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Church Renewal and Erasmus' 1516 Edition of the New Testament: An Example of Irony

Clint Banz

Librarian, Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary

It's well known that all human affairs . . . have two completely opposite faces, so that what is death at first sight, as they say, is life if you look within, and vice versa, life is death. The same applies to beauty and ugliness, riches and poverty, obscurity and fame, learning and ignorance, strength and weakness, the noble and the baseborn, happy and sad, good and bad fortune, friend and foe, healthy and harmful—in fact, you'll find everything suddenly reversed. . . .

*Folly in Erasmus' Praise of Folly*¹

In *Praise of Folly*, Erasmus used the character, “Folly” to unmask the *folly* of conventional wisdom, while disclosing the *virtue* of what the world often deems *folly*. It was a brilliant masterpiece of irony that ruffled feathers and condemned many who wielded power in the religious institutions of the day.

¹Erasmus of Rotterdam, *Praise of Folly*, trans. Betty Randice (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 43.

Irony as a technique has been used by many great literary geniuses. Yet reversals have a peculiar way of showing up where one least expects not only in literary works, but in real life as well. Take for instance Erasmus' Greek New Testament. Here was a work that Erasmus had entertained great aspirations—aspirations that are far different from what is happening today among exclusive groups within American Christianity. What was his intention of printing the first Greek New Testament? Before answering that question of intent, a brief description of the movement that exercised tremendous influence in Erasmus would be helpful; that is, Renaissance humanism. Following this description, a comparison will be made between Erasmus and humanist ideals. This in turn will prepare us to better understand the intended aims for the first edition of his New Testament.

Renaissance Humanism

'Prince of Humanists' is a title that has been conferred upon Erasmus. Indeed, in the sixteenth century he was the quintessential humanist. A great deal of confusion often exists, however, over the meaning and identity of what has become known as Renaissance humanism. Therefore, a summary of how humanism has been defined will be given before attempting to identify its distinguishing characteristics.

Defining Humanism

Part of this confusion surrounding the meaning of Renaissance humanism stems from the contemporary meaning of 'humanism'. Today it carries the connotation of a philosophy or movement that is explicitly anti-theistic, anti-supernatural, and over-confident of human capability. Renaissance humanism, however, had nothing in common with this notion of humanism.

Another reason for the confusion is the diverse nature of the humanism of the Renaissance. This diversity has spawned various interpretations. Nevertheless, these same schools of historiography taken together impart a colorful panorama of its salient features.

In 1860, Jakob Burkhardt portrayed the Renaissance as a very distinct period in Italy in which it became the cultural force that ushered in the modern world: the emphasis upon the secular, the new consciousness of the individual, and the Italian city-state as the model for the modern political state.²

Twentieth century scholars have tempered Burkhardt's humanism. Paul Kristeller, for instance, has emphasized humanism as a cultural and educational movement. Renaissance humanists, he advocates, were primarily, "professional rhetoricians" who had a "curious fancy for the classical studies."³

One criticism of Kristeller's concept is that his meaning of 'eloquence' is incomplete. The humanists' relationship between form and substance in language was more than a concern for 'style' that had utilitarian relationship to the meaning; rather, true eloquence was related to wisdom. As Gray has contended, "true eloquence . . . could arise only out of a harmonious union between wisdom and style; its aim was to guide men toward virtue and worthwhile goals."⁴

Another facet of Renaissance humanism has been identified by Nancy Struever. In her *Language of History in*

²Jacob Burkhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

³Paul Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters* (Rome 1956), 563; quoted in John Stephens, *The Italian Renaissance: the Origins of Intellectual and Artistic Change Before the Reformation* (London: Longman, 1990), xi.

⁴Hannah H. Grey, "Renaissance Humanism: The Pursuit of Eloquence," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 24 (1963): 498.

the Renaissance, Struever presents a view of the Renaissance humanists as the legatees of the ancient sophists.⁵ The sophists' views on the relation between language and being prompted the humanists in the development of their own language theory.⁶ The Renaissance humanists were more than simply schoolmen who were interested in philology, letters, and finding ancient texts. These were rather symptoms of the changes in which the eloquence *mediates* the message. In a more recent work, Struever further argues that Renaissance humanists "relocated" ethical inquiry from the theoretical of the contemporary scholastics to the realm of personal experience, asking the Socratic question, "How should we then live?"⁷ They were consequently not simply grammarians who were second-rate philosophers, but rather they were serious investigators participating in an "investigation that is lived."⁸

Characteristics of Renaissance Humanism

Characterizing a movement as widespread and diverse as Renaissance humanism is a challenging and intimidating endeavor. Exceptions are bound to come to the mind of various readers. Nevertheless, even though this international movement that began in the city-states of Italy in the 14th century and continued throughout Europe well into the sixteenth century had great diversity, it did have some distinguishing features. This is a general attempt to identify the most dominant ones.

