

Editorial

Contemporary western secular society is godlessly relativist. It has no absolute standards of truth in matters of belief and of right in matters of conduct. The relativist says: "This belief is true for you but not for me. This form of conduct is fine for you but not for me." In other words, all belief systems and moral codes are right for those who follow them, but not for others. There is no such thing as right and wrong, good and bad. No one's faith and life-style is better than anyone else's; all our differences are relative. Tell the secular man that Christ is the only Saviour, and he will accuse you of arrogance. Tell him that he is a sinner, and he will charge you with self-righteousness. Little does he realize that he is just as dogmatic and intolerant as those who disagree with him. His relativism is really a new form of orthodoxy. Fortified by the spirit of the age and a self-confident 'scientism,' he imagines he has triumphed over Christian faith and morality.

We need not be afraid. God is still on the throne of the universe, and His truth endures for ever. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but Christ's words shall never pass away. Many such hammers as relativism have been broken on the anvil of the Word of God. That Word shall stand at the grave of all the world's philosophies. Though modern secular man scoffs at the truth of an inerrant Bible, he will find, unless he repents, that he will be judged and condemned by it at the Day of Judgment.

We who believe should have great compassion on him; for he is drowning in a sea of subjectivism, and has not even a plank to cling to. How thankful we should be that, as man's fallen nature is as wicked as ever, so God's Gospel is as needed as ever. And that Gospel, of salvation by free and sovereign grace alone, is perfectly adapted to every sinner on earth, and should be preached to every sinner. May we, in the strength of that selfsame grace, support its world-wide circulation, by ministers, missionaries, translators, distributors and private Christians. Then shall our Saviour come again, to gather His elect to Himself, and to banish the reprobate to eternal punishment. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

Some Reformation Theologians: Desiderius Erasmus (1469-1536)

Introduction

It is a question with some writers whether Desiderius Erasmus was a theologian at all. Durand de Laur, for instance, says that “Erasmus was born for Letters [ie. Learning and Literature] and not for Theology.” Renaudet states bluntly: “Erasmus was not a theologian.” Indeed, we have Erasmus’ own word on the matter: by 1499, he says, he had bidden “goodbye to the title of theologian.” Nevertheless, he engaged in activities that come well within the scope of the theologian. “He formulated a curriculum for theology students; he edited, translated, paraphrased and expounded biblical and patristic texts; he commented on doctrinal questions; and he offered spiritual advice in devotional tracts.” (Erika Rummel) We shall therefore treat him as one.

His Life

Born in Gouda or Rotterdam, Holland, the illegitimate son of a priest, Erasmus was educated at Gouda, Deventer and 'sHertogenbosch. In Deventer, he was taught by the Brethren of the Common Life, a community famous for Thomas a Kempis and his *Imitation of Christ*. “Under their influence, Erasmus grew up in an environment shaped by a belief in simplicity, practical piety, work and service.” (J. Laurel Carrington) In 1487 he became a reluctant Augustinian canon regular at Steyn. For the next seven years he read widely in classical [ie. Greek and Roman] authors and worked hard to perfect his literary style, but found “monastic thralldom and stagnation” oppressive. (G.C. McCrie) Ordination into the Popish priesthood was followed by a period as secretary to the Bishop of Cambrai. After a period of study in Paris, where he went “to seek a doctorate in theology” but reacted against the Faculty’s crabbed scholasticism, he became a freelance scholar, supporting himself by tutoring the sons of the nobility. His first writings were a defence of

humanism and a collection of moral adages (sayings from the Greek and Roman world).

The year 1499 found the studious and accomplished Dutchman in England, where he met Colet, Linacre, Grocyn and More (the latter was soon to become William Tyndale's chief enemy), all of whom became his friends. At Oxford and Cambridge he advanced his classical scholarship, mastered Greek language and literature, and made more humanist friends. It was their encouragement that persuaded Erasmus to place his exceptional talents "in the service of Christ." The prospect of studying Scripture in addition to classical writers fascinated him. From this time on, his chief aim was to draw together pagan and Christian sources that would bring about a reformation of the human spirit through language.

Fired by this ideal, Erasmus returned to Paris, then to Louvain, the two strongholds of Roman Catholic theology, and commenced the most productive phase of his life. The *Adages* (1500) was quickly followed by his *Handbook of the Christian Soldier* (1503). Not surprisingly, proud professional theologians began to question a mere layman's right to trespass on their exclusive territory. Noel Beda, one of the most vehement of the Paris theologians, scornfully called Erasmus and his friends "theologizing humanists." Undeterred, Erasmus pressed on. Constantly on the move, first in Paris, then in Orleans, then back in the Netherlands, then in Turin (where he finally got his coveted doctorate), then in Bologna, Florence, Venice and Rome, he gathered in his train (metaphorically speaking) a whole entourage of 'cultured' men and women. Some gloried in the mere mention of their names in his correspondence. Others made collections of his books to show their guests.

In 1507 and 1509 he met the pope, Leo X, whom he fulsomely and flatteringly praised for his "kindness and humanity, his magnanimity and his learning, the indescribable charm of his speech, his love of peace and of the fine arts," and placed him "as

high above all his predecessors as Peter's Chair is above all thrones in the world." (F.X.Kraus)

1509 also saw the completion of his *Praise of Folly*, a biting satire on the evil deeds of bigoted churchmen, warmongering civil rulers, pompous lawyers and too serious humanists. This stream of satire, directed particularly against every rank of the Roman hierarchy and its corruptions, brought Erasmus under suspicion from 'Holy Mother Church.' Yet, unlike many suspected 'heretics,' he was protected against persecution mainly through the good offices of prominent churchmen and noblemen, who agreed with his criticisms. There was plenty to criticize: ignorant priests, libidinous monks, clerical concubinage, multiplied Masses, cults of 'saints,' futile pilgrimages, the exploitation of 'relics,' and the lucrative sale of indulgences, to name only a few.

On a more positive note came *The Education of a Christian Prince*, which advocated education, toleration, social justice and peace. This publication formed part of the ideal Erasmus was pursuing: of a Golden Age populated by morally upright citizens.

