

# The Counsels of Erasmus

by Jean Bowes Gwatkin

In April of the year 1518 a young Augustinian friar was summoned by the order of Pope Leo X to attend the Chapter of his Province at Heidelberg. Four years previously, Martin Luther had reached his radical conclusions on justification and by 1517 they were beginning to cause a stir in the University of Wittenberg, where, in his capacity as professor in the faculty of theology, Luther had been lecturing on the Epistle to the Romans. In May 1517 he had become so confident as to write to the prior at Erfurt: 'The lectures on scholastic theology are deserted and no one can be sure of an audience who does not teach our theology'.

Then, on the eve of All Saints that same year, Luther announced his 95 theses on indulgences – these, together with the earlier and more fundamental theses on faith and works, were the occasion of his summons to Heidelberg where Luther himself presided over the disputation and won the support of most of his brethren.

These Germanic vibrations reached the Netherlands and in particular a man – perhaps the most learned in Europe – who stood at the pivot of affairs, supported by the Pope and sought after by kings and bishops – Erasmus of Rotterdam. In the summer of 1518 Erasmus wrote to the Rector at Erfurt where Luther had studied:

'Luther has said many things excellently well. I could wish, however, that he would be less rude in his manner. He would have stronger support behind him, and might do real good . . . I can give no opinion about his positive doctrines . . .'

During 1518 the gathering storm with Luther at its centre gained momentum. The Pope sent an order to his Legate in Germany, the Dominican Cardinal Cajetan, to the effect that if Luther did not recant, he should be sent to Rome. Luther failed to satisfy the Cardinal who examined him at Augsburg and, remaining unmolested, published an appeal from the judgment of the Pope to the judgment of the next General Council. With the death of the Emperor Maximilian early in 1519, the situation suddenly became less menacing. Luther's own sovereign and protector was a strong candidate for the Imperial Crown. Luther had already written to Erasmus for support and now the time seemed opportune for Erasmus to answer. Referring to the anger aroused in Louvain by Luther's teaching, Erasmus admitted that he himself was now an object of animosity and proceeded to give Luther some good advice:

'I think courtesy to opponents is more effective than violence . . . and it might be wiser of you to denounce those who misuse the Pope's authority than to censure the Pope himself . . . Old institutions cannot be rooted up in an instant. Quiet argument may do more good than wholesale condemnation . . . Keep cool . . . do not hate anybody . . . Christ give you His spirit for His own glory and the world's good.'

In June 1519 not Luther's sovereign but Charles V was elected Emperor. One of his first Imperial acts was to name Erasmus an Imperial Councillor. In the autumn of the same year, Erasmus was writing to the former Archbishop of Mainz, now a Cardinal, about Luther.

'I am neither Luther's accuser, nor his patron, nor his judge; I can give no opinion about him, least of all an unfavourable one . . . But certain divines that I know will neither set him right nor point out where he is wrong . . . They shout out . . . "Heretic, schismatic, Antichrist" . . . and their language is the more odious because most of them have never looked into his writings.'

Erasmus continued:

'Propositions taken out of Luther's writings have been condemned as heretical which are found in Bernard or Augustine and from them are received as orthodox and edifying . . . He challenged, perhaps too uncompromisingly, the authority of the Roman Pontiff in the face of an extravagant exercise of it. He ventured to reject the opinion of St Thomas . . . and he condemned the abuse of the confessional. . . . In earlier times a person charged with heresy was heard in his defence; he was acquitted if his answers were satisfactory; if he persisted, the worst which he had to fear was exclusion from Communion. Now heresy is the darkest of crimes, and the cry is raised on the least occasion . . .'

Besides good sense, there is courage in Erasmus' letters to both Luther and to so eminent a prelate as the former Archbishop of Mainz whose powerful protection Erasmus risked losing in a cause with which he was by no means entirely in sympathy for a man he thought hot-headed and potentially dangerous.

In March, 1520, Erasmus was writing again – this time to a moderate bishop:

'I would see the Church purified of evil, lest the good in it suffer by connection with what is indefensible; but in avoiding the Scylla of Luther I would have us also avoid Charybdis. If this be sin, then I own my guilt . . . But be assured of this, if any movement is in progress injurious to the Christian religion, or dangerous to the public peace or to the supremacy of the Holy See, it does not proceed from Erasmus. . . . Many great persons have entreated me to support Luther. I have answered always that I will support him when he is on the Catholic side . . . I feared always that revolution would be the end, and I would have done more (against Luther) had I not been afraid that I might be found fighting against the Spirit of God.'

This letter is, I think, highly significant in any assessment of Erasmus's position. The moderation of its tone and, in the last lines, the evidence of willingness to approve what was good in the Reformer's zeal would seem born of a serenity of mind – a mind disciplined, cultivated and rooted in faith.

On June 15th, 1520, following the condemnation of Luther's teaching by the Universities of Cologne and Louvain, appeared the solemn condemnation of the Pope. Erasmus wrote to the Councillor of the Empire: 'The Pope's authority as Christ's Vicar must be upheld, but in upholding it Gospel truth must not be sacrificed . . . It is not for me to judge the Pope's sentence. Some regret the tone of the Bull, but impute it to his advisers, not to himself. The fear is that, if Luther's books are burnt and Luther executed, things will only grow worse . . . Luther's conduct and the causes which led to it ought to be referred to a small committee of good learned men who will be above suspicion. The Pope need not be bound to bow to their authority . . . Our hopes are in the approaching Diet'.