⁵Nancy Struever, *Language of History in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

⁶*Ibid.*, 46.

⁷Nancy Struever, *Theory as Practice: Ethical Inquiry in the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 3.

⁸*Ibid.*, 4.

Church Renewal and Erasmus' New Testament

One of the most salient features of Renaissance humanism was that it was a cultural and intellectual movement which stressed the *studia humanitatis*; that is, the cultivation of things human, especially grammar and rhetoric. Related to this was its renewed interest in the condition of humanity and human experiences. Among the humanists there existed a belief in the dignity of being human by virtue of being created in the image of God and possessing the inherent, creative energy and ability given in creation. This led to a revival of things 'human'.

Moreover, as has been mentioned, the humanist's emphasis upon language was more than merely a means of communication but as the "pursuit of eloquence"—that is, appropriateness in speech to the end goal of living a virtuous life. The primary appeal of this eloquence was to the will of the individual; consequently, the study of rhetoric was stressed as the means of persuasion.

It was this concern for eloquence that helped to revive the study of the Latin and Greek classics (*ad fontes*, "to the sources"); in the sources of antiquity, alternative methods, insights, and models were found to supplant the contemporary scholastic models and categories. These heroes and models of the past were embraced as replacements to what was considered to be a decadent scholasticism. The renewed importance of language and history made the study of grammar and philology essential to theological discussion. In time, the need for a knowledge of the original languages of the texts under consideration prevailed.⁹

Contemporaneous with the discovery of Latin texts from antiquity was the exodus of the Byzantine scholars from Constantinople who brought their Greek texts to Western

⁹It was not until the fifteenth century that western theologians began to pursue a knowledge of Greek, and even that was the exception.

Europe. This combination of multiple manuscripts, simultaneous with the invention of the printing press, helped to give birth to a new critical study of texts. As numerous texts were compared and shown to yield variants, the discipline of textual criticism was to evolve.

Moreover, as more studied and read the Bible and the early Fathers of the church, the contemporary Christianity that supported the theoretical inquires and speculations of scholasticism began to be looked at with some suspicion. This return to the original sources, combined with the emphasis of the humanists that knowledge should serve practical ends, led to a stress on internal piety and moral sensibility.

One of the most well-known characteristics of Renaissance humanism was its rejection of or at least its criticism of the schoolmen. Scholasticism became seen no longer as a quest for the truth, but often as a rigid system that resisted any attempt to enlighten or change its conclusions. Kelley states this succinctly when he explains that the aim of those who used the scholastic method was, "to justify, to order, to inculcate, and to criticize—rather than to investigate—the received doctrine in particular fields of study."¹⁰ Such a disposition to knowledge was in direct contrast to Renaissance humanism. This difference between the humanists and the scholastics further involved epistemological differences inherent in both groups. The humanists' emphasis upon rhetoric was an epistemological shift from absolute knowledge towards knowledge as probability.

¹⁰Donald R. Kelley, *Renaissance Humanism* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 6.

Church Renewal and Erasmus' New Testament

Erasmus and Renaissance Humanism

No one could deny that Erasmus' literary productions are similar to other humanists of the 15th and 16th centuries. Nevertheless, he does stand apart from many of his colleagues, for in him Renaissance ideals were employed to stimulate church reform. His literary accomplishments in biblical studies and the church Fathers demonstrated a practical influence on diverse groups in the church: His New Testament in Greek and work on the Fathers aided the scholar; his biblical commentaries aided the preacher; and his paraphrases were a tool to enhance understanding of the Bible among the laity.¹¹ Before proceeding on the relationship between Erasmus and Renaissance humanism, it would be helpful to consider a few of the humanists who had a great deal of influence upon Erasmus and others who were involved in a similar endeavor regarding the Greek New Testament.

Humanists Who Influenced Erasmus

Erasmus was influenced by Italian humanists through his contacts in England and through his trips to Italy. Ficino and Pico were the sparks in a revival of Neoplatonism in England during the time he first ventured there in 1499.¹² This trip to England played a decisive part in his education. He was greatly impressed with the aristocratic scholars whose lives were unimpeachable (e.g. William Grocyn, William Latimer, Thomas Linacre, John Colet, Thomas More) and became

¹¹Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus: His Life, Works, and Influence*, trans. J.C. Grayson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 102.

