* (New York, 1965), pp. 92 ff. On the *Paraclesis* see P. Mesnard, "La Paraclesis d'Erasmus," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, XIII (1951), 26 ff. See also J. Coppens,

Erasmus created indeed a *Novum Instrumentum* for doing theology, and in his *Paraphrases* on all books of the New Testament, except Revelation, and on selected Old Testament writings he put his theory into practice.<sup>19</sup> With these publications he fulfilled a working program which he had certainly developed already in his *Enchiridion* of 1503,<sup>20</sup> or as Kohls quite convincingly establishes, perhaps already in his first major extant writing, the *Antibarbari* of 1494/95.<sup>21</sup>

According to Erasmus, true theology is Biblical theology and evangelical theology. That is, true theology has its source alone in Scripture, and the Gospel is the organizing principle of Scripture:

Why don't we all center our thinking on these great and important authors [of Holy Scripture]? Why don't we carry [Holy

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"Les idées réformistes d'Erasmus dans les Préfaces aux Paraphrases du Nouveau Testament," *Scrinium Lovaniense* (Louvain, 1961), pp. 367 ff. — W. T. H. Jackson, the editor of *Essential Works of Erasmus* (New York, 1965), simply does not give a true picture of Erasmus by editing as "essential works" only selections from the colloquies of Erasmus, his letters, and his *Praise of Folly*. The essential Erasmus is found in the introductory writings to the New Testament, and the vast literary productivity of Erasmus has to be seen from this point of view. The Erasmus selections by W. Köhler (*Die Klassiker der Religion*, XII, XIII [Berlin, 1917]), serve as a better introduction to the essentials of Erasmus.

<sup>19</sup> Clericus V and VII. According to Carl S. Meyer in *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XL (1969), 735, n. 14, the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington holds a copy of the 1548 English translation of the *Paraphrases* made by Nicholas Udall et al. For an analysis of the *Paraphrases* see R. H. Bainton, "The *Paraphrases* of Erasmus," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, LVII (1966), 67 ff.

<sup>20</sup> Text: Holborn, pp. 22 ff.

<sup>21</sup> Kohls I, 66; II, 83, n. 216.

Scripture] around with us? Hold [it] in our hands? Be concerned with [it]? Think about [it], and search [it] incessantly? Why do we spend a larger portion of our lives on Averroes than on the gospels? Why do we waste almost a whole life [studying] the commentaries and the contradictory opinions [we find in them]? It may be that [the commentaries] are indeed the task of the "exalted" theologians, but without any doubt [the gospels themselves] will be the touchstone of the great theologian of the future.<sup>22</sup>

Scripture is important for Erasmus because no artist with his brush could give us a clearer picture of Christ than Scripture has done.<sup>23</sup> In the New Testament, Erasmus maintains, "Christ lives, breathes, and speaks for us today. I could almost say He does so more effectively than when He was [on earth]. The Jews saw and heard less [of Him] than you hear or see [of Him] now in the evangelical writings."<sup>24</sup> Christ is for Erasmus *unicus scopus totius vitae*,<sup>25</sup> because in Christ God comes to man. As nothing is more like the Father than the Son (that is, the Father's Word which comes from the bottom of His heart), so nothing is more like Christ than Christ's Word.<sup>26</sup>

It is the task of theology to describe this revelation of God in Christ and to make it useful for the life of the individual Christian. "According to Erasmus all theological reflection has to take its point of

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<sup>22</sup> *Paraclesis*; Holborn, p. 148: 5 ff. See also the first quotation from the *Paraclesis* on p. 663, n. 89.

<sup>23</sup> *Enchiridion*; Holborn, pp. 75:3—76:24.

<sup>24</sup> *Paraclesis*; Holborn, p. 146:23 ff.; see also Holborn, pp. 94:34—95:2; 135:12-16 (*Enchiridion*).

<sup>25</sup> *Enchiridion*; Holborn, p. 63:9-10.

<sup>26</sup> *Enchiridion*; Holborn, p. 75:22-24.

departure with Scripture, and is therefore primarily exegesis, that is, explanation of and commentary on Scripture. The most important task and the actual purpose of all theological work is, however, to stimulate others to engage in Scripture exegesis."<sup>27</sup>

The norm and frame for this Biblical-exegetical theology is Christ, in whom God's history of salvation has reached its climax.<sup>28</sup> But Christ is for Erasmus not an empty word, a historical phenomenon; He is love (*caritas* {*agape*?}), simplicity, patience, purity—in short all that He Himself has taught, and it is the task of the Christian to look to Christ alone as the highest, the only good.<sup>29</sup> For Erasmus theology is exegetical theology normed by the Gospel, that is, by Christ's person and teachings, because Christ is the principle of correct thinking and blessed living. Theology is, then, evangelical theology as reflection on Christ's teachings and *stimulus* for the Christian life.

## II

Much has been written about Erasmus' method for this Biblical-exegetical-evan-

<sup>27</sup> Kohls I, 81; see also Kohls I, 136 ff.

<sup>28</sup> *Methodus* (1516); Holborn, pp. 156:14 to 157:24; see also Holborn, pp. 34:14—35:2; 56:32—57:16 (*Enchiridion*). According to Kohls (I, 175 ff.; II, 127, n. 715), Erasmus described this history of salvation in the categories of *exitus* and *reditus*, which he took over from some of the Fathers and from Thomas Aquinas. See also *Cresset*, XXX (October 1967), 14, n. 9.

<sup>29</sup> *Enchiridion*; Holborn, p. 63:11-27. On the Christology of Erasmus see Kohls I, passim; see also A. Rich, *Die Anfänge der Theologie Huldrych Zwingli's* (Zürich, 1949), pp. 25 ff.; L. W. Spitz, *The Religious Renaissance of the German Humanists* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), pp. 225—26.

gelical theology.<sup>30</sup> To be sure, Erasmus did not *invent* the "modern exegetical method and tools"—whatever this term may mean. He was a humanist, and as such he stood in the tradition of the textual studies of humanism,<sup>31</sup> joining with his fellow humanists in the cry *ad fontes*, and sharing with them the excitement of groundbreaking work in the areas of both internal and external criticism.<sup>32</sup> What made him a great exegete was his voluminous output and his pedagogical gifts of making con-

<sup>30</sup> See Kohls I, passim; see also C. S. Meyer, "Erasmus on the Study of Scriptures," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XL (1969), 734 ff.; M. Anderson, "Erasmus the Exegete," *ibid.*, XL (1969), 722 ff.; J. Coppens, "Érasme exégète et théologien," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*, XLIV (1968), 191 ff.; H. Schlingensiepen, "Erasmus als Exegete. Auf Grund seiner Schriften zu Matthäus," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, XLVIII (1929), 16 ff.; Rich, pp. 29 ff.; Spitz, pp. 218 ff., 224. John W. Aldridge's *The Hermeneutic of Erasmus* (Richmond, 1966) presents some problems and has not been received too enthusiastically; see, for example, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, V (1968), 176 ff.; Kohls I, 141; II, 115, n. 486; 131, n. 798; 135, n. 29.