Sometime between 1512 and 1516 Erasmus embarked on a massive project, editing select 'Church Fathers.' Of these, Origen and Jerome exercised the greatest influence on his own understanding of the Scriptures.

By now, Erasmus had become "the supreme humanist scholar." "All Europe wanted Erasmus as its property," and "people came to him as devotees." Artists of the calibre of Holbein and Durer painted his portrait. Travelling widely and corresponding with hundreds of possible and actual converts to his ideals, he became "indifferent to where he lived, as long as there was a good fire, a good dinner, a pile of amusing correspondence and a handsome research grant." (Diarmid MacCulloch)

Having collected and collated many manuscripts from different parts of Europe, Erasmus in 1516 produced his most valuable work, a Greek New Testament, with his own Latin translation and Annotations. "This was the first ever printed edition of the New Testament in Greek." (Tony Lane) His remarks in the Preface, later echoed by Tyndale, have become famous. "Let the farmer sing a passage from the Bible at the plough, the weaver hum a passage to the movement of his shuttle, the traveller lighten the weariness of his journey with biblical stories."

By 1517, when he could see the tentative emergence of reform in both Zurich (under Zwingli) and Wittenberg (under Luther), he optimistically announced the dawning of a new age. Without delay, he returned to the Roman Catholic stronghold, Louvain, and founded a 'College of the Three Languages' (Hebrew, Greek and Latin) as an inaugural step towards the building of his cherished 'Republic of Letters.' People actually wrote to congratulate him on founding a 'new' religion!

The historian A.G. Dickens sees Erasmus as an early influence on Zwingli, while pinpointing a fundamental difference between the two men: "Zwingli's work was in effect a daring extension of the critical principles of Erasmus, applied to doctrine as well as to abuses, and applied by a man more willing than Erasmus to sacrifice the amenities of a scholar's life."

People also half believed that he was a staunch supporter of Luther. In 1520, when quizzed by Luther's protector, the Elector Frederick the Wise, Erasmus memorably replied: "Luther has committed a great sin; he has hit the monks in their belly and the pope in his crown!" Frederick's response shows great insight: "What a wonderful little man; you never know where you are with him!" Erasmus would not condemn the Reformer, but at the same time he had no intention of becoming embroiled in the spiritual war that Luther was fighting. Yet after the pope had excommunicated Luther, and Luther had defiantly burnt his Bull of

Excommunication, called on the German nobility to summon a council and reform the church immediately, Erasmus could no longer stand aloof. In 1523, after much procrastination and pressure from the pope and other alarmed churchmen, he reluctantly decided to challenge Luther head-on. Gordon Rupp calls this decision his “greatest act of appeasement.” In his little book *The Freedom of the Will* he painted Luther as a cranky, arrogant, unbalanced extremist; portrayed himself as a moderate, reasonable, tolerant, humble and peace-loving man; and claimed for all men the power to accept or reject God’s salvation at will.

Despite his siding with the traditional church view and his scornful criticism of the German Reformer, both Romanists and Reformers [the term ‘Protestant’ had not yet been coined] began to eye him with increasing suspicion, as a man who concealed his real sympathies out of conservatism or sheer cowardice.

The artist Durer had once urged him to “Give ear, knight-errant of Christ; ride on by the Lord Christ’s side; defend the truth; reach forth to the martyr’s crown.” “But that was a crown which Erasmus never desired; still less would he seek it in a cause which threatened to ruin his most cherished designs. Theology, he complained, bade fair to absorb all the Humanities; and the theology of Luther was as hateful to him as that of Louvain.” (A.F. Pollard) The dogmas of the rough-hewn Saxon repelled such cultured men of the world as Erasmus. As a distinguished scholar, he was firmly anchored into the doctrine of personal merit which Luther, from his Bible, denied. In fact, Erasmus was viewed by Wittenberg as “little better than a Pelagian.” (A.F. Pollard)

In 1519 Erasmus had said enthusiastically: “The world is coming to its senses, as if waking from an ancient dream . . . I see a golden age appearing, which perhaps I may not myself live to enjoy.” But Erasmus himself was in a dream - of a world filled with “elegantly phrased letters, high-minded reform projects, and charming Latin-speaking friends” extending all over Europe.

The debate with Luther shattered that dream. Instead of seeing the dawn of a new era, and despite revealing his semi-Pelagian loyalty to his church, Erasmus was increasingly suspected of being “a time-serving coward, who lacked the courage to take sides now that everyone was expected to do so.” (Diarmid MacCulloch) Rome’s keen scent for ‘heresy’ made Spain’s leading churchmen accuse him of “bad scholarship, of heresy, of impiety,” and of Lutheranism. (W.E. Collins) But it was only after his death that the dreaded Spanish Inquisition placed his works on the *Index* of Forbidden Books. With characteristic malice, in 1550 the Inquisition also savaged a portrait of him that appeared in a book.

From 1514 to 1529 Erasmus had chosen Basle as his place of residence, where his printer Froben was near at hand. He was present at Basle’s acceptance of biblical reform, and noted sarcastically that “not a single saint lifted a blessed finger” to prevent the dismantling of images!

In 1529 Erasmus quarrelled with Martin Bucer, the Strasburg Reformer. In this debate he claimed that both the doctrines and the lives of the Reformers proved that they did not reflect the true Gospel. This most serious charge marks Erasmus’ total and final alienation from the Reformation. His suave, non-doctrinal approach to reform could never sit well with the Reformers’ firm, assertive Biblical stance on the doctrines of grace. Writes J. Laurel Carrington: “Whatever sympathy he may have had for the Reformers in earlier years was by now utterly exhausted.” The Reformation had passed the point where it could be contained within the Roman fold.

With the death of Froben, his printer, and finding the newly reformed city too hot for him, Erasmus forsook Basle for nearby Freiburg, but returned to Basle to die just as Calvin was completing the first edition of his *Institutes* (1536).