¹²Roland Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 59.

convinced of the necessity to master Greek.¹³ It was John Colet who exercised the most influence upon Erasmus to pursue biblical studies.¹⁴ Following the return from his second trip to England (June 1506), Erasmus left for Italy. Although there were Greek teachers in England, Greek-teaching Greeks were found in Florence, Padua, Rome and especially in Venice. Erasmus already comfortable with his Greek had ample opportunity to improve it.¹⁵

Although numerous illustrations of the influences of Renaissance humanism can be traced throughout Erasmus' works, the influence of Lorenza Valla (1406-1457) alone will be cited. Lorch identifies several parallels of the works of Erasmus which have an affinity to several of Valla's works: for instance, Valla's *Epicurus* and Erasmus' *Enchiridion*; and of course Valla's *Adnotationes Novum Testamentum* with Erasmus' annotations of the New Testament.¹⁶

Valla's work *Adnotationes Novum Testamentum* [i.e. *Annotations of the New Testament*] were discovered by Erasmus in manuscript form in 1504. He was impressed with Valla's work and edited a publication of it the next year. Valla's esteem of the apostle Paul indicated that the theology of the apostles and church Fathers (that is, a theology of rhetoric) should be the focus of attention rather than the theology founded on "Aristotle's metaphysics and dialectics."¹⁷ In his *Annotations*, Valla dared to lay the ax to the root of various Catholic dogmas. Passages which had become proof-

¹³Ibid., 57-58.

¹⁴Lewis W. Spitz, *The Religious Renaissance of the German Humanists* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1963), 202.

¹⁵Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom*, 78.

¹⁶Maristella Lorch, "Lorenza Valla," in *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy*, ed. Albert Rabil (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 337.

¹⁷Ibid., 337.

texts of these dogmas were declared to be based on a faulty translation of the original Greek (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:10; Luke 1:28; Matt. 4:17).¹⁸

Valla's *Annotations of the New Testament* had thus established grounds to question the accuracy of the authorized version of Roman Catholicism; that is, the Latin Vulgate. Consequently, the theology which had been based on the Vulgate was likewise assailed. Erasmus' publication of Valla's work in 1505 made it accessible to a broader audience as well as introduced to this broader audience the linguistic methods that formed the basis of what would be his own related work eleven years later, *Novum Instrumentum*.¹⁹

Although Valla wrote his *Annotations* in 1453, their distribution through Erasmus' publication in 1505 invariably became the catalyst that made the knowledge of Greek a requirement among those who would participate in theological discussion. This in turn mandated a need for a Greek text of the New Testament that would become the playing field of the dialogue. Whether this was already conceived in Erasmus' mind at the time is not known. What is known, however, is that in 1507 Erasmus inquired of the renown Italian printer Aldus Manutius of the prospects of printing a Greek New Testament writing,

I very much wonder what has prevented the publication, long before now, of your New Testament, a work which, unless my guess is mistaken, will please even the general public and especially those of my sort, that is, the theologians.²⁰

¹⁸McGrath, *Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 131-134.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 131.

²⁰Desiderius Erasmus, *Correspondence of Erasmus: Letters 142 to 297, 1501-1514*, trans. R.A.B. Mynors and D.F.S. Thomson

Similar Works to the *Novum Instrumentum*

Of Erasmus' contemporaries, two men toiled over works similar to his *Novum Instrumentum*. They were Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples and Cardinal Francisco Ximénez de Cisneros.

Lefèvre had surrounded himself with various humanists in France and in the process advanced humanism. Though not opposed to Aristotle, he emphasized the study of Scripture and the Church Fathers. Lefèvre also desired to correct the Vulgate based on the original Greek. This he did for the Pauline Epistles, including a commentary on this same portion of Scripture which emphasized an exegesis that was more philological and homiletical than speculative.²¹ He published this work in 1512.

Cardinal Ximénez de Cisneros was the mastermind behind the *Computensian Polyglot*. One scholar Ximénez employed in the polyglot was Elio Antonio de Nebrija. Nebrija was from Spain and he too labored to restore interest in the original languages and texts.²² Nebrija eventually became disenchanted, however, with the methods used in completing the massive *Complutensian*. His intention had been to correct and clarify the Latin Vulgate from the originals; however, the conservative stance of the one in charge of the project,

in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 131; works in this series will be hereafter referred to as *CWE*.

²¹Erika Rummel, "Voices of Reform from Hus to Erasmus," in *Handbook of European History 1400-1600*, vol. 2, ed. Thomas A. Brady, Heiko Oberman, and James D. Tracy (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 70.

²²Jerry H. Bentley, *Humanists and the Holy Writ: New Testament Scholarship in the Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 77-91.