<sup>31</sup> This can be documented by the fact that Erasmus' first major publication in the area of textual criticism was Valla's *Annotationes* (Paris, 1505). Letter of dedication: Allen I, 182; English translation: H. A. Oberman, ed., P. L. Nyhaus, trans., *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought* (New York, 1966), pp. 308 ff.

<sup>32</sup> See *Paraclesis*; Holborn, pp. 146:6-8; 141:21-25. For some examples of Erasmus' exegetical work see Anderson, 727 ff.; Spitz, pp. 218 ff.; A. Bludau, "Der Beginn der Controverse über die Aechtheit des Comma Joanneum (1. Joh. 5, 7, 8) im 16. Jahrhundert," *Der Katholik*, LXXXII (1902), 25 ff., 151 ff. For the argument between Erasmus und Faber Stapulensis on Hebr. 2:7 see Clericus IX, 17 ff.; see also M. Mann, *Érasme et les Débuts de la Réforme Française (1517—1536)* (Paris, 1934). For the argument between Erasmus and John Colet on Luke 26:39 see Kohls I, 103—4.

crete suggestions, based on the wealth of his own experience, and of guiding the beginner. He did this especially in his introductory writings to the New Testament edition and in his *Paraphrases*.

Erasmus' prime concern is to establish the *sensus historicus* of Scripture.<sup>33</sup> To accomplish this goal, Erasmus insists on a thorough knowledge of the original languages,<sup>34</sup> on the constant consultation of textual variants for the purpose of comparing and improving the available text,<sup>35</sup> and on a thorough knowledge of the history of exegesis.<sup>36</sup> In order to understand Scripture, an exact knowledge of the facts is necessary, as well as a thorough investigation of the context and a theological concordance of main terms and subjects, that is, of *loci theologici*.<sup>37</sup>

While this material of Erasmus' exegetical method is common knowledge, there is an element that is sometimes overlooked.

However, not at all do I want you, who are better endowed, to remain caught by the sterile letter, but you should hurry to

<sup>33</sup> *Methodus* (1516); Holborn, pp. 156:14 to 158:33. Only after the *sensus historicus* has been established may one proceed to the allegorical interpretation, but then one has to proceed to allegory for . . . "*contempta littera ad mysterium potissimum spectes.*" *Enchiridion*; Holborn, p. 70:15 f. On Erasmus and allegory see Kohls I, passim; Spitz, pp. 217 ff.; Rich, pp. 32 ff. In this connection the fifth canon of the *Enchiridion* is of special importance.

<sup>34</sup> *Methodus* (1516); Holborn, pp. 151:25 to 154:9.

<sup>35</sup> *Apologia* of the *Novum Instrumentum* (1516); Holborn, pp. 165:25—168:7; *Methodus* (1516); Holborn, pp. 152:12 ff.

<sup>36</sup> *Methodus* (1516); Holborn, pp. 154:31 to 155:4.

<sup>37</sup> *Methodus* (1516); Holborn, pp. 153:20 to 154:9; 158:22—159:14; 157:9 ff., where Erasmus suggests that one draw up an exact history of the life of Christ.

the more profound mysteries. [Strengthen yourselves in this task] with frequent prayers, until He opens to you the book with the seven seals, He who has David's keys, who locks and no one can open the mysteries of the Father — mysteries which no one knows but the Son and those to whom the Son wishes to reveal them.<sup>38</sup>

The study of Scripture has to be *interrupted* time and again with prayer and thanksgiving. In prayer one implores the aid of the Holy Spirit, in thanksgiving one acknowledges the granted grace.<sup>39</sup> Erasmus thus advocates a personal confrontation between Scripture and the exegete. Exegesis is not something that takes place in a vacuum, where the exegete as spectator remains detached from his subject. For Erasmus, Christian theology consists not of syllogisms, disputations, or abstract knowledge, but of life and transformation,<sup>40</sup> since "there is not one iota in Holy Scripture which does not pertain to your salvation."<sup>41</sup>

### III

It was this Biblical-exegetical-evangelical theology which Bucer heard defended by Luther during the Heidelberg disputation. And Bucer was correct in his evaluation of Luther. Since May 1516, that is, immediately after its publication, Luther had used the Erasmus edition of the New Testament in his classroom work,<sup>42</sup> just as he had

<sup>38</sup> *Enchiridion*; Holborn, p. 35:17 ff. See also n. 33.

<sup>39</sup> *Ratio seu Methodus* (1519 ed. of *Methodus*); Holborn, p. 180:32-34.

<sup>40</sup> *Paraclesis*; Holborn, pp. 144:35—145:1.

<sup>41</sup> *Enchiridion*; Holborn, p. 57:1-2.

<sup>42</sup> See WA LVI, xii f., xxvii ff. On Luther as a humanist see Spitz, pp. 237 ff.; B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 138 ff.; F. Schenke, "Luther und der Humanismus," *Luther*, XXXIII

used the work of the French Biblical humanist Faber Stapulensis when he was lecturing on the Psalms for the first time.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Luther was tenaciously working for a reorganization of the curriculum of his Wittenberg University along the lines of humanistic principles.<sup>44</sup> Luther shared with Erasmus the conviction that theology has to be both Biblical-exegetical and evangelical. He shared with Erasmus the exegetical method (that Luther might have had technical deficiencies does not jeopardize this judgment). A careful study of Luther's letters written in the period from 1516 to 1520, of his lectures, and of the history of Wittenberg University in that same period would clearly document the fundamental influence that Biblical humanism and its outstanding representative, Erasmus, had on Luther and his university. It is not necessary to go into detail at this point since much modern literature on this subject is available. Bucer was cor-

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(1962), 77 ff.; H. Junghans, "Der Einfluss des Humanismus auf Luthers Entwicklung bis 1518," *Lutherjahrbuch*, XXXVII (1970), 37 ff.

<sup>43</sup> See F. Hahn, "Luther's Auslegungsgrundsätze und ihre theologischen Voraussetzungen," *Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie*, XII (1935), 165 ff., and his "Faber Stapulensis und Luther," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, LVII (1938), 356 ff.; G. Ebeling, "Die Anfänge von Luthers Hermeneutik," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, XLVIII (1951), 172 ff., and his "Luthers Psalterdruck vom Jahre 1513," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, L (1953), 43 ff.; W. A. Quanbeck, "Luther's Early Exegesis," *Luther Today: Martin Luther Lectures*, I (Decorah, Iowa, 1957), 37 ff., especially 47 ff.

<sup>44</sup> For what follows see K. Bauer, *Die Wittenberger Universitätstheologie und die Anfänge der Deutschen Reformation* (Tübingen, 1928); E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times* (Saint Louis, 1950), pp. 268 ff., and his "New Groups and Ideas at the University of Wittenberg," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, LI (1958), 60 ff.

rect when he came to the conclusion that Luther agreed in all points with Erasmus.<sup>45</sup>

Yet, as is common knowledge, Luther was not a blind follower of Erasmus, and he did not uncritically adopt Biblical humanism. He knew of differences between his own theology and that of Biblical humanism. He did not hesitate to voice his criticism of Erasmus, even though he did this only to his intimate friends, obviously in an attempt to protect the progress of "our theology."<sup>46</sup>

Under the immediate impact of his careful study of the Erasmian New Testament, Luther wrote to George Spalatin on Oct. 19, 1516, and developed a detailed criticism of Erasmus' theology.<sup>47</sup> Luther made four points: (a) Erasmus lacks the proper understanding of the difference between *iustitia fidei* and *legis*; (b) Erasmus has no proper understanding of heretical sin; (c) Erasmus has not studied Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings; and consequently (d) Erasmus has no feeling for the early church tradition concerning justification by faith. Notwithstanding these criticisms, Luther expressed his deep respect for Erasmus and his work. He also pointed out that his criticism of Erasmus' high esteem of Jerome did not originate in a blind devotion to Augustine as the patron saint of his order.