His Theology

(a) The Foundation

Defending himself against the charge of usurping the trained theologian's role, Erasmus claimed to be first a "grammarian" and after that "the lowliest of theologians." There can be no doubt, however, that Erasmus accepted as irrefutable "that which the Catholic Church holds without controversy and by a large consensus, such as the doctrines expressly stated in holy scripture and in the apostles' creed, to which I am willing to add the decrees of councils properly constituted and following proper procedure."

What a theological minefield! What has the Church ever held "without controversy"? What is a "large consensus"? When is a church council "properly constituted"? When does it follow "proper procedure"? Not only is Erasmus' foundation impossible on which to base a unified solution to any theological problem; it also undermines the only basis on which Christian theology can build. Why does he not simply say: "the doctrines expressly stated in Holy Scripture"? Because he had imbibed from his youth the lie that in some fundamental doctrines Scripture proof is either lacking or unclear. This is why he leaves the door wide open for any number of rulings that either church authority or long-standing tradition may impose. There is a huge crack in Erasmus' very foundation.

Nevertheless, Erika Rummel detects two principal keys to his theology: "the centrality of the word and the spiritual nature of piety." To these we now turn.

(b) The Centrality of the Word

At the root of Erasmus' envisaged reform lay the misguided notion that we will grasp a message best when that message is couched in the finest possible language. While giving token allegiance to Scripture as supreme, he felt that the pagan classics had a necessary contribution to make in preparing readers for Scripture. By mastering the best writing of the past, Christians would learn what

is morally good along with the teachings of Christ. "His ideal," writes James I Packer, "was to unite 'good letters' (the classics) with 'sacred letters' (the Bible) for the furthering of a moral culture and a cultured morality." With the apparent prospect of peace in Europe and in view of the renewed study of the inspired languages, Erasmus naively saw a clear path to Christian piety and culture. "Not only are honest habits and Christian piety going to shine again," he wrote with keen enthusiasm, "they will be joined by ancient literature in its original purity and also all the finest disciplines." The parallel revival of pagan morality and Christian teaching would certainly produce a new Golden Age.

In this programme Grammar and Rhetoric would enable aspiring theologians to interpret Scripture aright, and rid the world of the rigid dialectical logic of the scholastics and their followers. Then the Gospel could be proclaimed unhindered. This is the theme of his last original work, *The Preacher*. The combination of learning and eloquence would not only enlighten hearers' and readers' minds; it would also transform their hearts. Because there is transforming power in the very words of Scripture, people of all classes should be fully exposed to it.

True to these principles, Erasmus issued a series of *Paraphrases* on the New Testament, couched in a homiletic or popular preaching style. He also wrote commentaries on eleven psalms. All he was doing, he claimed, was trying to bring Bible study, systematic theology and devotional reading together.

We may see immediately that Erasmus' doctrine of the word is not the Biblical doctrine of the Word. Despite his close engagement with Holy Scripture, by 'word' he means 'language skills' and 'literary finesse.'

Under the heading of 'language skills' he places the knowledge of "the three Biblical languages," meaning Latin, Hebrew and Greek. This is itself erroneous. There are only two Biblical languages

(except for a few Old Testament passages in Chaldee), Hebrew and Greek. Here Erasmus is following Cardinal Ximenes in his Complutensian Polyglot Bible, which blasphemously places Latin in the centre, with the two thieves, Hebrew and Greek, on either side! Even his understanding of the function of Hebrew and Greek is faulty, for he claims that all the mysteries of Holy Scripture may be known through them. He never mentions our need of the New Birth and the illumination of the Holy Spirit on His own inspired text before we can understand a single truth of Scripture.

Yet still he writes eloquently of contemplating God's Word in its native glory, unimpeded by scribal errors and ignorant translators. But he advises his readers to interpret the Bible allegorically, as Origen and Jerome had done. Thus the true meaning of the Gospel writers and apostles, which is the meaning of the Holy Spirit, was lost.

(c) The Spiritual Nature of Piety

We may summarize Erasmus' teaching on piety under three headings: the philosophy of Christ, the primacy of the inner life and an optimistic view of human nature.

(i) The Philosophy of Christ

Erasmus' distinctive programme for spiritual renewal is defined as the Philosophy of Christ. This, he claims over against contemporary university philosophy, is the only philosophy that matters. All must point to Christ, since "he alone was a teacher who came forth from heaven; he alone could teach true doctrine, since it is eternal wisdom; he alone, the sole author of human salvation, taught what pertains to salvation; he alone fully vouches for whatever he taught; he alone is able to grant whatever he has promised."

Abounding moral corruption, superstition and scholastic obscurantism had driven Erasmus to seek this simple Philosophy of Christ. But by this he meant New Testament morality rather than New Testament doctrine. The latter was not important to him. Writes James I Packer: "His attitude was that as long as one tries to

be good and says one's prayers, keeping humble and admitting one's faults and weaknesses, being loved as a churchman and law-abiding as a citizen, one need not bother one's head about matters of doctrine."

In attempting to show us Christ, Erasmus draws a parallel from Greek and Roman mythology. Just as the statues of Greece and Rome appear crude on the outside but in fact reveal the figure of a god, so Christ appears on the outside no more than a poor itinerant preacher, whereas in fact there is a god within him. That is, Christ's humble, unimpressive appearance teaches us to repudiate this world's values. To the worldling, Christ's crucifixion is sheer folly, but to the spiritually minded it demonstrates the vast difference between the world's values and God's.

The Christ of Erasmus claims to be the Christ of Holy Scripture. Yet at the outset we identify a merely human, god-filled teacher. Not a word appears of the only-begotten Son of God taking our nature to save His people from their sins by an infinitely meritorious obedience and substitutionary atonement. So everything can be reduced to a Christ-inspired morality.

(ii) The Primacy of the Inner Life

Echoing much of what he had learned from the Brethren of the Common Life in childhood, Erasmus places "inward spirituality" above both doctrinal instruction and ritualistic ceremony. He says: "Life means more than debate. Inspiration is preferable to erudition. Transformation is more important than intellectual comprehension." We grasp Christ's true message, he claims, when we seek what is hidden over what is seen. "Riches, honour, military might - all must give way to the inner word." (J. Laurel Carrington) "This is your first and only goal," Erasmus charges his readers, "perform this vow, this one thing: that you be changed, that you be seized, that you weep at and be transformed into those teachings which you learn."

