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Erasmus Before the Storm[1]

TIMOTHY GEORGE
Founding Dean,
Beeson Divinity School, Samford University

Five hundred years ago this year, in February and March of 1516, a Swiss-German printer in Basel named Johann Froben published a volume of some 1,000 pages titled *Novum Instrumentum Omne*, "the whole New Testament." This was the first officially published edition of the Greek New Testament, and it was the work of Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam. Next year, the scholarly world will commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, with much attention devoted to Martin Luther and the hammer blows heard in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. Before then, however, it is good to glimpse Erasmus in the *annus mirabilis* of 1516, the year before the storm broke loose.

Erasmus was at once the greatest scholar of his age and Europe's first public intellectual. He was also one of the most tragic figures among the reformers. Born the illegitimate son of a Dutch priest in 1466 or 1469—he most likely lied about the date of his birth in order to cover the shame of his situation—Erasmus early on developed a love for learning and a desire to know the ancient classics.

At age sixteen, he took monastic vows and joined the Augustinian Canons; in 1492 he was ordained a priest. The monastic routine did not suit him well, but he did like spending time in the library. Roland Bainton once said: "Luther entered the monastery to save his soul by good works, Erasmus to enlighten his mind by good books." He once took an entire volume of St. Augustine with him to bed at night! Unlike Luther, Erasmus never renounced his monastic vows, though he did acquire a papal dispensation that allowed him to live outside the monastery and to put off the habit of his order.

Although he studied at Paris for a while (in the same college at which John Calvin and Ignatius Loyola were later students) and was

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granted a kind of honorary doctorate from the University of Turin, formal academic life was not for him. The road which took him to Basel in 1516 had many detours and passed through many places: Deventer (where as a boy he studied with the Brethren of the Common Life), Oxford (where he met John Colet who encouraged him to learn Greek), Antwerp, Louvain, Venice, Rome, Cologne, London, and Cambridge. Erasmus was a migratory scholar, always on the move, the original "flying Dutchman." He traveled all over Europe looking for manuscripts, talking with printers, cultivating the friendship of humanist scholars and those interested in *bonae litterae*. He once said, "If Ulysses was the wisest man in Greece because he visited so many cities, my horse is the wisest in Europe because he has been to so many universities."

In the summer of 1514, Erasmus was once again on the road, or rather, on the river, traveling through the Rhine Valley from England to Basel. At each stop along the way, he was received with praise and acclaim at Mainz, where Gutenberg introduced the printing press more than a half-century before; at Strasbourg, where one of his young protégés Martin Bucer would soon introduce the Reformation; at Sélestat, the site of a famous Latin school commended by Erasmus for turning out "geniuses." At this point, Erasmus had become an intellectual rock star; his role in the revival of letters and the spread of learning was known all over Europe from Lisbon to Lithuania. Erasmus himself was well aware of the special role he had played in opening the world to the new learning that he believed would result not only in personal betterment but also in the renewal of society:

> It is I, as cannot be denied, who have aroused the study of languages and good letters. I have brought academic theology, too much subjected to sophistic contrivances, back to the sources of the holy books and the study of the ancient orthodox authors; I have exerted myself to awaken a world slumbering in pharisaic ceremonies to true piety.

Among the many virtues of Erasmus—and there were many—humility perhaps was not the greatest.

Erasmus's 1516 Greek New Testament was a pivotal moment in the development of biblical scholarship, but it was not met with universal acclaim. It contained many errors, and Erasmus later complained that

this volume, like many other books rushed into print, had perforce been "precipitated rather than edited." In his reconstruction of the Greek text, Erasmus had been limited to the use of five manuscripts and, as he knew, they were neither the oldest nor the best. The process of acquiring better manuscripts, clarifying textual variants, and improving his Latin translation would remain an ongoing task for the rest of his life. In all, Erasmus brought out five editions of the Greek New Testament over the course of two decades (1516, 1519, 1522, 1527, and 1535). He had prudently dedicated the 1516 edition to Pope Leo X, whom he had met at Rome in 1509 as Giovanni de' Medici. The pope in turn provided a letter of commendation. This helped Erasmus to fend off, though not to silence, charges of heterodoxy from his conservative Catholic critics.