Ximénes, prohibited it; consequently, the *Complutensian* never became an "instrument of reform."²³

Erasmus and Humanist Ideals

Evidence abounds that suggests Erasmus' commitment to humanists' ideals: grammar and rhetoric were his priceless pearls; the defense of a classical education was already argued in his youth in his work, *Antibarbari*; and eventually he embraced the notion that classical literature enabled one to understand theology.²⁴ Following his return from England, he turned his attention to biblical studies. It was this "coupling of classical culture with theology" that led Erasmus to also examine the Fathers of the church.²⁵ His return to the Fathers was to discover, moreover, "models of Christian *eloquentia*."²⁶ These models were consulted for alternative methods to what Erasmus considered the sterile theological method of the scholastics. Origen and Jerome were the fathers he esteemed the most. In fact, in the same year he saw the publication of his New Testament, he also had printed a newly edited nine volume edition of Jerome.

***Novum Instrumentum* as a Humanist Work of Reform²⁷**

Today, most of the brilliant works of this sixteenth century priest have become the exclusive interest of only a few

²³Ibid., 89-90.

²⁴Augustijn, *Erasmus*, 104.

²⁵Ibid., 105.

²⁶McGrath, *Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, 128.

²⁷*Novum Instrumentum* was the title Erasmus gave to the first edition of his Greek New Testament.

scholars, literary critics, and historians. Despite the neglect of these works, however, one of Erasmus' accomplishments remains of perennial interest to both scholars and lay people of the 20th century church: his Greek New Testament. Part of the reason for this is that it was a revision of his Greek New Testament that later would be attributed the status *Textus Receptus*.

The question remains, however, in what way did the intended purpose of his 1516 edition of the New Testament differ so drastically from how it is used by some today? This writer suggests that the first edition of the New Testament reflected a quest for church renewal that was indeed flavored by humanism. To support this claim, a brief description will be given of Erasmus' 1516 New Testament. This description will be followed by a consideration of how it did serve as a document of reform.

Description of the *Novum Instrumentum*

Erasmus used the term *Instrumentum* instead of *Testamentum*, because he thought it was a better rendering of the Greek word *διαθηκη*, since this was a *written* document of the new covenant. For all subsequent editions, however, he used the standard title *Novum Testamentum* to appease his critics.²⁸

Erasmus' first edition of his New Testament was much more than simply a Greek version of the New Testament. The work consisted of four main parts: The Dedication to Pope Leo X, the preliminaries, the text itself in both Greek and Latin, and the annotations. Three parts formed the preliminaries: the *Paraclesis*, *Methodus*, and *Apologia*. In the *Paraclesis*, Erasmus encouraged the reader to read the New Testament. In the *Methodus*, he gave "pointers to the fruitful

²⁸Bentley, *Humanists and the Holy Writ*, 121.

reading of it."²⁹ The *Apologia* was his defense for producing the work. The third main part of the work was the text of the New Testament. Each page consisted of two columns, the Greek on the left and the revised Latin Vulgate on the right. These texts were then divided into books and chapters only, not into verses. The fourth part consisted of the annotations, which described the reason Erasmus modified the Vulgate version. Since, of course, the bulk of the work was the text of the New Testament and the annotations, they merit a fuller description.

Latin Translation. The revision of the Latin Vulgate was the most controversial part of Erasmus' New Testament. It was not a fresh new translation in Latin; that would come in 1519.³⁰ Rather, it was fairly unsophisticated.³¹ Bentley comments that Erasmus' translation was at times even more literal than the Vulgate, but he was not slavish to this. He sought to translate the sense of the Greek passage not merely the individual words.³² Jonge expands upon his translation philosophy when he explains that Erasmus believed language had two elements: words and meanings. He rejected the notion that words in the original language always corresponded exactly to words in the receiving language—this holds

²⁹Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom*, 90.

³⁰Bentley, *Humanists and the Holy Writ*, 162.

³¹Jonge explains that the 1516 translation amounted to simply deleting certain words and replacing them with others. This was done in each succeeding edition so that by the 5th edition in 1535, only 60% of the Vulgate's text was the same. H.J. de Jonge, "Wann ist Erasmus' Übersetzung des Neuen Testaments Entstanden?" in *Erasmus of Rotterdam: the Man and the Scholar*, edited by J. Sperna Weiland and W.Th.M. Frijhoff (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 152.

