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Editorial ✠

Who was Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam?

Ask the question of anyone except an expert in some aspect of the history of 16th-century European thought and you are as likely as not to get a blank stare for an answer. At most you probably will get a faint echo of a half-forgotten survey course in Reformation history: "Erasmus was a Semipelagian who attacked Martin Luther's doctrine of grace, whereupon Luther demolished Erasmus with a treatise *On the Enslaved Will.*"

Actually this kind of answer, although true after a fashion, does much less than justice to Erasmus. He deserves a better press than he has conventionally received, especially in circles friendly to Luther. For that reason CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY devotes the bulk of the present issue to an effort at setting matters a little straighter.

The immediate occasion for this Erasmus issue is that according to the consensus of Erasmus specialists the year 1969 probably marks the 500th anniversary of the birth of the great Dutch Christian humanist.

Three scholars from as many confessional traditions join in this reassessment, a Lutheran (Carl S. Meyer), a Baptist (Marvin W. Anderson), and a British Methodist (Philip S. Watson).

Within the inescapable limitations of the 64 pages of this journal, Meyer indicates the striking dimensions of the debt which Biblical scholars of the 16th century and of every subsequent century owe to the originality, the diligence, and the insight of Erasmus.

Anderson uses substantially the same sources to make another important point: Part of the greatness of Erasmus lay precisely in his willingness to view the Biblical and patristic sources to which he turned with fresh eyes, rather than only through the lenses of late medieval theology. Granted that Erasmus' vision was not wholly perfect, his very courage in daring to look enabled him to mediate to his own generation and to his readers of later periods insights that might otherwise have remained undisclosed.

Watson returns to the debate between Luther and Erasmus with an extended examination of the most penetrating modern Roman Catholic inquiry into the exchange, Harry J. McSorley's *Luther: Right or Wrong?*

The staff of CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY does not see this series of articles as an irrelevant delving into a dusty past. On the contrary, it holds that these three articles are ocular demonstrations of what has been called the liberating power of the study of historical theology. Accordingly it invites the readers of this journal to examine these articles critically in the awareness that the fundamental problems they treat are with us still, for all the changes that 450 years have brought about.

The value of patient, detailed, and objective scholarship is not universally recognized. The virtue of bringing forth out of the treasure that one has what is new as well as

what is old is not always conceded. The question of the relative roles of God and of human beings in the subjective salvation of the individual will not down.

It is precisely at the last point that the staff feels that this issue may provide useful stimulation. The key thesis of Luther's treatise — the utter gratuitousness and the unqualified monergism of divine grace in turning human beings to God — is the very essence of the Gospel. It is God who has in Christ reconciled the world of humanity to Himself, and it is His Holy Spirit that makes the individual person a member of the body of Christ and of the people of God. The human being cannot reconcile himself to God; he cannot introduce himself into the body of Christ and the people of God.

But it is human beings, with all the qualities and capacities of human beings, including their "capacity for freedom" (F[ormula of] C[oncord], S[olid] D[eclaration], 2, 22), that God reconciles and turns to himself. Again, conversion involves no coercion on the part of God, no absolute determinism or necessity that would in effect make a human being less an authentically human being, something that Luther himself finds it essential to point out in his commentary on Genesis 26 (*Weimarer Ausgabe,* 43, 457,32—463,17; *American Edition,* 5, 42—50; cited in FC, SD, 2, 44), where he explicitly rejects misunderstandings and misrepresentations of his position. (Again, since both Erasmus and Luther had been baptized in infancy and had received the "liberated will" of which FC, SD, 2, 67, speaks, neither was really in a position to discuss on the basis of personal experience the way in which God initially turns a human being to Himself.) Finally, the process of subjective salvation is not complete when God turns the individual to Himself. Ahead there still lies the time — longer or shorter — in which the human participants in the process "can and must, in the power of the Holy Spirit, work together" with the Holy Spirit as "cooperators with God." (FC, SD, 2, 65—66)

Even in Lutheran circles the debate did not end with the exchange between Erasmus and Luther. Precisely because of the difficulty of formulating the process in terms that do full justice both to the data of the Sacred Scriptures and to the experience and faith of the church, the real paradox implicit in the subjective salvation of the individual human being has sparked a revival of the old debate time after time. In essence the paradox and the problem confront every preacher, every counselor, every catechist, every pastor — every day!

This recognition puts us at the heart of what promises to be one of the central issues of theology for the next few years. This issue is what an older generation of theologians called "theological anthropology," the church's doctrine about human beings. The difficulty is heightened by the necessity of discussing the problem in the terms that the 20th century dictates rather than in the terms of inherited debates of the past.

Much has happened in the human sciences during the last 100 years, and much is happening today. The latter third of the 20th century is the richer for the information and insights that biology, medicine, sociology, anthropology, psychology, psychiatry, and their various subdisciplines have contributed to what we know about the way in which human beings become, live, grow, think, learn, behave, become ill in body and in mind,

recover health, and finally die. These insights have not dispelled the mystery that human beings in general and each individual person present. Indeed, in many ways they have heightened the mystery and raised new and as yet unanswered questions.

By and large, however, theology has not profited from these inquiries as it might and should have done. Too often its reflections and pronouncements about human beings have been in a dated vocabulary and have reflected conceptions of the nature of human beings and models of human behavior that have survived almost without modification out of the 17th century (and sometimes out of the Middle Ages).

This superseded vocabulary and these archaic conceptions are insufficient to utilize what we have learned and what we are learning about human beings. The failure of theologians to reconsider, to expand, to restructure, and if necessary to discard and to replace them exposes all of us to the risk of preaching irrelevantly, of counseling and educating less effectively than we could, and of failing to promote to the fullest possible degree our people's spiritual growth and their progress in holiness.

Needed is a new analysis of our doctrine of human beings. How much is authentically Biblical? How much is accommodation on the part of the Holy Spirit to the conventional views of the times in which the authors of the Biblical documents wrote? How much is metaphor — and hence possibly in need of demetaphorization and remetaphorization? How much is systematic baggage that comes not from divine revelation but from the human sciences of earlier epochs and that has simply accumulated in the dogmatics compendia of the past?

Needed too is translation. The authentic Biblical concepts need restatement in vocabularies that are spoken and understood by men and women who have been formed in these areas by the contemporary human sciences. Similarly, the insights of the modern human sciences need to be translated into language that permits us to compare them meaningfully with the authentic elements of Biblical revelation.

The doctrine of human beings was a matter of high concern to thinkers of the 16th century. Precisely because it involves issues that are still — or again — of high concern, neither the academic theologian in the seminary nor the practical theologian in the parish can evade the necessity of the task of analysis and of back-and-forth translation. Let the reader see in this Erasmus issue of CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY another urgent invitation to this task!

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