By March 1, 1517, Luther had grown more emphatic:

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<sup>45</sup> See p. 649, n. 4.

<sup>46</sup> See p. 648. It cannot be decided whether Luther wanted "our theology" to refer exclusively to the theology taught at the University of Wittenberg or to the larger context of this local undertaking, that is, to the theology of Biblical humanism. See also below, Luther's letter of Jan. 18, 1518.

<sup>47</sup> WA, Br I, 27:4 ff.; LW 48, 24 ff.



I am reading our Erasmus, but daily I dislike him more and more. . . . I am afraid . . . he does not advance the cause of Christ and the grace of God sufficiently; here he knows even less than Stapulensis. Human things weigh more with him than divine. . . . I see that not everyone is a truly wise Christian just because he knows Greek and Hebrew. St. Jerome with his five languages cannot be compared with Augustine, who knew only one language. Erasmus, however, is of an absolutely different opinion on this. But the discernment of one who attributes weight to man's will [i. e., of Erasmus] is different from that of him who knows (*noscere*) nothing else but grace [i. e., Luther himself].<sup>48</sup>

Replying on Jan. 18, 1518,<sup>49</sup> to Spalatin's request regarding the best way to study Scripture, Luther pointed out:

You have Erasmus, who plainly asserts that blessed Jerome is such a great theologian in the church that he alone deserves to be considered. If I should place blessed Augustine over against him, I would seem to be quite a biased and unreliable judge, not only because I am a member of the Augustinian Order but also on account of the widespread and long-accepted opinion of Erasmus that it would be impudent even to compare Augustine with Jerome. . . . in the face of all who either passionately hate or slothfully neglect good learning—and that is before all men—I always give Erasmus the highest praise and defend him as much as I can; I am very careful not to air my disagreements with him lest by chance I too would confirm [his enemies] in their hatred of him. Yet, if I have to speak as a theologian rather than as a philologist, there are many things in Erasmus which seem to me to be completely incongruous with a knowledge of Christ

(*cognitio Christi*). Otherwise there is no man more learned or ingenious than he, not even Jerome, whom he extols so much. Now if you should disclose my opinion of Erasmus to someone else, you will have violated the principles of friendship. I am not warning you without good reason. There are many, as you know, who are eager to find an occasion to slander good learning. Therefore let what I have told you remain a secret.

Then Luther detailed his "system" of Bible studying:

To begin with, it is absolutely certain that one cannot enter (*penetrare*) into the [meaning of] Scripture by study or innate intelligence. Therefore your first task is to begin with prayer.<sup>50</sup> You must ask that the Lord in his great mercy grant you a true understanding of his words. . . . For there is no one who can teach the divine words except he who is their author, as he says, "They shall all be taught by God" [John 6:45].<sup>51</sup> You must therefore completely despair of your own diligence and intelligence and rely solely on the infusion of the Spirit. Believe me, for I have had experience in this matter.

Then, having achieved this despairing humility, read [the books of] the Bible in order from beginning to end, so that you first get the simple story in your mind (as I believe you have already done long since). Blessed Jerome, in his letters and commentaries, will be of great help to you in this. But for an understanding of Christ (*cognitio Christi*) and the grace of God (that is, for the more hidden understanding which is given by the Spirit), Augus-

<sup>50</sup> For Erasmus the study of Scripture has to be *interrupted* with prayer; see above, p. 653.

<sup>51</sup> For the fact that Erasmus used the concept which Luther expressed here by citing John 6:45, yet arrived at a different result, see below, note 53, the italicized lines in the quotations from the *Paraclesis*.

<sup>48</sup> WA, Br I, 35:15 ff.; LW 48, 40.

<sup>49</sup> WA, Br I, 57:10 ff.; LW 48, 52 ff.

tine and Ambrose seem to me to be far better guides, especially because it appears to me that blessed Jerome "Origenizes" (that is, allegorizes) too much. I say this aside from the judgment of Erasmus—but you asked for my opinion and not for his.

If one looks at this material, Luther's great respect for and admiration of Erasmus is obvious. Also obvious, however, is the fact that Luther's criticism of Erasmus is based neither on loyalty to a specific theological school nor on marginal issues. To the contrary, Luther's criticism deals with two issues which are central to his career as a theologian: the penetration of the meaning of Scripture and the knowledge of Christ. Luther's criticism focuses on Erasmus' understanding of the nature of Scripture and exegesis and on his understanding of Christ. While these issues obviously cannot be neatly separated, the following observations will concentrate on the issue of Scripture and exegesis.

Only after you have completely despaired of your diligence and intelligence, maintains Luther in the letter to Spalatin just quoted, and only when you completely rely on the Holy Spirit, are you able to penetrate Scripture; but—and this is the necessary consequence of Luther's argument—then you will indeed penetrate the meaning of Scripture because then God Himself will teach you the meaning of Scripture. About 10 years later Luther wrote in the Small Catechism: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel."

"To penetrate Scripture" means for Luther to understand Christ and to know

Him, to know what grace is, and to weigh it properly. Luther criticizes Erasmus for knowing little or nothing of grace. He criticizes many things in Erasmus' theology as being incongruous with the knowledge of Christ. The basis of this criticism is the fact that for Luther the purpose of Biblical-exegetical theology is to penetrate, to enter into the meaning of Scripture (*penetrare sacras literas*), in order to know Christ crucified and in Him the God of grace.<sup>52</sup> This alone is for Luther a proper knowledge of Christ. For Erasmus the purpose of Biblical-exegetical theology is to reverently observe and describe the *mysterium incarnationis*, to listen to the teachings of Jesus, and to make them fruitful for life through meditation and Christian living.<sup>53</sup> Thus

<sup>52</sup> See especially Luther's well-known April 8, 1516, letter to George Spenlein. WA, Br I, 11; LW 48, 11 ff.