God intentionally planned, he adds, that pre-Christian pagan writers should pave the way for Christians to know and do God's will. If we train our children in them, they would have a sure preparation for the higher teaching of Scripture. Yet, he cautions, we must not linger too long with them, but aim to call them with ourselves to Christ. A certain character in Erasmus' *The Godly Feast* shows us where this counsel can lead. Following this method, he confesses, "I could hardly help exclaiming: 'Saint Socrates, Pray for us!'"

The emphasis Erasmus gives to such a counsel of despair draws far more on popular mediaeval mysticism than on Scripture, where Paul especially stresses that in order to worship and serve God aright, we must exercise both the understanding and the spirit. (1 Cor 14.15) Furthermore, all his epistles lay a foundation in doctrine before exhorting to life and practice. But no-one hated doctrine more than Erasmus.

(iii) An Optimistic View of Human Nature

Unlike Zwingli, Luther, Calvin, Bucer and other Reformers, Erasmus believed that man plays the decisive role in preparing himself to receive salvation. His blatant semi-Pelagianism openly teaches that man by nature is amenable to instruction by Christ, because his soul is always open to persuasion. This is why all education should concentrate on the inner man.

Here again we detect the typical humanist view of man. As Christ is chiefly an example, "a classical hero, a way of living, rather than . . . the Saviour on the cross," Erasmus and his fellow humanists "saw in the Christian life the struggle of an essentially free and dignified being," fully able to control himself and his appetites. (A.G. Dickens) The stark contrast to Reformed Protestantism could hardly be better stated. And so Dickens concludes: "Erasmus, who as a good humanist believed in the basic dignity and goodness of man," fully taught "man's ability by the exercise of free will to contribute towards his own salvation."

(iv) Baptism, the Lord's Supper and Marriage

This idea of inward spirituality spills over into Erasmus' teaching on Baptism, The Eucharist and Marriage.

For example, while Baptism is important as a sign of entry into the community of faith, the one baptized must strive to fulfil his baptismal covenant in a God-fearing life.

Similarly, while commending the Reformer Oecolampadius' treatise on the Lord's Supper, which teaches the spiritual presence of Christ over against transubstantiation, Erasmus hesitates to endorse it, fearing to go against "the general opinion of the church, from which I consider it perilous to dissent." Leo Jud stated publicly that Erasmus was in covert agreement with the Zurich Reformers, but was too cowardly to openly say so. In response, Erasmus claimed that his loyalty to Rome did not spring from fear, but from his sincere belief that, for all her faults, Rome was the one true church.

As for Marriage, Erasmus follows Augustine in teaching that a cloistered life is no guarantee of sexual purity - "all the veiled aren't virgins, believe me!" - and that married life can be pure.

(v) Penance, Auricular Confession and Saint Worship

Erasmus' principle of spiritual inwardness also found expression in other areas.

Penance, for instance, does not absolve from sin without sincere contrition.

Confession to a priest is lawful as long as the penitent is confessing through him to Christ.

As for Saint Worship, Erasmus mocks it mercilessly. All you have done, he says to the church in effect, is to replace pagan deities with so-called saints. The lying relics of Mary's breast milk are just as worthless as sailors' distress cries to her as 'Star of the Sea,' 'Queen of Heaven,' 'Mistress of the World,' and 'Port of Salvation.' Whether or not, as Diarmid MacCulloch says, Erasmus wrote "for effect . . . for money . . . and to curry favour," his caustic wit certainly drove some to forsake images and seek a more inward form of religion.

His Controversy with Luther

In the Sovereign Grace Union's pamphlet *Was the Reformation Necessary?* by Graham Bidston and in Volume 4 of James I Packer's *Collected Shorter Writings* the controversy between Erasmus and Luther is thoroughly dealt with. The core issue may be briefly stated: Erasmus, the "man of peace," set out to prove that man's free will can accept or reject God's way of salvation. When his discussion failed to produce a clear-cut answer, he said that he would suspend his judgment and "gladly seek refuge in scepticism."

Luther, in reply, affirmed in the strongest possible way man's absolute helplessness in sin and the sole sufficiency of the grace of God. Marshalling many Biblical proofs for his claim, Luther roundly told his opponent that he, Erasmus, always wants to "compare everything and assert nothing," whereas he, Luther, asserts the truth because "the Holy Spirit is no sceptic!" Erasmus feebly replied that he accepted as probable what others accept as certain, leaving "the decrees of the church" and "the consensus of the Christian people" to decide.

Clearly, those who had previously tried to put Erasmus and Luther in a "double harness . . . like yoking an ox with a fallow deer" (the simile is Erasmus's) could no longer be in doubt. The die was cast, and Luther's "riddles and paradoxes" [ie. statements on predestination and the bondage of man's will] remained unsolved. As J. Laurel Carrington well says: "Luther dismantled Erasmus's case as leaving free will with so negligible a role as to be virtually non-existent." B. B. Warfield states the sum of the matter even better: "Luther . . . demanded a clear and definite acknowledgment that the work of salvation is of the grace of God alone, and man contributes nothing whatever to it. This acknowledgment Erasmus could not make." The timid humanist, always happiest when sheltering beneath church authority, though known to history as "the man who would not take sides" (J. Gresham Machen), did take sides, and so identified himself as an enemy of the grace of God.

His Greek New Testament

This is not the place to consider in detail Erasmus's greatest contribution to the Reformation. The Trinitarian Bible Society has done sterling work over the years in defence of his Greek New Testament. The opposition it roused indicates its value to Biblical Protestantism. One Dominican slandered Erasmus as an imposter, "ignorant of all theology." The Paris Theological Faculty damned his work as "blasphemous and heretical." Noel Beda, its theological figurehead, publicly denounced Erasmus as a "clandestine Lutheran." Conservative Romanists viewed his challenge to Jerome's sacrosanct Vulgate as heresy; the Council of Trent endorsed their view by giving the Vulgate canonical status. Others among them saw Erasmus's *Annotations* on the text as undermining the authority of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, which were the backbone of scholastic exegesis.

