

Sunday, November 17, 2019—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 100 Erasmus and the Greek New Testament

Introduction

- The last two Lessons (98 and 99) have been laying the groundwork for what we are going to begin talking about this morning, namely Erasmus' publication of the first Greek New Testament.
- Near the end of the 4th century Jerome produced the Vulgate, a translation of the scriptures into Latin, that was widely viewed as authoritative for the next millennium. (Miller, 459)
- “Down to the days of Reuchlin and Erasmus the Vulgate was the received text. Greek and Hebrew were almost unknown in the West.” (Miller, 459; Miller, 499)
 - Thus, access to the Greek of the Byzantine Majority supporting the *Received Text* was extremely limited in the Latin speaking western church.
- “Erasmus bent all his great mental powers, and all his laborious studies, to the preparation of a critical edition of the Greek Testament. This work appeared at Basel in 1516, one year before the Reformation, accompanied by a Latin translation, in which he corrected the errors of the Vulgate. This was daring work in those days. There was a great outcry from many quarters against this dangerous novelty. The Vulgate could no longer be of absolute exclusive authority; the Greek was its superior not only in antiquity, but yet more as the original text.” (Miller, 500)
 - Just as the secular Renaissance thinkers returned to the ancient writings, Erasmus compiled the Greek New Testament.
 - This is a return not simply to the Greek language in which the New Testament was written, but also to the text that the early church and the Greek speaking Eastern Church always recognized as authoritative, the *Textus Receptus*¹.
- “Educated lay men and women, whom Erasmus regarded as the church's most important resource. The future of the church, Erasmus argued, rested on the emergence of a biblically literate laity.” (McGrath, 25)
 - Erasmus's New Testament was foundational to achieving the goal of a biblically literate laity.
- In this Lesson we will consider the following points regarding Erasmus and the Received Text.
 - The Life and Career of Erasmus
 - Erasmus and the Greek New Testament

¹ The term “Textus Receptus” was not utilized until 1633, but Erasmus's chosen text was consistent with what would subsequently come to be known as the Textus Receptus or Received Text.

The Life and Career of Erasmus

- Alister McGrath, author of *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, discusses how the Northern Renaissance took a more religious tone than the Italian Renaissance. McGrath states:
 - “Although there are major variations within northern European humanism, two ideals seem to have achieved widespread acceptance throughout the movement. First, we find the same concern for written and spoken eloquence after the fashion of the classical period, as in the Italian Reformation. Second, we find a religious program directed toward the corporate revival of the Christian church. The Latin slogan *Christianismus renascens*, “Christianity being born again,” summarizes the aims of the program . . .” (McGrath, 40)
- Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) is generally regarded as the most important humanist writer of the Renaissance. Consequently, Erasmus had a profound impact upon Christian theology during the first half of the sixteenth century. Although not a Protestant in any sense of the term, Erasmus did much to lay the intellectual foundations of the Reformation. (McGrath, 40)
- According to the entry in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* edited by Walter E. Elwell on Erasmus:
 - “. . . was educated at Deventer by the Brethren of the Common Life (1475-84), he spent six years as a monk and then attended the College de Montaigu in Paris (1494). In 1499 he visited England, where he met John Colet and Thomas More. This experience influenced him to employ literary talent, intellectual brilliance and clever wit in the service of Christ.” (Elwell, 383)
- The following is a summary of the life and career of Erasmus presented in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*:
 - From Paris
 - 1500—*Adages*, an annotated collation of classical proverbs, was published
 - 1503—*Enchiridion*, a handbook of practical theology, as well as editions of Cicero and Jerome and a critical edition of the *Annotation of the New Testament* by Lorenzo Valla went to press.
 - From England
 - 1505—began his translation of the New Testament
 - Traveled to Italy in 1506 and experienced direct contact with humanist culture.
 - In 1509 Erasmus went back to England where he finished and published *Praise of Folly*.
 - Between 1509 and 1516, when his Greek edition of the New Testament was published, Erasmus traveled all over Europe studying Greek manuscripts. Moreover, it was also during this time period that critical editions of Jerome, Seneca, Plutarch, and Cato were

published. Lastly, it was during these years that the *Education of a Christian Prince* was printed. (Elwell, 384)

- David Daniell, author of *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence*, reports that in the 1480s Erasmus was a youth in the Dutch monastery of Steyn, one of the most “austere” and “anti-intellectual” monastic orders of the late Middle Ages. (Danniel, 113) The early letters of Erasmus reveal that upon leaving the monastery he became acquainted and fell in love with the writings of Italian Renaissance, especially Lorenzo Valla.
 - “Erasmus’s earliest surviving letters, however, written only a few years after his time at Steyn, reveal him as an enthusiastic and slightly intoxicated disciple of Italian humanism. This shift to a mental Italy was not—or not only—a rebellious later-adolescent separation from the monastic life in which he had been brought up. Everything that had been given to him by the *Devotio moderna* [his monastery] he took with him, making it more and more personal through the rest of his life.