<sup>53</sup> *Enchiridion*; Holborn, pp. 30:35—31:30; 33:20-22; 73:30-35. In talking about the penetration of Scripture, Erasmus oscillates between two extremes. On the one hand Scripture is clear and can be understood, if properly read and interpreted; therefore everyone should read Scripture. On the other hand Scripture contains mysteries which cannot be penetrated but have to be worshiped. And the *cognitio Christi* reaches its climax when Christ has become the *unicus scopus vitae*, the norm of correct thinking and blessed living. For documentation, see p. 651, the following quotation, the last paragraph of the quotation on p. 663, and p. 664. The following passages from the *Paraclesis* are of special importance: "Indeed, here there is no requirement that you approach equipped with so many troublesome sciences. The journey [i. e., into Scripture, or the *philosophia Christiana*] is simple, and it is ready for anyone. Only bring a pious and open mind, possessed above all with a pure and simple faith. Only be docile, and you have advanced far in this philosophy [i. e., the *philosophia Christiana*, or Christian theology]. It itself supplies inspiration as a teacher which communicates itself to no one more gladly than to minds that are without guile. The teachings

Erasmus can warn and admonish the reader of the *Enchiridion*:

... you must remember that one should not touch the Holy Scripture except with washed hands—this is to say, with abso-

of the others, besides the fact that they give hope of a false happiness, drive off the natural talents of many by the very difficulty, it is clear, of their precepts. This doctrine in an equal degree *accommodates itself to all* [see the commentary to the first sentence of the following quotation], lowers itself to the little ones, adjusts itself to their measure, nourishing them with milk, bearing, fostering, sustaining them, doing everything until we grow in Christ. Again, not only does it serve the lowliest, but it is also an object of wonder to those at the top. And the more you shall have progressed in its riches, the more you shall have withdrawn it from the shadow of the power of any other. It is a small affair to the little ones and more than the highest affair to the great. It casts aside no age, no sex, no fortune, or position in life. The sun itself is not as common and accessible to all as is Christ's teaching. It keeps no one at a distance, unless a person, begrudging himself, keeps himself away." Holborn, p. 141:27 ff.; translation by Olin, p. 96; italics by this writer.

"Indeed, *this philosophy easily penetrates into the minds of all, an action in special accord with human nature.* [For the contrast, see Luther's Jan. 18, 1518, letter to Spalatin, on p. 655, where Luther points out that you have to despair of your own ability in order to grasp the meaning of Scripture; this suggests that for Luther Scripture, the basis of theology, is not in accordance with human nature. See also WA XXV, 163:23-26 (*Lectures on Isaiah*); XXXVIII, 554:16-25 (*Notes on Matthew*); and below, p. 664, n. 89.] Moreover, what else is the philosophy of Christ, which He himself calls a rebirth, than the restoration of human nature originally well formed? By the same token, although no one has taught this more perfectly and more effectively than Christ, nevertheless one may find in the books of the pagans very much which does agree with His teaching." Holborn, p. 145:4 ff.; translation by Olin, p. 100; italics by this writer.

"Indeed, I disagree very much with those who are unwilling that Holy Scripture, translated into the vulgar tongue, be read by the uneducated, as if Christ taught such intricate

lute purity of mind—lest sin's antidote be turned into poison for you and the manna turn rancid. Remember that unless you absorb it into the innermost recesses of mind and feeling, you will suffer the same fate as Uzzah [2 Sam. 6:6 ff.], who had the temerity to lay profane hands upon the swaying ark and paid for his impermissible service with sudden death. It is of prime importance to understand the value of these writings. Think of them as genuine oracles, as they are, originating in the secret depths of the mind of God. If you approach them reverently, with veneration and humility, you will perceive yourself to be possessed by His will, to be ineffably rapt and transported. You will experience the delights of His blessed Spirit, you will know the riches of Solomon, you will find the hidden storehouse of everlasting wisdom. But beware of brazenly forcing your way into the chambers. The door is low;

doctrines that they could scarcely be understood by very few theologians, or as if the strength of the Christian religion consisted in men's ignorance of it. The mysteries of kings, perhaps, are better concealed, but Christ wishes his mysteries published as openly as possible. I would that even the lowliest women read the gospels and the Pauline Epistles. And I would that they were translated into all languages so that they could be read and understood not only by Scots and Irish but also by Turks and Saracens. Surely the first step is to understand in one way or another. It may be that many will ridicule, but some may be taken captive. Would that, as a result, the farmer sing some portion of them at the plow, the weaver hum some parts of them to the movement of his shuttle, the traveler lighten the weariness of the journey with stories of this kind! Let all the conversations of every Christian be drawn from this source. For in general our daily conversations reveal what we are. *Let each one comprehend what he can, let him express what he can.* Whoever lags behind, let him not envy him who is ahead; whoever is in the front rank, let him encourage him who follows, not despair of him." Holborn, p. 142:10 ff.; trans. Olin, pp. 96 f.; italics by this writer. For the whole problem see Kohls I, 134 ff.

see that you do not bump your head and bounce back! . . . If you prefer to be sounder in spirit than cunning in debate, if you are looking for food for the soul rather than a show of ingenuity, then meditate most profoundly upon the ancient commentators, whose goodness is more reliably tested, whose learning is more copious and mellow, whose language is neither dry nor crude, and whose interpretations are more in keeping with the spiritual content.

. . . God's Spirit has its own language and its own imagery, which you must, by all means, study carefully. When it speaks to us, this holy Wisdom stammers childishly and, just like a solicitous mother, suits her speech to our own inadequacy. She offers her milk to those who are little babes in Christ, her herbs to those with weak stomachs. But naturally you should hasten to mature and get ready for more solid nourishment. She stoops to your incompetence; but you, conversely, should mount upward toward Her sublimity. To be always the infant is unnatural; to be always the invalid is too flabby.<sup>54</sup> If you break through the husk and find the kernel, pondering one little line will have more savor and food value than will the whole psalter when it is chanted through with reference only to the literal content. . . .

[I find no] other reason for the fact that we see monastic devotion everywhere growing lax and enervated and dying out, but that these men are decaying in literalism and not striving for insight into the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures (*ad spiritalem scripturarum cognitionem elaborant*). They do not hear Christ calling out in the gospels: "The flesh is good for nothing at all. It is the spirit that gives life" [John 6:63]. They do not hear Paul corroborating his Master: "The letter kills;

<sup>54</sup> Compare this statement with Luther's statements concerning the beggar, p. 662.

it is the spirit that quickens" [2 Cor. 3:6]. We know that since the law is of the spirit it is not of the flesh [Rom. 7:14]. "Things of the spirit must be compared with things of the spirit" [1 Cor. 2:13]. At one time the Father of things spiritual wanted to be worshiped on a mountain top, but now in spirit [John 4:20 ff.].<sup>55</sup>

Biblical theology is for Erasmus a reverent description of and meditation on the divine mystery; a reverent feeling of one's way toward the "chambers," the holy of holiest, "the hidden storehouse of everlasting wisdom." It is reflection on and adoration of the Father in the Spirit. "Adoration," it should be remembered, means for Erasmus a devout life governed by Christ's teachings.<sup>56</sup> Theology is a *striving* (*elaborare*) for the *cognitio* of Scripture. Theology only points toward the center of religiosity, the *mysteria nostrae religionis* into which theology cannot, however, penetrate,<sup>57</sup> and, we may add, which faith also cannot grasp. For Erasmus the theologian and the man of faith are pilgrims moving toward a goal which they neither reach nor possess, though they might now and then catch a glimpse of it.<sup>58</sup> Their pilgrimage is normed by Christ, the only norm of correct thinking and blessed living,<sup>59</sup> and the individual's effort and good will on that pilgrimage count just as much as the accomplishment.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>55</sup> *Enchiridion*; Holborn, pp. 33:13 ff.; trans. Himelick, pp. 52 ff.

<sup>56</sup> See p. 652; see also below, n. 59.