Protestants, by contrast, hailed the work as seminal. Indeed, by its re-translation of certain Gospel passages, changing 'penance' (Matt 3.2) to 'repentance,' and 'full of grace' (Luke 1.28) to 'gracious,' and translating 'ekklesia' as 'called' rather than 'clergy,' and 'episkopos' as 'overseer' rather than 'bishop,' to name no others, it contributed greatly to further reformation.

For his part, Erasmus claimed mildly that he was "concerned solely with the integrity of the text." It is only the truth to state that, along with Colet, Reuchlin and Lefevre, Erasmus genuinely tried to penetrate beneath centuries of church accretions and irresponsible exposition to answer the question: What precisely did Jesus Christ in the Gospels and the apostle Paul (especially) in his Letters say? For this we should be truly thankful to God.

Conclusion

Can we apportion to Erasmus a share in the Reformation? Yes, if we view him as a tool in God's hands to further the world wide spread of His Word and Gospel. His mordant wit opened people's eyes to the abominable claims and corruptions of the Roman

hierarchy, and he was genuinely concerned to see church abuses removed. His linguistic gifts pointed scholars to the sacred text, opening the way to more faithful translations. These two contributions alone made conscientious adherence to the Papacy impossible and the Reformation necessary. True, his critique of Rome never penetrated down to the root of the matter. It was given to Luther, Zwingli, Bucer, Calvin, Knox and their immediate successors to replace the old rotten edifice with a much sounder structure. Yet, like Cyrus of old, he served God's purpose, whether he realized it or not.

Recently, Erasmus has been rehabilitated in Roman Catholic circles. John O'Malley believes that "the name of Erasmus could become a symbol, indeed a warning, for us to think and act as true Catholics." Ecumenists, too, make much of him. His "methodology of doubt" and dislike of clear-cut doctrine make him an admirable banner to wave in support of their ideals.

Evangelical and Reformed Christians, however, must beware. He may have laid the egg that Luther hatched; but, as Luther told him: "Your thoughts of God are too human." He never accepted the all-sufficiency of the Word of God. He never grasped its teaching on sin and grace. He never saw the sinfulness of sin. He never saw the need of the New Birth and the Holy Spirit. He never saw the perfect atonement of Christ. He never saw that we are justified by faith alone. He never stopped leaning on the prop of 'the church.' He never understood that salvation, from first to last, is of the Lord, and not a joint enterprise between God and man. He never came to see that man has no merit at all before a holy God. And as 'the prince of humanists' he never ceased to hob-nob with the intellectual elite of this world, or the international scholars' club members of his day. His Philosophy of Christ was at heart a mere moralism, not, as he claimed, the "simple Christianity" of Christ. Luther thought he had never come to Christ. We shall one day know.

Meanwhile, let us preach the Gospel of free and sovereign grace to as many as we can. For thousands in the churches think and speak like Erasmus. Wholly indifferent to doctrine, they are firmly entrenched in the view that it is not what we believe, but how we live, that ultimately matters. Their beloved slogan is the old semi-Pelagian: "God helps those who help themselves." Furthermore, they cling for dear life to the notion of the innate goodness of man. Every thief, liar and adulterer is 'good at heart.' Many of them hate assertions of any kind, and many still find the Bible an obscure, culturally conditioned old tome. Many are quite content to attend church, say prayers, give to charity and do their neighbours no harm. O, how greatly they need to hear again, in ringing tones of certainty and conviction, that Christ Jesus came into the world TO SAVE SINNERS, and that THIS MAN RECEIVETH SINNERS. Only then will they forsake a wretched man-made religion for the true religion of Christ.

Q. How doth the Scripture prove there is but one God?

A. It expressly affirms, *The Lord our God is one Lord: and there is no other God but one.* Deut 6.4, 1 Cor 8.4.

Q. Are there no others besides the true God called gods in Scripture?

A. Yes; angels, magistrates, idols, men's belly, and the devil are so called.

Q. Why are angels called *gods*?

A. Because they are most like God in spirituality, wisdom and power.

Q. Why are magistrates called *gods*?

A. Because, as God's deputies, they rule over others.

Q. Why are heathen idols called *gods*?

A. Because blinded sinners worship and honour them as gods.

Q. Why is men's belly called *a god*?

A. Because many are chiefly careful to satisfy and please it. Phil 3.19.

Q. Why is the devil called the *god of this world*?

A. Because he rules over, and is honoured and worshipped as a god by the most part of mankind. 2 Cor 4.4.

Q. Is not God sufficiently distinguished from these gods?

A. Yes; for he is the only living and true God. Jer 10.10, John 17.3.

John Brown of Haddington

Church Divisions

Edited Notes from a Bible Reading

by William Jay

‘I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord. And I entreat thee also, true yoke-fellow, help those women which laboured with me in the Gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellow-labourers, whose names are in the book of life. Rejoice in the Lord alway; and again I say, Rejoice.’ (Philippians 4.2-4)

The apostle much valued and commended the Philippian converts. He here calls them his ‘brethren,’ his ‘dearly beloved,’ ‘and longed for,’ his ‘joy and crown.’

Many people *distress* and *disgrace* their ministers, but these yielded Paul both comfort and honour. For love’s sake, therefore, he *beseeches* and *entreats* them.

The subject is three-fold:

1. Unanimity and Concord

This regards a particular instance of disagreement in the church. ‘I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord.’ Here were two women at variance. We are not informed whether the ground of difference was civil or religious. Perhaps it was owing to a talebearer . . . Perhaps it was a mere trifle to begin with . . . Perhaps they were both to blame; this is commonly the case, and therefore the Scripture says ‘forgiving *one another*.’ Two such individuals at variance may draw in others, form parties and embroil a whole church. When this is the case, their edification is at an end. The apostle, therefore, would have Euodias and Syntyche compose their difference, keep the peace and live in love. The Saviour is the Lamb of God, and if we have the mind that was in Him, we shall display ‘the meekness and gentleness of Jesus Christ.’