³²Bentley, *Humanists and the Holy Writ*, 165-166.

especially true with idioms. Erasmus explained this in his *Apologia* of the work,

Whoever translates, is regularly obliged to deviate from the details and finer points of the original. Let me not be hauled before the judge if each word in the original does not have a word which answers to it in the translation: try as you will, it will not succeed. . . . do not condemn my new version if you can establish that I have given a truer rendering of the meaning and intention than the maker of the Vulgate.³³

Greek Text. On each page placed alongside his Latin version was a column of the corresponding New Testament text in the Greek language. Erasmus cited the usage of four Greek manuscripts for his Greek text, but the consultation of additional manuscripts can be adduced from his annotations.³⁴ These manuscripts have been identified as being from Britain, Brabant, and Basle.³⁵ What is noteworthy about the Basle manuscripts is, namely, which manuscript he relied heavily upon (i.e. MS. 2) and which manuscripts he refused to consult (MS. E and MS. 1).³⁶ In short, the Basle manuscripts that received highest regard by Erasmus were MS. 2 (a manuscript of the Gospels, Acts, and the Epistles which dates from the twelfth century and is now generally regarded as inferior), MS. 817 (the "chief source" Erasmus used to correct MS. 2),

³³Desiderius Erasmus, "Apologia" in *Ausgewählte Werke*, edited by H. Holborn (Munich 1933), 170; quoted in Hank Jan de Jonge, "Erasmus' Method of Translation in His Version of the New Testament," *The Bible Translator* 37 (January 1986): 137.

³⁴Bentley, *Humanists and the Holy Writ*, 125.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 125-126.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 129-131.

MS. 7 and MS. 4.³⁷ For Revelation, Erasmus had only one manuscript, and it lacked the final six verses of Revelation. Erasmus responded to this predicament by translating from the Latin into the Greek citing this in his annotations.

Since the Greek manuscripts had to be copied in order for the printer to use them, numerous errors were made in the transcription. In addition to this the project was undertaken with great haste. Consequently, the outcome was a Greek text that had many errors.

The Annotations of the New Testament. The fourth major section of the *Novum Instrumentum* were the Annotations of the New Testament. It was in this section that Erasmus explained the rationale of his changes to the Latin Vulgate, citing variants in Latin manuscripts and more accurate renderings of the Greek. Erasmus also consulted a number of the church fathers (e.g. Jerome, Augustine, Hilliary, Chrysostom) to support his revisions. For instance, he identified how Jerome's commentaries contradicted many passages of the Vulgate (e.g. Acts 26:2-3, 1 Cor 5:6, Gal 5:7-9, and Eph 1:4).³⁸

Although Erasmus reiterated many of the same criticism articulated by Lorenzo Valla, he expanded their coverage. The annotations of the first edition of his New Testament were 294 folio pages. This would eventually be expanded to 783 folio pages by his fifth edition in 1535.³⁹

It was in these annotations that Erasmus exercised a level of textual criticism that has not always been acknowledged by current scholarship. Bentley praises his work saying, "The Annotations alone should prove sufficient to dispose of a rather silly notion, sometimes still repeated,

³⁷Ibid., 127-132.

³⁸Ibid., 162.

³⁹Ibid., 123.

that Lorenzo Valla and Politan were the only true philologists of the Renaissance."⁴⁰ Here was an active mind fully engaged in a level of textual criticism that up to that time was unprecedented.⁴¹

Having taken a cursory glance at his first edition of the New Testament, we are more prepared to explore how it served to foster church reform.

***Novum Instrumentum* as Church Renewal**

When Erasmus completed his *Novum Instrumentum*, did he merely intend it to be a document for circulation and discussion among the scholarly community? Or did he seek to reach a much wider audience; in fact, all of western Christendom? The entire thesis of this paper rests upon the latter assertion that Erasmus' first edition of the New Testament was a document that would foster church reform.

In speaking of Erasmus' interest in church reform, however, it should be stated that the specific kind of reform being referred to here was not the dogmatic confrontation that characterized Martin Luther. Rather, it was distinctly humanist; namely, the tacit disapproval of a Christian dogma so dependent on a systemization of Aristotle and so different from the simple piety of the first century. It was in this way that his biblical works, especially the first edition of his New Testament, fostered church reforms that were characterized by humanist ideals. Five ways that Erasmus intended this to be accomplished will be considered.

Stimulate Reading of the New Testament. One way Erasmus sought church reform in his work *Novum Instrumentum* was to provide a Latin version that was not only

⁴⁰Ibid., 161.