<sup>57</sup> So Kohls I, 58, on the basis of Erasmus' *Antibarbari*.

<sup>58</sup> *Methodus* (1516); Holborn, p. 151:1-24; *Enchiridion*; Holborn, p. 33:7-16.

<sup>59</sup> *Enchiridion*; Holborn, p. 110:17-18; see also Kohls I, 58 ff., 61-62, 71.

<sup>60</sup> *Enchiridion*; Holborn, p. 35:3-22.

On the basis of this understanding of theology, it is necessary for Erasmus to reject a *theologia affirmativa*:<sup>61</sup>

But take note of this. Though I want you to differ stoutly from the world, I do not want you to take up a kind of churlish cynicism, attacking the opinions of everyone else, superciliously damning everything, hatefully railing at everyone else, viciously slurring every kind of life. . . . When it is not at odds with virtue to do so, be all things to all men so that you may gain men for Christ. Adapt yourself to all men outwardly, as long as your resolution remains firm inwardly. Externally, let gentleness, affability, friendliness, agreeableness influence your brother; better pleasantly to draw him to Christ than to repel him with your asperity. In sum, you ought to express what you believe in by your moral habits rather than by issuing proclamations in abusive language. But, again, do not cater to popular frailties in such a way that you do not dare to stand up doughtily for truth when the occasion demands. Men should be improved by your humanity, not misled by it.<sup>62</sup>

Theologians are to teach (*docere*) and not to make laws (*leges praescribere*), says Erasmus already in the *Antibarbari*.<sup>63</sup> He finds the ideal of a theologian in the members of the Greek academy; they did not make or affirm any final statements, but they modestly debated all issues, always professing that they knew nothing.<sup>64</sup> Thus Erasmus has to reject the dogmatism of late medieval Scholasticism.<sup>65</sup> He also has to reject Luther, to whom he writes in the

opening section of the *Diatriba on the Free Will*:

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

Moreover, I prefer this disposition of mine to that with which I see some people endowed who are so uncontrollably attached to their own opinion that they cannot bear anything which dissents from it; but they twist whatever they read in the Scriptures into an assertion of an opinion which they have embraced once for all. . . . I ask you, what sort of sincere<sup>66</sup> judgment can there be when people behave in this way? Who will learn anything fruitful from this sort of discussion — beyond the fact that each leaves the encounter bespattered with the other's filth?<sup>67</sup>

Luther counters: "Nothing is better known or more common among Christians than assertions. Take away assertions and you take away Christianity."<sup>68</sup>

#### IV

The difference between Erasmus and Luther, who both were Biblical theologians

<sup>66</sup> Sic in Rupp-Watson, p. 37. While this is the closest translation at hand for *sincerus*, the context makes clear that Erasmus was not thinking of a "sincere" judgment, but of an "objective" judgment or a "sound" judgment. According to Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1958 [New York, 1879]), s. v. *sincerus*, I, II, "sound" can also be used as a translation of *sincerus*.

<sup>67</sup> Walter, p. 3:15 ff.; trans. Rupp-Watson, p. 37.

<sup>68</sup> WA XVIII, 603:28-29; trans. Rupp-Watson, p. 106.

<sup>61</sup> See Kohls I, 58 ff.

<sup>62</sup> *Enchiridion*; Holborn, p. 110:22 ff.; trans. Himelick, pp. 160 f.

<sup>63</sup> As cited in Kohls I, 59.

<sup>64</sup> See Kohls, loc. cit.

<sup>65</sup> See *Paraclessis*, passim.

and who both worked with the same humanistic exegetical method, was, then, certainly not a difference of faithfulness to Augustine versus faithfulness to Origen or Jerome. Whatever critical objections to Erasmus Luther set forth in his letters,<sup>69</sup> they were only manifestations of a fundamental difference which lay in the understanding of the nature of theology and of the task of doing theology; or as Luther said in his *On the Bound Will*, in the "frame of mind."<sup>70</sup> For Erasmus theology was teaching, not making laws; it was modestly debating, not making affirmations.<sup>71</sup> That is, for Erasmus theology was descriptive and analytic; doing theology was for him existential only insofar as it contributed to the realization of Christ as *unicus scopus vitae*,<sup>72</sup> as norm for correct thinking and blessed living.<sup>73</sup> Notwithstanding his own protests, for Erasmus theology remained in the area of *disputatio*.<sup>74</sup> For Luther theology was *affirmatio* or *assertio*, and doing theology was a confessional task. Referring in *On the Bound Will* to Rom. 10:10, Matt. 10:32, and 1 Peter 3:15, Luther pointed out this confessional posture of the theologian:

Let Skeptics and Academics keep well away from us Christians, but let there be among us "assertors" twice as unyielding as the Stoics themselves. How often, I ask you, does the apostle Paul demand that *plerophoria* (as he terms it) — that most sure and unyielding assertion of conscience? [Follows Rom. 10:10; 1 Peter 3:15.]

<sup>69</sup> See pp. 654 f.

<sup>70</sup> See WA XVIII, 603:7-8, as trans. by Rupp-Watson, p. 105.

<sup>71</sup> See p. 658.

<sup>72</sup> See p. 651.

<sup>73</sup> See p. 658.

<sup>74</sup> See p. 653.

. . . Why, the Holy Spirit is given them [i.e., to Christians] from heaven, that a Christian may glorify Christ and confess him even unto death—unless it is not asserting when one dies for one's confession and assertion. Moreover, the Spirit goes to such lengths in asserting, that he takes the initiative and accuses the world of sin [John 16:8], as if he would provoke a fight; and Paul commands Timothy to "exhort" and "be urgent out of season" [2 Tim. 4:2]. But what a droll exhorter he would be, who himself neither firmly believed nor consistently asserted the thing he was exhorting about! . . .

But it is I who am the biggest fool, for wasting words and time on something that is clearer than daylight. What Christian would agree that assertions are to be despised? That would be nothing but a denial of all religion and piety, or an assertion that neither religion, nor piety, nor any dogma is of the slightest importance.<sup>75</sup>

In the opening paragraph of the section just quoted Luther stated:

For it is not the mark of a Christian mind to take no delight in assertions; on the contrary, a man must delight in assertions or he will be no Christian. And by assertion—in order that we may not be misled by words—I mean a constant adhering, affirming, confessing, maintaining, and an invincible persevering; nor, I think, does the word mean anything else either as used by the Latins or by us in our time.

I am speaking, moreover, about the assertion of those things which have been divinely transmitted to us in the sacred writings.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>75</sup> WA XVIII, 603:22 ff.; trans. Rupp-Watson, p. 106.

<sup>76</sup> WA XVIII, 603:10 ff.; trans. Rupp-Watson, p. 105.

Luther summarized his argumentation by stating:

What, furthermore, are we to say of the comment you add: "To which I everywhere willingly submit my personal feelings, whether I grasp what it prescribes or not"? What are you saying, Erasmus? Is it not enough to have submitted your personal feelings to the Scriptures? Do you submit them to the decree of the Church as well? What can she decree that is not decreed in the Scriptures? Then what becomes of the liberty and power to judge those who make the decrees, as Paul teaches in I Cor. 14[:29]: "Let the others judge"? Does it displease you that anyone should sit in judgment on the decrees of the Church, although Paul enjoins it? What new religion, what new humility is this, that you would deprive us by your own example of the power of judging the decrees—of *men*, and subject us in uncritical submission—to *men*?<sup>77</sup> Where does the Scripture of God impose this on us?