We read in church history of two Christians who had quarreled in the morning. In the evening one of them sent a note to the other:

‘Brother, the sun is going down.’ The hint produced reconciliation. When Jonathan Edwards had finished preaching one day he observed two families stay behind when the others had left. He discovered that they had been at variance, but the influence of the Spirit of God on them through his sermon kept them from leaving the house of God till they were reconciled.

2. Mutual assistance

‘And I entreat thee also, true yoke-fellow, help those women which laboured with me in the Gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellow-labourers, whose names are in the book of life.’

Whoever these females were, they had co-operated with Paul and his associates in the ministry - not in public preaching, for this our apostle had expressly forbidden, but in various offices suited to their sex and condition; by their devotion, example, and conduct.

On their behalf, Paul addresses his ‘true yoke-fellow.’ Whoever he was, he was to help those females who had been so serviceable to Paul, Clement and their comrades; by his prayers, consolations and every kind of attention that their circumstances required. . . . Whoever was a loser by anything he did for the cause of the Redeemer? He that watereth shall be watered also. God is not unrighteous to forget the work of faith and labour of love.

3. Constant joy

‘Rejoice in the Lord alway; and again I say, Rejoice.’ Rejoicing is a pleasing exercise, but not an easy one. In a vale of tears; in enemy country; without, fightings; within, fears; pressed down with a sense of unworthiness; burdened with infirmities; wearied with a body of sin and death: what wonder if we hang our harps on the willows? or at least that we cannot always sing the Lord’s song? Yet we are enjoined to rejoice in the Lord always. . . *in the Lord*. And in Him there is enough at all times and in every condition to encourage and delight. We are empty, but in Him all fulness dwells. In Him is all the wisdom, pardon, righteousness, strength and hope we need. His grace is sufficient for us. He is AN INFINITE RESOURCE. Therefore, Rejoice, AND AGAIN I SAY, REJOICE.

A Divine Warning

Among the many commands that God gave to the Jews by which to regulate their national life stands one that is as applicable to Britain today as when it was given. It is the prohibition of every form of psychic dabbling. Witchcraft, sorcery, necromancy, spiritualism, astrology, magic and occult practices are expressly forbidden, and all who practice them are branded as abominable in God's sight. (Deut 18.9-12). We need go no further than the local bookshop, video store or television magazine to see how today people are bombarded and bewitched by these things. Indeed, our poor children are fed them daily.

Do even professing Christians realize the insult they offer to God for dabbling in what He has forbidden? Whatever the form this dabbling takes - whether trying to discover our future destiny through astrology and fortune-telling, or practicing magic (black or white), or attending seances, or joining a secret society (such as the Freemasons), or observing Hallowe'en, or wearing 'lucky charms', crosses and crucifixes, or experimenting with mists, lights and scents - it is absolutely forbidden by God.

God is our Lawgiver as well as Israel's. Because He calls us to worship, serve and obey Himself alone, He has wisely and kindly ordered us to discard all such practices and find contentment in Himself. In the Old Testament Church, He punished King Saul for spiritualism (1 Chron 10.13-14), but commended King Josiah for putting away spiritualists (2 Kings 23.24-25). Near the end of the Bible, we are told that He will certainly punish all those who do not repent of such things. (Rev 9.20-21). We may not be aware that behind all such sinister practices stand Satan and evil spirits, maliciously waiting to capture and destroy our souls and the souls of our children. (1 Tim 4.1)

A specific evil of this kind is particularly provoking to God. On October 31st, children, dressed as witches, ghosts or demons, go from door to door asking "Trick or Treat?" Shops sell candle-lit cut-outs, black cats and broomsticks, while witches' covens meet in clandestine festivity, and practice their abominations. It is Hallowe'en, the most superstitious day in the year.

What is its origin? Why is it celebrated? Whom does it worship? Hallowe'en dates from Roman times, when feasts were held on October 31st to Pomona, goddess of fruit trees. In Britain, the Druids honoured Samhain, lord of the dead, who was said to call together damned souls living in cats' bodies as punishment for their sins. The animals were then sacrificed to appease their gods. From this developed the belief that at this time the air is full of spirits, ghosts, fairies, elves and witches who come out to harm people.

Tricking and Treating with Jack o' Lanterns stems from pagan Ireland. On October 31st, Irish farmers went begging from door to door for food for village feasts in honour of their gods. Good luck was promised to the generous, while the mean were cursed with evil. The Jack o' Lantern face was their symbol of a damned soul. A man named Jack was allegedly debarred from heaven for being niggardly and debarred from hell for playing tricks on Satan. Consequently, he was doomed to wander the earth with his lantern until Judgment Day. Afraid to suffer the same fate, the poor, superstitious Irish placed lighted candles inside hollow turnips to scare evil spirits from their homes.

The Church of Rome, anxious to gain heathen converts, let them keep their pagan festival as long as they were given a 'Christian' flavour. Instead of praying to pagan gods, they were now to pray to departed saints. The Church declared November 1st the Feast of All Saints, called the service of the day All Hallow Mass and the previous evening All Hallows Evening, now abbreviated to Hallowe'en.

Christians should reject Hallowe'en customs, root and branch. We should openly condemn them, and forbid our children to participate in them. Deuteronomy 18 expressly forbids us to have anything to do with witchcraft, spiritism and the demonic. We can no more 'Christianize' Hallowe'en than we can Christianize the devil. God and Satan cannot mix.

Let us rather follow the good example of King David, who studied God's law day and night, and sought to rule his kingdom by its teaching. (Psalm 1) Let us hear God's Son as He speaks to us in the Bible. (Matt 17.5 and 28.20) Let us confess any involvement we have ever had in such evils, and trust God to forgive us for the sake of Christ. (1 John 1.9) Let us cry to Him to have mercy on us and deliver us from all evil. (Psalm 130) Then His warning not to dabble in the occult will not have been in vain.