⁴¹Ibid., 143.

more accurate, but which would also be a catalyst for reading and translating the New Testament into the vernacular. This is supported in his exhortation to read the Bible, the *Paraclesis*, in which he stated,

Indeed, I disagree very much with those who are unwilling that Holy Scripture, translated in the vulgar [i.e. native] tongue, be read by the uneducated, as if Christ taught such intricate doctrines that they could scarcely be understood by very few theologians. . . . I would that even the lowliest of 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.⁴²

This willingness to put the Bible in the language of the people was not exclusive to Erasmus. Basil Hall remarks that the sixteenth century witnessed a resurgence of interest in a knowledge of the Bible. He adduces this not only from scholars such as Lefèvre, but from the educated laity as well. The latter may be seen in the number of French and German translations from the Vulgate in the latter fifteenth and early sixteenth century.⁴³ Erasmus would definitely have been aware of the prospects for his Latin translation to be consulted for such endeavors.

⁴²Desiderius Erasmus, "*Paraclesis*," in J. C. Olin, ed., *Christian Humanism and the Reformation* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), 96-97.

⁴³Basil Hall, "Biblical Scholarship: Editions and Commentaries," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, vol. 3, ed. S.L. Greenslade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 38-39.

Revision of the Latin Vulgate. Although Erasmus has been remembered by most as the first editor of a publication of the Greek New Testament, strong evidence suggests that such was not his primary purpose.⁴⁴ Rather, Erasmus sought to correct and revise the Vulgate, using the Greek text as primary basis to accomplish such a task.

One reason Erasmus sought to correct the Vulgate was that he shared the assumption along with Jerome that the Latin New Testament contained a number of errors. In a letter to Maarten Dorp, a theologian from Louvain, Erasmus defended himself using Jerome's example as a precedent for his work. He wrote to Dorp, "Why does Jerome find fault with many things [in the Vulgate] and correct them explicitly?"⁴⁵

It was this stance toward the authorized version of the day that invited such harsh criticisms and invectives. Some assaulted Erasmus' work with a zeal that forfeited judgment. A Carthusian monk, for instance, claimed that, "If one point of the Vulgate were in error the entire authority of Holy Scripture would collapse, love and faith would be extinguished, heresies and schisms would abound, blasphemy would be shaken, and indeed the Catholic Church would collapse from the foundation."⁴⁶ Another critic of the *Novum Instrumentum* was Nicolaas Daechem of Egmond, a "professor of theology and head of the Carmelite house of studies at Louvain." In one of his letters, Erasmus relays some of this man's criticisms

⁴⁴Hank Jan de Jonge, "Novum Testamentum a Nobis Versum: The Essence of Erasmus' Edition of the New Testament." *Journal of Theological Studies* (New Series) 35 (October 1984): 395f.; see Bentley, *Humanist and the Holy Writ*, 114, n. 9 for a different perspective.

⁴⁵CWE 3:134.

⁴⁶Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom*, 135.

saying, "A great crisis threatened the Christian religion and that the coming of Antichrist was at hand."⁴⁷

Erasmus was not surprised by such opposition. In his preface to the reader of his Annotations he wrote, "I know . . . that it is human nature to object to novelty in everything, but especially in the field of learning, and that most people expect to find the old familiar taste and what they call the traditional flavors."⁴⁸ In response to those who accused him of tampering with the Vulgate, he wrote,

It is not as though I undermine the modern text [i.e. the Latin Vulgate]; I restore the old one to the utmost of my power, but in such a way as not to weaken the new one. Those who do battle for the new one as though for hearth and altar still have what they are so much attached to; they have lost nothing, and have gained something worth having. The text they love they will henceforward *read more accurately and understand more correctly* [italics mine].⁴⁹

Jonge identifies three primary objectives of Erasmus' translation as clarity, correctness and purity of Latin, and simplicity.⁵⁰ This may all sound rather harmless today to readers who have no attachment to the Vulgate, but it would be short-sighted to underestimate the rippling effect of this new translation within the church. The Vulgate had gone unchallenged for over one thousand years; old traditions die hard. Moreover, medieval theologians had invested much

⁴⁷CWE 6:315.

⁴⁸CWE 3:199 (Preface to the Annotations of *Novum Instrumentum*, "To the Reader").

⁴⁹CWE 4:46 (letter to Henry Bullock, August 1516).

⁵⁰Jonge, "Erasmus' Method of Translation in His Version of the New Testament," 137, 138.

doctrine in the precise language of the Vulgate, and as one scholar remarks, any revision of this prized work might undermine important tenants of their system of theology.⁵¹ Erasmus acknowledged this threat to the schoolmen in a sarcastic way in his letter to Maarten Dorp when he wrote, "These are the men who do not like to see a text corrected, for it may look as though there were something they did not know."⁵² Erasmus' translation was to have a profound influence on theologians who were better versed in Latin than in Greek. Attridge reports that,

Luther makes extensive use of Erasmus' edition of the New Testament as a primary source book for his early exegesis, particularly in the *Römerbriefvorlesung*. In fact the Latin translation and the annotations of Erasmus were of considerable help to Luther as he sought to derive the real and literal meaning of the text.⁵³

Indeed, few reforms could have assailed the status quo of church practices more than to change what had become the authorized version for over one thousand years.