The proposal to set up a committee to examine the causes of Luther's conduct is striking in its modernity – particularly today when we are familiar with the Commissions established in connection with the Vatican Council – and again the keynote is one of moderation mingled with restrained optimism.

In December, 1520, Erasmus replied to a letter from Cardinal Campeggio:

'Those who wish Luther condemned disapprove of the methods now pursued against him . . . If we want truth, every man ought to be free to say what he thinks without fear. If the advocates of one side are to be rewarded with mitres, and the advocates on the other with rope or stake, truth will not be heard . . . I think, and many think with me, that there would be a better chance of a settlement if there was less ferocity, if the management was placed in the hands of men of weight and learning, if the Pope would follow his own disposition and would not let himself be influenced by others'.

Campeggio came to Louvain to consult with Erasmus and so did Aleander, the Papal Nuncio who was to prosecute Luther before the Diet. To one of many who wanted Erasmus to give Luther open help while it was assembling he wrote:

'I have never been a dogmatist. I think the Church has defined many points which might have been left open without hurt to the faith . . . I know the charges brought against the Court of Rome, but all reports need not be true, nor, if true, need the Popes be responsible for all that is done at Rome . . . It is not for me to pronounce (on Luther). To his own Master he stands or falls. But if the worst comes and the Church is divided, I shall stand on the Rock of Peter till peace returns.'

The Diet met at Worms and, on April 19th, 1521, after his final refusal to recant, Luther was condemned and ordered to await his sentence at Wittenberg. In the event, he was helped by his Elector to escape to the castle of Wartburg. For ten months there was no word of him but during the summer it became known that Luther was alive, protected by the Elector. Adrian of Utrecht, who had been at school with Erasmus, had succeeded Leo X on the papal throne and in the winter of 1522/3 he addressed two letters to Erasmus asking him to come to Rome to advise on possible measures to heal the breach in Christendom:

'It lies with you, God helping, to recover those who have been seduced by Luther from the right road . . . '

Erasmus declined the invitation on grounds of poor health but wrote:

'Meanwhile you shall have my honest heart in writing'.

He went on to advise mild measures in Germany:

'Punish no one. Let what has taken place be regarded as a chastisement sent by Providence, and grant a universal amnesty. If God forgives so many sins, God's Vicar may forgive . . . let the world know and see that you mean in earnest to reform the abuses which are justly cried out against, and if your Holiness desires to know what the roots (of prevalent abuses) are . . . send persons whom you can trust to every part of Latin Christendom. Let them consult the wisest men that they can find in the different countries, and you will soon know'.

But in 1523 Adrian died and hopes of a true reform within the Church were deferred. His successor – Clement VII – was to be bedevilled by the question of the English divorce.

In 1524 we find Erasmus writing to Melancthon, Luther's disciple and a man who tempered reforming zeal with moderation:

'The Pope's advocates have been the Pope's worst friends, and the extravagant Lutherans have most hurt Luther'.

After speaking of new heresies affecting the Eucharist which were multiplying with speed he concluded that 'Luther himself may come to regret popes and bishops.'

By 1530 other Reformers had risen. The Swiss were challenging the doctrine of the Real Presence. In a letter to the Bishop of Hildesheim Erasmus wrote:

'Innumerable questions are asked – how the elements are transubstantiated; how accidents can subsist without a subject . . . at what moment the miracle takes place . . . Such problems may be discussed among the learned. For the vulgar it is enough to believe that the real Body and Blood of our Lord are actually present . . . Priests should not by their loose living teach heretics to despise the ineffable mystery.'

The year 1530 saw the Diet of Augsburg and the acceptance by the Emperor of the confutation of the Protestant 'Confession'. The edicts of Augsburg, commanding the restoration of Catholic worship, could not

be enforced, however, because the Emperor needed the help of the Protestant princes in fighting off a threatened Turkish invasion. The princes had formed a league and with them the Emperor came to terms in a pact known as the Interim of Nuremberg, made on July 23rd, 1532. By this time Erasmus was in his middle sixties. In 1534, the new Pope, Paul III, urgent for reform, wrote to him of plans for a General Council and asking for advice. But for Erasmus, already seriously ill, the sands of time were running out. He lived long enough to hear of the deaths of More and Fisher and the fate of Anne Boleyn. Of More and Fisher he wrote: 'They were the wisest and most saintly men that England had . . . but such are the tides of human things.'

Of all the expressions of his many-sided genius, these brief extracts from the letters of Erasmus provide the merest glimpse. In these exciting days of the Second Vatican Council it is the ideas of the great Victorians – Newman and Acton – which are quoted. But I think it would be fair to say that the counsels of Erasmus which, partly owing to the more brutal circumstances of his epoch, failed to achieve fruition in his life time are relevant today. This is not to say that even then his influence was not felt. But his unremitting exhortations to men to talk – without fear, without heat and in charity *are* heeded in our time and much that he called for in the sixteenth century is being implemented in the twentieth. The insights and perceptions of Erasmus, so many of which were contained in his 'counsels', are still valid and will continue to be so while Christians struggle to reach maturity.

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