Then again, what Christian would so throw the injunctions of Scripture and the Church to the winds, as to say, "Whether I grasp them or not"? Do you submit yourself without caring at all whether you grasp them? Anathema be the Christian who is not certain and does not grasp what is prescribed for him! How can he believe what he does not grasp? For by "grasp" you must mean here to "apprehend with certainty" and not to "doubt like a Skeptic"; for otherwise, what is there in any creature that any man could "grasp" if "grasp" meant perfect knowledge and insight? In that case, there would be no possibility that anyone should at the same time grasp some things and not others, for if he had grasped one thing, he would have grasped all—in God, I mean, since

<sup>77</sup> Italics by translator.

whoever does not "grasp" God never "grasps" any part of his creation.

In short, what you say here seems to mean that it does not matter to you what anyone believes anywhere, so long as the peace of the world is undisturbed, and that in case of danger to life, reputation, property, and goodwill, it is permissible to act like the fellow who said, "Say they yea, yea say I; say they nay, nay say I," and to regard Christian dogma as no better than philosophical and human opinions, about which it is quite stupid to wrangle, contend, and assert, since nothing comes of that but strife and the disturbance of outward peace. . . .

I have said all this so that you may henceforward cease from charging me with obstinacy and willfulness in this matter. By such tactics you only succeed in showing that you foster in your heart a Lucian, or some other pig from Epicurus' sty who, having no belief in God himself, secretly ridicules all who have a belief and confess it. Permit us to be assertors, to be devoted to assertions and delight in them, while you stick to your Skeptics and Academics till Christ calls you too. The Holy Spirit is no Skeptic,<sup>78</sup> and it is not doubts or mere opinions that he has written on our hearts, but assertions more sure and certain than life itself and all experience.<sup>79</sup>

It is this confessional nature of theology and of doing theology that separated Luther from Erasmus, and the controversy about the will was only a manifestation of this discrepancy. For Luther theology was a matter of confession which de-

<sup>78</sup> For the theological implications of this passage see A. Siirala, "Freedom and Authority in Erasmus and Luther," *Dialog*, VII (1968), 108 ff. Luther closes the last paragraph prior to this quoted section with the question: What is more miserable than uncertainty?

<sup>79</sup> WA XVIII, 604:34 ff.; trans. Rupp-Watson, pp. 108-9.

manded the engagement of his total personality, and this had been so from the day he entered the monastery. A careful investigation of the theology of the young Luther, especially of the Heidelberg disputation, would establish this confessional quality of Luther's theology.<sup>80</sup> Even though he scarcely was aware of all the implications, Bucer might have felt, subconsciously, that here was the point of difference between Luther and Erasmus. For after he had stated that Luther agrees with Erasmus in all things, he continued: ". . . but with this difference in [Luther's] favor, that what Erasmus only insinuates, [Luther] teaches openly and freely."<sup>81</sup>

To penetrate Scripture, to know Christ and know Him crucified, to know in Him the gracious God, was for Luther a matter of life and death, a matter of constant struggle, but also of constant victory.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>80</sup> See E. Vogelsang, "Der confessio-Begriff des jungen Luther (1513—1522)," *Lutherjahrbuch*, XII (1930), 91 ff.; F. W. Kantzenbach, "Aspekte zum Bekenntnisproblem in der Theologie Luthers," *Lutherjahrbuch*, XXX (1963), 70 ff.; W. von Loewenich, *Luthers Theologia Crucis*, 5. ed. (Witten, 1967), passim.

<sup>81</sup> See p. 649.

<sup>82</sup> Or to phrase it differently, a matter of *Heilsgewissheit*, which was the result of the *Überwindung der Anfechtungsnot*. Out of the material available on this subject, see esp. H. Beintker, *Die Überwindung der Anfechtung bei Luther* (Berlin, 1954); J. von Rohr, "A Study of the *Anfechtung* of Martin Luther to the Time of His Evangelical Awakening," Yale University Ph.D. Dissertation 1947; St. Pfürtner, *Luther and Aquinas on Salvation* (New York, 1965), a book which in the opinion of this writer does not do justice to Luther's position. From the viewpoint of *Seelsorge* it would be a very worthwhile and also a necessary task to confront Erasmus' understanding of *Heilsgewissheit* with that of Luther. For Erasmus, see R. Padberg, "Personale Seelsorge bei Erasmus

Consequently that same Luther who according to Erasmus was so free in making theological assertions on the basis of Scripture stated in the last hours of his life:

No one should consider that he has sufficiently digested Scripture unless he, together with the prophets, has ruled the congregations . . . for a hundred years. Therefore Scripture is a great miracle. Do not tamper with this divine Aeneid, but, humbly adoring, follow in its footsteps. We are beggars. This is true.<sup>83</sup>

While Luther on the one hand considered himself a beggar, he knew on the other hand that he was a beggar made rich through the Gospel. For

[the Gospel is] . . . comforting news, as if a rich man endows a poor beggar with a thousand gulden. This would be [for this beggar] a gospel, a joyous message, to which he is pleased to listen, and about which he would rejoice from the bottom of his heart. But what is money and property in contrast to this sermon, full of comfort and grace, namely, that Christ will be a helper of the miserable ones, and [will be] such a king who will help the dead, the sinners, and those who are captives under the Law to life eternal and to justice.<sup>84</sup>

In another context Luther could say: "The Gospel is a fine word, a messenger of peace concerning God's Son, who has become man, has suffered, and has been resurrected through the Holy Spirit — [and all this] for our salvation."<sup>85</sup>

von Rotterdam," *Theologie und Glaube*, LIII (1963), 207 ff.

<sup>83</sup> WA XLVIII, 241; see also XL, 223:8 f. (*Sermon of 1541*)

<sup>84</sup> WA LII, 25:39 ff. (*Postilla*)

<sup>85</sup> WA II, 467:12 ff. (*1519 Commentary on Galatians*)



This message was for Luther strength and comfort:

This is our comfort, which keeps us alive and makes our hearts happy and courageous against the persecutions and fury of the world, that we have such a Lord, who has not only saved us from sin, God's wrath, and eternal death, but also protects us and saves us in sufferings and persecutions, so that we do not perish. Even if they should rage against the Christians in the most horrible way, neither the Gospel nor Christendom will perish for this reason, but their heads will be crushed.<sup>86</sup>

He derived this assurance from Scripture. For all that is written in Scripture is written for our instruction;<sup>87</sup> what Holy Scripture teaches, rejects, or sets up as a certain thing, man may accept without worry and teach it accordingly.<sup>88</sup> The "assertions" from which Erasmus shied away are for Luther the center of theology and of Christian existence.

## V

Both Erasmus and Luther were Biblical theologians and worked with the humanistic principles of exegesis, yet each arrived at a different type of Biblical theology. Perhaps we may summarize our findings by saying that for Erasmus theology was a descriptive task, establishing the norm of Christian existence. For Luther theology was a confessional task by which the existence of man was shaped.<sup>89</sup> How can one explain this difference?