For all the flaws of the first edition, its significance in the history of New Testament studies can hardly be overstated. The Greek text Erasmus published became the basis for the *textus receptus*, which lay behind the King James Version of 1611 and subsequent translations until the revolution in textual criticism led by Tischendorf, Westcott, and Hort in the nineteenth century.

In addition to publishing the Greek text of the New Testament, his scholarly annotations, and his own Latin translation, Erasmus also wrote paraphrases of the New Testament. Starting with Romans in 1517 and concluding with Acts in 1524, he covered every book except Revelation. A paraphrase, Erasmus declared, was neither a translation nor a commentary but something in between these two genres. As he put it, the purpose of a paraphrase is to "say things differently without saying different things."

There is a common theme running through the twists and turns of Erasmus's long and interesting life. He called it the *philosophia Christi*: a program of educational and moral reform based on the recovery of classical letters and biblical wisdom and centered on personal devotion to Jesus. More than anywhere else in his many writings, the "philosophy of Christ" is evident in the *Paraphrases*. No doubt this is why Katherine Parr, the sixth wife of Henry VIII and the only one to outlive her husband, arranged for Erasmus's paraphrases to be translated into English. In 1547, King Edward VI issued a royal injunction requiring that the *Paraphrases*, along with a copy of the English Bible, be publicly displayed in every parish in the Church of England. Nicholas Udall, a Tudor playwright who supervised the English paraphrase project, portrayed

Erasmus as a true proto-Protestant, "the chief leader and shower of light and the principal opener of a way unto the evangelical truth now in these last times by God's goodness shining forth into the world."

But the fact is, Erasmus cannot be claimed unambiguously as a champion for either side of the Reformation divide. Erasmus was an early defender of Luther and agreed with many of his criticisms of traditional Catholic piety. There is some truth in the old saw, "Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched"—a jibe which originated in the sixteenth century among some of Erasmus's Franciscan critics. Luther learned from Erasmus that the Greek word *metanoeite* meant "to repent" not "to do penance" and this insight was reflected at the first of his 95 Theses. A few years later, Luther had at hand the second edition of Erasmus's Greek New Testament as he labored to "verdeutschen" the Bible for his German people. But, as lines began to be drawn in the sand in the Reformation disputes, Erasmus chose to be, as he put it, "a spectator rather than an actor." "Let others court martyrdom," Erasmus remarked. "I don't consider myself worthy of this distinction."

In April 1517, six months before Luther's posting of the 95 Theses, Erasmus wrote to Pope Leo X: "If ever there was a golden age, then there is a good hope that ours will be one." But the violence of the rhetoric and the temper of the times into which Erasmus was reluctantly drawn dampened his optimism. In 1522, Erasmus grimly declared, "I am a heretic on both sides." His whole grand project of *bonae litterae* seemed on the verge of going up in flames. From Basel, where Erasmus lay dying in 1536, he wrote to his old friend Willibald Pirckheimer, a fellow humanist and patron of letters: "Peace is perishing, and love and faith and learning and morality and civilized behavior. What is left?"

Erasmus lived most of his life among the learned languages of Latin, Greek, and to a lesser extent Hebrew. He also advocated the translation of the Bible into the developing vernacular languages of Europe, so that, as he put it, God's Word might be read by everyone—"the farmer, the tailor, the mason, prostitutes, pimps, and Turks." At the very end, Erasmus's final words were murmured not in the classical tongues he knew so well but rather in his native Dutch—just two words he must first have heard from his mother in Holland, *"Lieuer Got,"* he said, "O, Dear God."