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"The term [Occult] refers to 'hidden' or 'secret' wisdom; to that which is beyond the range of ordinary human knowledge; to mysterious or concealed phenomena; to inexplicable events. It is frequently used in reference to certain practices (occult 'arts') which include divination, fortune telling, spiritism (necromancy) and magic. . . . Those phenomena collectively known as 'the occult' may be said to have the following distinct characteristics: (1) the disclosure and communication of information unavailable to humans through normal means; (2) the placing of persons in contact with supernatural powers, paranormal energies or demonic forces; (3) the acquisition and mastery of power in order to manipulate or influence other people into certain actions.

Both the OT and the NT proscribe such spiritually impure occultic activities as sorcery, mediumship, divination and magic. . . . While Scripture acknowledges both the reality and the power of occultic practices, it proclaims that God through Christ has disarmed the principalities and powers. At the cross of Calvary the works of the devil were destroyed and the powers of darkness were conquered.

R.M. Enroth

Annual General Meeting

Book Reviews

Reformation Heritage Books

Questions and Answers on the Shorter Catechism - John Brown of Haddington. 356pp. Pbk. \$16. ISBN 978-1-60178-004-0.

This photo-litho reprint of the 1846 edition contains all we expected from this lovable pastor-theologian: logical method, precise definitions, clear discernment between true and false religion, and a warm-hearted delight in his God and Saviour. Cast in the same mould as the catechisms of Flavel, Vincent and Fisher, this masterly work (penned originally for young people!) is richly evangelical and thoroughly Reformed. A fine biographical Introduction by Joel Beeke and Randall Pederson places Brown in his theological and historical context.

J.M.B.

Handfuls of Purpose: Gleanings from the Inner Life of Ruth Bryan. 474pp. Pbk. \$19. ISBN 978-1-60178-003-4.

This intensely moving collection of extracts from the Diary of Ruth Bryan, in the same class of writing as *The Life of Elizabeth Bury*, *The Memoirs of Elizabeth West* and *Life in Jesus* (Mary Winslow), uncovers a character refined and moulded into something beautiful by her holy but gracious God. From beginning to end, the record glows with ardent affection for the Saviour and sears with mourning over indwelling sin. The following quotations are typical: "I fall at thy feet, O Immanuel: loathesome, corrupt and abominable, crying for free, unmerited mercy." [I feel] "encrusted with earth and enveloped in carnality." "I want to *feed* upon Christ, to *live* upon Christ, to *grow* up into Christ, and to be *rooted* in Christ." "Lord, make me thankful for a faithful, searching ministry." While not making her experience the yardstick of our own, we feel constrained to ask: How often do we groan over our depravity, and how ardently do we long for the intimate knowledge of Christ? The shallowness of our experience is sufficient proof of the large-scale withdrawal of the Holy Spirit from the people of God in our day.

J.M.B.

Spiritual Exercises of the Heart - Thomas Reade. 443pp. Pbk. \$18. ISBN 978-1-60178-006-5.

The little-known author of these 78 brief meditations expressly aims “through the blessing of God” to lead the reader into “a closer communion with his own heart, and with Jesus, his exalted Saviour.” In language surprisingly modern for 1837, he covers such diverse topics as *Christian Retirement*, *Perverved Views of the Gospel*, *Following the Lord Fully*, *Christian Motives*, *Lukewarmness*, *True Happiness* and *The Day of Judgment*. Pulling no punches over such ‘unpalatable’ subjects as human wickedness, religious formalism and the dreadfulness of hell; combining pointed appeals to the conscience with a sense of wonder at redeeming grace; and mingling familiar truths with many fresh and enlightening comments, Reade presents us with a most attractive and readable guide to true godliness. Perhaps two factors stand out more clearly than any others: the author’s ability to state what every renewed heart feels, so that his remarks become a mirror to us; and his sheer delight in the matchless love, sovereign grace and tender mercies of our covenant-keeping God. My only regret is the absence of any information on Reade himself.

J.M.B.

Walking as He Walked - Joel Beeke. 144pp. Pbk. \$6.50. ISBN 978-1-60178-010-2.

These four addresses - Jesus’ Crossbearing and Ours, Jesus’ Officebearing and Ours, Jesus’ Tears and Ours, Jesus’ Endurance and Ours - were delivered at Aberystwyth in 2006. Deliberately choosing some of the most difficult areas of Christian discipleship, Dr. Beeke guides us ‘through thorny ways’ once trodden by our Saviour to our goal in God. The tone of these addresses is affectionate, richly pastoral and encouraging. One who attended the Conference reports how edifying and stimulating they were. A Study Guide enhances the value of these ‘breaths of fresh air’ from a modern American Puritan. Recommended by Maurice Roberts and Derek Thomas.

J.M.B.

John Diodati’s Doctrine of Holy Scripture - Andrea Ferrari. 140pp. Pbk. \$12. ISBN 1-89277-98-3. As I hope to include Diodati in our series on Reformation Theologians (DV), using material from this

title, I trust that readers who do not wish to purchase it will be patient for further information regarding him. J.M.B.

Our God - Octavius Winslow. 176pp. Pbk. \$11. ISBN 978-1-60178-005-8.

How refreshing and heart-warming to see the attributes of our God viewed not as abstract qualities to be put under a theological microscope, but as living, glorious perfections graciously placed at the service of His elect. The devout author himself reminds us that “the God of the Bible is ours”, and so all the thoughts of His mind, all the love of His nature, all the teaching of His Spirit, all the promises, invitations, hopes, warnings and admonitions are ours too. Here Winslow offers us a most winsome study of the God of Love, Hope, Patience, Comfort, Bethel, Grace, Holiness, Peace and Light; fittingly ending with an applied exposition of the text “For this God is our God for ever and ever.” (Psa 48.14). Surely this warmly experiential treatment of the best of themes is one of the finest available. J.M.B.

A Sweet Flame: Piety in the Letters of Jonathan Edwards - ed. Michael Haykin.

This slim book of some 150 pages offers us a glimpse of the warm-hearted piety of this brilliant theologian. His tender dealings with family and friends give insight into the heart and mind of this servant of God. The title comes from his consideration of the love of God: “God’s love to sinners appeared like a sweet flame, burning with an infinitely pure love.” To him, obedience to God was a joyful undertaking, to which he gave himself with much passion. He estimates his own talents in the sentence: “I think I can write better than I can speak.” Do buy this book. You will not be disappointed. Indeed, it will be a blessing to turn frequently to these letters and be thankful. A.Ridge.