<sup>86</sup> WA XLI, 224:21 ff. (*Sermon of 1535*)

<sup>87</sup> WA XLIII, 332:12 ff. (*Lectures on Genesis*)

<sup>88</sup> WA XLIII, 301:9 ff. (*Lectures on Genesis*); see also above, p. 660.

<sup>89</sup> This discrepancy can be illustrated by Erasmus' and Luther's understanding of the real theologian and the way he works. Erasmus, *Paraclesis*: "The first step, however, is to know

One is immediately tempted to point to Luther's religiosity and to his personal struggle for salvation, a struggle that Eras-

what He taught; the next to carry it into effect. Therefore, I believe, anyone should not think himself to be Christian if he disputes about instances, relations, quiddities, and formalities with an obscure and irksome confusion of words, but rather if he holds and exhibits what Christ taught and showed forth. Not that I condemn the industry of those who not without merit employ their native intellectual powers in such subtle discourse, for I do not wish anyone to be offended, but that I think, and rightly so, unless I am mistaken, that that pure and genuine philosophy of Christ is not to be drawn from any source more abundantly than from the evangelical books and from the Apostolic Letters, about which, if anyone should devoutly philosophize, praying more than arguing and seeking to be transformed rather than armed for battle, he would without a doubt find that there is nothing pertaining to the happiness of man and the living of his life which is not taught, examined, and unraveled in these works." Holborn, p. 145:33 ff.; translation by Olin, pp. 101—2.

"To me he is truly a theologian who teaches not by skill with intricate syllogisms but by a disposition of mind, by the very expression and the eyes, by his very life that riches should be disdained, that the Christian should not put his trust in the supports of this world but must rely entirely on heaven, that a wrong should not be avenged, that a good should be wished for those wishing ill, that we should deserve well of those deserving ill, that all good men should be loved and cherished equally as members of the same body, that the evil should be tolerated if they cannot be corrected, that those who are stripped of their goods, those who are turned away from possessions, those who mourn are blessed and should not be deplored, and that death should even be desired by the devout, since it is nothing other than a passage to immortality. And if anyone under the inspiration of the spirit of Christ preaches this kind of doctrine, inculcates it, exhorts, incites, and encourages men to it, he indeed is truly a theologian, even if he should be a common laborer or weaver. And if anyone exemplifies this doctrine in his life itself, he is in fact a great doctor. Another, perhaps, even a non-Christian, may discuss more subtly how the angels understand, but to persuade us to lead here an angelic life,

mus was spared. This answer, however, does not do justice to the problem, though no doubt it is of major importance. As Kohls has repeatedly pointed out, it is the understanding of Scripture itself *and* of the underlying concept of God's revelation in which the roots of the difference between the Biblical theology of Erasmus and the Biblical theology of Luther must be seen. In the final analysis it is the concept of God from which all differences between Erasmus and Luther are derived.<sup>90</sup>

free from every stain, this indeed is the duty of the Christian theologian." Holborn, p. 143:3 ff.; translation by Olin, p. 98.

Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*: "He who wishes to receive benefit from studying theology and Holy Scripture should above all learn to really understand [the nature of] sin. . . ." WA XLIV, 507:15 ff.—Preface to Vol. 1 of the German writings, Wittenberg, 1539: "I shall demonstrate to you a correct way of studying theology, for I have practiced this way. . . . And this is the way which . . . David teaches in Psalm 119. . . . There you will find three rules . . . : *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*." WA L, 658:29 ff.; see also WA, Tischreden III, No. 3425; II, No. 1583.

<sup>90</sup> For Erasmus, Kohls I, 61-62, 94 ff., 126 ff. For Luther, with special reference to the controversy on the will and the problems under discussion, see M. Schüler, "Luthers Gottesbegriff nach seiner Schrift *De servo arbitrio*," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, LV (1936), 532 ff.; H. Schultz, "Luthers Ansicht von der Methode und der Grenze der dogmatischen Aussagen über Gott," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, IV (1880), 77 ff.; Ph. S. Watson, "How Luther Speaks about God," *Dialog*, VI (1967), 276 ff.; E. Grisli, "Martin Luther's View of the Hidden God. The Problem of the *Deus absconditus* in Luther's Treatise *De servo arbitrio*," *McCormick Quarterly*, XXI (1967), 81 ff.; A. Adam, "Der Begriff '*Deus absconditus*' bei Luther nach Herkunft und Bedeutung," *Lutherjahrbuch*, XXX (1963), 97 ff.; J. Dillenberger, *God Hidden and Revealed: The Interpretation of Luther's Deus Absconditus and its Significance for Religious Thought* (Philadelphia, 1953). In general, see A. Peters, "Ich

In the opening sections of his diatribe on free will Erasmus writes:

There are some secret places in the Holy Scriptures into which God has not wished us to penetrate more deeply and, if we try to do so, then the deeper we go, the darker and darker it becomes, by which means we are led to acknowledge the unsearchable majesty of the divine wisdom, and the weakness of the human mind.

It is like a cavern near Corycos of which Pomponius Mela tells, which begins by attracting and drawing the visitor to itself by its pleasing aspect, and then as one goes deeper, a certain horror and majesty of the divine presence that inhabits the place makes one draw back. So when we come to such a place, my view is that the wiser and more reverent course is to cry with St. Paul [follows Rom. 11:33; Is. 40:13] rather than to define what passes the measure of the human mind. . . .

There are some things which God has willed that we should contemplate, as we venerate himself, in mystic silence; and, moreover, there are many passages in the sacred volumes about which many commentators have made guesses, but no one

glaube an Gott! Was heisst das?" *Kerygma und Dogma*, XV (1969), 259 ff., and his "Die Trinitätslehre in der reformatorischen Christenheit," *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, XCIV, (1969), 561 ff.; O. H. Pesch, "Die Frage nach Gott bei Thomas von Aquin und Martin Luther," *Luther*, XLI (1970), 1 ff.; Ph. S. Watson, "Erasmus, Luther, and Aquinas," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XL (1969), 747 ff. For Luther's understanding of Scripture see R. Hermann, *Von der Klarheit der Heiligen Schrift. Untersuchungen und Erörterungen über Luthers Schrift De servo arbitrio* (Berlin, 1958). For the relationship between Luther's understanding of God and that of man see W. von Loewenich, "Gott und Mensch in humanistischer und reformatorischer Schau. Eine Einführung in Luthers Schrift *De servo arbitrio*," *Humanitas-Christianitas* (Gütersloh, 1948), pp. 65 ff.

has finally cleared up their obscurity: as the distinction between the divine persons, the conjunction of the divine and human nature in Christ,<sup>91</sup> the unforgivable sin; yet there are other things which God has willed to be most plainly evident, and such are the *precepts for the good life. This is the Word of God*,<sup>92</sup> which is not to be bought in the highest heaven, nor in distant lands overseas, but it is close at hand, in our mouth and in our heart. These truths must be learned by all, but the rest are more properly committed to God, and it is more religious to worship them, being unknown, than to discuss them, being insoluble. How many questions, or rather squabbles, have arisen over the distinction of persons, the mode of generation, the distinction between filiation and procession; what a fuss has been raised in the world by the wrangle about the conception of the virgin as Theotokos! I ask what profit has there been so far from these laborious inquiries, except that with the loss of harmony we love one another the less, while seeking to be wiser than we need.<sup>93</sup>

While Luther in no way challenges the idea that there are things in God and in Scripture which man does not know or cannot penetrate, he equally emphatically maintains that in its "subject matter," its very center, that is, in Christ and the Gospel, Scripture is crystal clear, for "we may be absolutely certain that a no more sim-

ple word has been spoken on earth than God's Word."<sup>94</sup> Consequently he counters Erasmus:

That in God there are many things hidden, of which we are ignorant, no one doubts [follows Mark 13:32; Acts 1:7; John 13:18; 2 Tim. 2:19]. But that in Scripture there are some things abstruse, and everything is not plain—this is an idea put about by the ungodly Sophists, with whose lips you also speak here, Erasmus; but they have never produced, nor can they produce, a single article to prove this mad notion of theirs. . . .