Relocation of the Source of Authority. A third way that Erasmus intended to reform the church through the *Novum Instrumentum* was by relocating the authorized text from the Latin Vulgate to the Greek text of the New Testament. No where does he state this explicitly (for obvious reasons), but he implies this throughout his writings.

⁵¹Bentley, *Humanists and the Holy Writ*, 173.

⁵²*CWE* 3:136.

⁵³John William Attridge, *The Hermeneutic of Erasmus*, *Basel Studies of Theology*, no. 2 (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1966), 125.

Church Renewal and Erasmus' New Testament

The most obvious way this relocation took place is through the method he used to revise the Vulgate. He did not simply use Latin manuscripts to correct variants; rather, he cited the original Greek. Consequently, the authorized text of the church [i.e. the Latin Vulgate] became validated by the Greek text. It now only became a matter of time before the Greek text would supplant the Vulgate as the authoritative text of much of Christendom.

Erasmus elsewhere declared that returning to the New Testament Greek manuscripts would bring about a much-needed renewal in the church. In his dedication of *Novum Instrumentum* to Pope Leo X, Erasmus boldly asserted this when he wrote,

I perceived that that teaching which is our salvation was to be had in a much purer and more lively form if sought at the fountain-head and drawn from the actual sources than from pools and runnels. And so I have revised the whole New Testament . . . against the standard of the original Greek.³⁴

Erasmus was even more bold in asserting the preference for the Greek when he stated in his preface to the Annotations that,

These advantages [i.e. greater understanding of the N.T.] accrue to those who would rather draw their knowledge of Scripture from the purest springs than from such streams and pools as may be handy, so often poured from one of them into another, not to say fouled by the muddy feet of swine and asses. No: fruit tastes better that you have picked with your own hands from the mother tree; water is fresher that you draw as

³⁴CWE 3:222.

it bubbles up from the actual spring In the same way the Scriptures have about them some sort of natural fragrance, they breathe something genuine and peculiarly their own, when *read in the language in which they were first written* [emphasis mine].⁵⁵

New Theological Method. What gave Erasmus such confidence that the Greek New Testament would influence the church to this extent? Part of the answer to this question is that the Greek New Testament implicitly promoted the contemporary theological method and theological education that Erasmus and other humanists believed were essential for church renewal. The *Novum Instrumentum* was intended to be a document of reform. Thus, it fostered a different theological method; namely, the tools of rhetoric rather than the dialectics of scholasticism. As such, he sought to restore theology by basing it on grammar and not on speculative philosophy.

Erasmus embraced the notion that the classical literature enabled one to understand theology.⁵⁶ He saw himself as someone who could “unite” these two as they had been united in the Fathers of the church, such as Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine.⁵⁷ This element of reform is most clearly perceived by the response of those who criticized his work on the New Testament.

In his preface to the final section of the *Novum Instrumentum*, the annotations, Erasmus wrote, “After revising the sacred books I added these pointers [i.e. annotations], partly to explain to the reader’s satisfaction why each change was made.” The explanation of his method that followed must have startled theologians of the day. What governed Erasmus’ judgment was not the contemporary

⁵⁵CWE 3:203.

⁵⁶Augustijn, *Erasmus*, 104.

⁵⁷Ibid., 103, 104.

dialectics, which were the staple of a theological education, but grammar and textual criticism. By correcting the Latin with Greek texts, Erasmus demonstrated a method of exegesis he deemed far superior to unfolding the meaning of Scripture.⁵⁸

This method smarted the dialecticians. Erasmus was convinced, however, that this group was part to blame for the ignorance of the Bible in his day among theologians,⁵⁹ and so he prudently side-stepped Scotus' arguments by working from the Greek sources and focusing on matters of philology and textual criticism. When criticized for being only a teacher and for giving grammar too much weight in theology, he wrote,

They are wont to refer to those who have had a good literary education, regarding it as a great insult to call a man a schoolmaster, as though it would be to the credit of a theologian to be innocent of schooling. Knowledge of grammar by itself is not the making of a theologian, but much less is he made by ignorance of grammar; at the very least, skill in this subject is aid to the understanding of theology and lack of skill is the reverse. Nor can it be denied that Jerome and Ambrose and Augustine, the principal authorities on whom our theology rests, were all drawn from the teaching profession. For in those days Aristotle was not yet accepted as an authority in the theological

⁵⁸Jonge, "Erasmus' Method of Translation in His Version of the New Testament," 137-38.