Eternity Realized - Robert Philip. 194p. Pbk. \$12. ISBN 978-1-60178-007-2.

Reprinted from the first American edition of 1833 and with a biographical foreword by Joel Beeke and Jay Collier, this devotional work is by a Scot (1791-1858) who held two lengthy pastorates in London and Liverpool. The author’s great aim is to

encourage believers to concentrate their thoughts upon eternity at all times throughout their lives. He deplores the fact that Christians are so 'this-worldly' in their thinking, their home lives, their worship, and so on. His approach is thoroughly Biblical and deeply spiritual. I suggest that maximum benefit could be derived from this book if just three or four pages were prayerfully read each day. J.M.

Banner of Truth Trust

The Life of John Murray - Iain Murray. 220pp. Pbk. £7.25. ISBN 978-0-85151-950-0.

This appreciative biography of a beloved man of God - scholar, pastor, preacher, lecturer, writer (and sheep farmer!) - traces Prof. Murray's outer life and sterling contribution to the Reformed Faith. In an easy-to-read style, and full of edifying anecdotes and affectionate regard for his subject, Mr. Murray leaves us heart-warmed yet saddened by the Church's loss of one hailed as the 'conscience' of Westminster Theological Seminary. "Your fathers, where are they? and the prophets, do they live for ever?" (Zech 1.5) "Help, Lord, for the godly man ceaseth; for the faithful fail from among the children of men." (Psa 12.1)

J.M.B.

Truth's Victory Over Error - David Dickson. 304p. Hdbk. £15.50. ISBN 9780-85151-949-4.

This splendid exposition of the *Westminster Confession* succinctly states the positive meaning of each section, then points out its opposing errors. As so many modern sects and cults are re-hashes of ancient heresies, this exposure of the latter helps us identify the former. A good companion to A.A.Hodge and Robert Shaw. J.M.B.

Letters of John Newton - ed. Josiah Bull. 432p. Hdbk. £16.50. ISBN 978-0-85151-951-7.

Over the years, this reviewer has found Newton's practical wisdom invaluable for its sane and sanctified common sense. This quality is prominent in these letters, some of which may be found in his *Works*, others were not previously published in collections of his correspondence. Biographical and historical notes by the editor enrich this volume, which is handsomely produced.

J.M.B.

Jesus Himself - Marcus Loane. 144p. Hdbk. £8.00. ISBN 978-0-85151-948-7.

Using the English Standard Version of the Bible, this devotional study is a gem. The wonder of the resurrection is retold with heart-felt beauty. The strong binding, which resembles that of a presentation copy, is a perfect match to the contents. J.M.B.

The following titles have been sent us, but as yet we are unable to include reviews of them. The Lord willing, we hope to make up this deficit. Ed.

Evangelical Press

The Cross - Peter Jeffrey.

The Beauty of Holiness (Leviticus) - Philip H. Eveson.

Can We Be Good Without God? - John Blanchard.

Beyond Amazing Grace (Lessons from Newton's Letters, Hymns and Sermons) - J. Todd Murray.

The Rise of Paganism (ie. today) - Jonathan Skinner.

Daniel (Study Commentary) - Allan M. Harman.

Christian Parenting - Roger Ellsworth.

The Dawn of Heaven Breaks (Hymns, Bible Readings and other writings on Heaven) - Sharon James.

Is That You, Lord? (God's Communication with Man) - Gary E. Gilly.

Christian Focus Publications

Cambridge and the Evangelical Succession (Grimshawe, Berridge, Venn, Simeon) - Marcus Loane.

Oxford and the Evangelical Succession (Whitefield, Newton, Scott, Cecil, Wilson) - Marcus Loane.

The Divine Inspiration of Scripture - Louis Gaussen. (A Classic)

Reformation Heritage Books

The Inner Sanctuary of Puritan Piety (John Flavel's Doctrine of Union with Christ) - J. Stephen Yuille.

Westminster Conference Papers *Where Reason Fails (Owen on the Trinity, Cranmer and Anglicanism, Azusa Street Phenomenon, Puritans on Atonement, When is War a Just War? William Tyndale)*

Chosen in Christ

Some of our adversaries have preposterously asked: How can men be certain of their salvation if it lies in the secret counsel of God? . . . Since the certainty of salvation is 'set forth' unto us in Christ, it is useless, and not without dishonour to Christ Himself, to pass over this fountain of life, which is thrown open that men may draw out of it, and to labour and toil in vain to draw the water of eternal life out of the *hidden abysses* of the mind and counsel of God! Paul testifies indeed that we are 'chosen before the foundation of the world', but it was 'in Christ.' Let no-one, then, seek confidence in his own election of God anywhere else than 'in Christ', unless indeed he would blot out and do away with the 'book of life' in which his name is written. God's adoption of us 'in Christ' is for no other end than that we should be considered His children. Now the Scripture declares that all those who believe in the only-begotten Son of God are the children and heirs of God. Christ, therefore, is the clear glass in which we are called upon to behold the eternal and hidden election of God; and of that election He is also the earnest. But the eye, by which we behold that eternal life which God sets before us in this glass, is faith. And the hand by which we lay hold of this earnest and pledge is faith. If any will have the matter more plainly stated, let them take it thus: election *precedes* faith as to its divine order, but it is seen and understood by faith. . . . Hence Christ, when dwelling on the eternal election of *His own* in the counsel of the Father, points out at the same time the ground on which their confidence may safely rest; where He says: 'I have manifested Thy name unto the men which Thou gavest Me out of the world: Thine they were, and Thou gavest them Me; and they have kept Thy Word.' (John 17.6). We see here that God begins with Himself, when He condescends to choose us and give us to Christ. But He will have us to begin with Christ, if we would know that we are numbered among His 'peculiar people.'

John Calvin: *The Eternal Predestination of God.*