I admit, of course, that there are many texts in the Scriptures that are obscure and abstruse, not because of the majesty of their subject matter, but because of our ignorance of their vocabulary and grammar; but these texts in no way hinder a *knowledge of all the subject matter of Scripture*.<sup>95</sup> For what still sublimer thing can remain hidden in the Scriptures, now that the seals have been broken, the stone rolled from the door of the sepulcher [Matt. 27:66; 28:2], and the supreme mystery brought to light, namely, that Christ the Son of God has been made man, that God is three and one, that Christ has suffered for us and is to reign eternally. Are not these things known and sung even in the highways and byways? Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what will you find left in them?

The subject matter of the Scriptures, therefore, is all quite accessible, even though some texts are still obscure owing to our ignorance of their terms. Truly it is stupid and impious, when we know that the subject matter of Scripture has all been placed in the clearest light, to call it obscure on account of a few obscure words.

<sup>91</sup> For Luther, see p. 665.

<sup>92</sup> Italics by this writer. For the difference between Erasmus' and Luther's understanding of the Word of God see the quotation from Luther on p. 665. See also WA XXV, 172:45—173:2 (*Lectures on Isaiah*); J. J. Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*, LW Companion Volume (St. Louis, 1959), pp. 48 ff.; C. W. Berner, "The Word Principle in Martin Luther," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XIX (1948), 13 ff.

<sup>93</sup> Walter, pp. 5:17 ff.; trans. Rupp-Watson, pp. 38 ff.

<sup>94</sup> WA XXIV, 19:26 ff. (*Sermons on Genesis*, 1527)

<sup>95</sup> Italics by this writer.

If the words are obscure in one place, yet they are plain in another; and it is one and the same theme, published quite openly to the whole world, which in the Scriptures is sometimes expressed in plain words, and sometimes lies as yet hidden in obscure words. Now, when the thing signified is in the light, it does not matter if this or that sign of it is in darkness, since many other signs of the same thing are meanwhile in the light. . . .

Your reference to the Corycian cave, therefore, is irrelevant; that is not how things are in the Scriptures. Matters of the highest majesty and the profoundest mysteries are no longer hidden away, but have been brought out and are openly displayed before the very doors. For Christ has opened our minds so that we may understand the Scriptures [follows Luke 24:25; Mark 16:15; Rom. 10:18; Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:16]. See, then, whether you and all the Sophists can produce any single mystery that is still abstruse in the Scriptures.

It is true that for many people much remains abstruse; but this is not due to the obscurity of Scripture, but to the blindness or indolence of those who will not take the trouble to look at the very clearest truth. It is as Paul says of the Jews in II Cor. [3:15]: "A veil lies over their minds"; and again: "If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this world has blinded" [2 Cor. 4:3-4]. With similar temerity a man might veil his own eyes or go out of the light into the darkness and hide himself, and then blame the sun and the day for being obscure. Let miserable men, therefore, stop imputing with blasphemous perversity the darkness and obscurity of their own hearts to the wholly clear Scriptures of God.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>96</sup> WA XVIII, 606:12 ff.; trans. Rupp-Watson, pp. 110 ff.

Behind these arguments stands a difference in the understanding of God and His revelation. Kohls has convincingly demonstrated<sup>97</sup> that for Erasmus even the *deus revelatus in Christo* cannot be totally and adequately grasped or defined in words because God, the incarnation, the Trinity, and the Scriptures are for Erasmus divine mysteries which man cannot grasp or penetrate, but can only worship in thought, word, and action. Theology is consequently a description of and a reflection on this divine mystery as well as a description of man's way to the "caverns" in which the *mysterium* full of majesty rests. It will be the task of future research to come to terms with Erasmus' understanding of the term *mysterium*, a task for which some initial contributions have been made,<sup>98</sup> but which as a whole still needs to be taken in hand.<sup>99</sup> It is known that Luther also worked with the term *mysterium* or the underlying concept, especially in the *Dictata super Psalterium* and in his writings of 1519 and 1520.<sup>100</sup> To look at Luther's

<sup>97</sup> Kohls I, 71, 96-97, 127 ff.

<sup>98</sup> See Kohls II, Index, s. v. *mysterium*. See also G. G. Krodel, "Figura Prothysteron," *Lutheran Quarterly*, XII (1960), 152 ff.; G. Chantaine, "Theologie et vie spirituelle," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, XCI (1969), 809 ff.

<sup>99</sup> As has been pointed out in *Cresset*, XXX (October 1967), 11 ff., it is in connection with the problems pertaining to Erasmus' understanding of *mysterium*, and with the impact of this understanding on individual theological *loci* where Kohls' work points into the future. It is here that this fundamental contribution to Erasmus will have to undergo its test.

<sup>100</sup> Wilhelm Maurer has called our attention to this fact; see especially his *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen. Zwei Untersuchungen zu Luthers Reformationsschriften 1520/21* (Göttingen, 1949). For the *Dictata*, see, for example, WA III, 49:6 ff.; 89:34 ff.; 124:33 ff.; 125:17 ff.; 176:19 ff.; 368:18 ff.; 547:24 ff.;

understanding of *mysterium* and of revelation in constant comparison with that of Erasmus will, as Kohls argues,<sup>101</sup> provide

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548:2 ff.; 621:2 ff.; IV, 183:18 ff. See also H. Fagerberg, "Die Kirche in Luthers Psalmenvorlesung," *Gedenkschrift für D. Werner Elert*, ed. F. Hübner, et al. (Berlin, 1955), pp. 109 ff.; W. Maurer, "Kirche und Geschichte nach Luthers *Dictata super Psalterium*," and J. Pelikan, "Die Kirche nach Luthers Genesisvorlesung," *Lutherforschung heute*, ed. V. Vajta (Berlin, 1958), pp. 85 ff., 102 ff.; G. G. Krodel, "The

us with a deeper understanding of the theology of both Erasmus and Luther, especially of the controversy on free will.

Valparaiso, Ind.

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Lord's Supper in the Theology of the Young Luther," *The Lutheran Quarterly*, XIII (1961), 19 ff.

<sup>101</sup> Kohls I, 61-62; II, 78, n. 176, where Kohls announces a forthcoming publication by Wilhelm Maurer on this topic.