⁵⁹For an account of how an expert knowledge of dialectics without a sufficient knowledge of the Bible produced a grossly insufficient theologian, see Thomas More "To Marten Dorp" in *St. Thomas More: Selected Letters*, ed. Elizabeth Frances Rogers (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961), 30-32.

schools, and the philosophy current in our universities nowadays was not yet invented.⁶⁰

In the same letter, Erasmus unleashes his sarcastic wit on those who so strongly opposed his work on the New Testament, asking, "Are they afraid that if the young are persuaded by them [i.e. Erasmus arguments in his annotations] they themselves will lecture to empty benches?"

The threat that Erasmus' work proposed on the educational methods of the day was not entirely unfounded. It had been a desire of Erasmus to reform the theological curriculum to make "philological skills mandatory."⁶¹ An opportunity for this became available in June 1517 after a great sum of money had been bequeathed to establish within the university of Louvain the *Collegium Trilingua*, a college in which Greek, Hebrew, and Latin would be taught side by side. The prospects for humanist studies here prompted Erasmus to put his weight behind the venture and use his influence for faculty appointments.⁶² At first, conflict was averted, but by March 1519, it was evident that a response from Erasmus was necessary to deal with the opposition to the humanist curriculum.

In his good-natured response, *Apologia contra Latomi dialogum*, Erasmus criticizes the standard method of education used among the scholastic theologians because they permit their students,

to touch the works of the early commentators such as Origen, Ambrose, and Augustine, but only after he has become thoroughly acquainted with scholastic writers.

⁶⁰*CWE* 4:49 (letter to Henry Bullock).

⁶¹Erika Rummel, "Voices of Reform," 85.

⁶²Martin Lowry, "Introductory Note of 'Apology of Desirius Erasmus of Rotterdam . . .'" in *CWE* 71:32-35.

So completely does he prefer these authors to their predecessors that our old scholar [i.e. the scholastic theologian] wants his theologian to study them before he touches the books of either the Old or the New Testament. He is concerned about the risk of a student's reading Cyprian, Hilary, Jerome, and Ambrose before Scotus, Durand, and Holcot.

New Attitude toward Biblical Studies. There is a fifth way in which Erasmus used his work on the New Testament text as a catalyst for change; namely, his attitude of investigation. Erasmus, along with other humanists, viewed knowledge as an journey rather than a point of destination. Consequently, it was more in his disposition to ask questions rather than make dogmatic pronouncements. It was this frame of mind that is easier to overlook in Erasmus' works, because of its elusiveness. Nevertheless, it leaves its fragrance over all his literary accomplishments. Roland Bainton refers to this side of Erasmus when he writes that,

The contribution of Erasmus to Biblical studies lies even more in the questions he raised, the controversies which he precipitated, and the awareness which he created as to the problem of text, translation, and interpretation.⁶³

Conclusion

Through his Greek New Testament, Erasmus sought to enlighten church leaders by liberating their theology from dependence on an authorized translation that was faulty (i.e. Latin Vulgate) to a translation that had closer resemblance to the original Greek. This translation, and of course indirectly the

⁶³Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom*, 134.

Greek New Testament, would thus become the basis for more accurate vernacular translations. Furthermore, by relocating the authority from the Latin Vulgate to the Greek text, Erasmus implicitly challenged the theological method of the dialecticians from syllogistic disputations to the study of grammar and philology for biblical interpretation.

Erasmus' edition of the New Testament was definitely intended to be an instrument of church reform. Wherein lies the irony to its peculiar status and usage today? Namely this, the same Greek text, which Erasmus intended as a spearhead for change, has today become a symbol of resisting change. Among some in Fundamentalism, there exists a categorical prohibition to consult extant Greek manuscripts in attempts to produce accurate, up-to-date translations in the vernacular. One of the reasons given to defend this opinion is that the revision of Erasmus' Greek New Testament, referred to as the *Textus Receptus*, is free from any textual errors, whereas the manuscripts used for virtually all contemporary translations are not. As a result, the same text that Erasmus envisioned would stimulate accurate translations in the vernacular is today being used by some to stifle contemporary translations. What might Erasmus have said to such irony? One can easily imagine *Folly* looking upon the scene with a broad grin like someone who has just succeeded in playing a practical joke. The old hackneyed phrase, 'Truth is indeed stranger than fiction' once again remains a relevant gloss to another event in the history of the church.