Yet he fell in love with secular Italy and the ancient world. All his realism and growing awareness of the fullness of humanity, all his sense of the possibility of life’s experience, grew as he understood that the new Italians were showing him something ‘bold and disturbing’, contrasting with what was ‘worn out or dead or medieval religiosity’. The new Italian books offered instead ‘a humanity eager for self-expression and full of self-confidence’. In his new Italian citizenship, as it were, the spiritual ideals of the *Devotio moderna* stayed with him, and leavened the whole. From the pairing grew his response to Lorenzo Valla’s gift of Bible understanding—nothing less than the sudden rediscovery of the New Testament.

Lorenzo Valla (1407-57), pioneering theoretician of the new Italian humanism, both in its philological base and as *Miles Christianus* (‘soldier of Christ’), wrote at Rome towards the end of his life his *Adnotationes in Novum Testamentum*. Erasmus read Valla. At eighteen, he made a summary of Valla’s famous *Elegantiae*. . . Early in 1504, Valla was for Erasmus, as for many, simply an exciting model of literary humanism. Later that same year Erasmus, then in Premonstratensian monastery at Louvain, apparently by chance opened the pages of Valla’s *Adnotationes*. It is not too fanciful to suggest that the opening of that book on his desk in the Abby of Park in Heverelle on that day, was, to the world of Bible studies, the moment of the break from the medieval to the modern. Erasmus, at once began to set out for himself his life’s work, which would be on the Bible.” (Danniel, 113-114)

- Prior to reading Valla’s *Adnotationes* at Louvain Library late in 1504, Erasmus had discovered Jerome and done a study of Origen’s *Hexapla*. Between 1504 and 1509 Erasmus traveled all over Europe including two stays in England where he befriended Thomas More and later in Venice. After causing Valla’s *Adnotationes* to be represented in 1505, he published his own new Latin version of the Gospels and Epistles based on a Greek manuscript shown to him at St. Paul’s by his friend John Colet. Regarding Valla’s *Adnotationes* William W. Combs of Detroit Baptist Seminary writes:
 - “Valla’s purpose was to evaluate the Vulgate as a translation of the Greek New Testament, and his work consisted of a compilation of annotations on the Vulgate in light of Greek manuscripts.” (Combs, 4)

- Put another way, the humanist Valla was seeking to improve the Vulgate by conforming it more closely with Greek MSS. Taking his cue from Valla, Erasmus sought to do likewise:
 - “Like Valla, Erasmus was convinced that the Vulgate New Testament had many deficiencies that could only be corrected by comparing to the Greek New Testament.” (Combs, 5)
 - Daniell credits Erasmus with a public renewal in Biblical studies during the first decade of the 16th century. Simply stated, Erasmus desired to “reform the church from within by a renewal of biblical theology based on philological study of the New Testament text, and supported by a knowledge of patristics, itself renewed by the same methods.” (Daniell, 114-115)
 - In order to accomplish this task Erasmus advanced on four fronts: 1) “establish a sound Greek New Testament text and print it with critical commentary and notes,” 2) “edit and print equally sound editions of those Fathers who were great biblical commentators,” 3) “proposed further editions and commentaries of the greatest biblical texts”, and 4) “expand his Preface to his Greek New Testament into a treatise of methodology. . . which both summed up and fed back into the other biblical work.” (Daniell, 115-116)
 - In summation Daniell states:
 - “All this he did. The importance was not simply in the works themselves, though that was very high. It was even more that the greatest and most famous scholar in all Europe, the author of *The Praise of Folly*, *The Enchiridion*, *De copia* and *Adagia* (to whom More’s *Utopia* was dedicated), was, as one might put it, ‘doing’ the Bible. He was undercutting the texts of the Fathers, including some that, to his dismay, he had discovered to be fakes. Not only was he focusing on biblical theology; he was editing the New Testament in Greek.” (Daniell, 116)
 - Erasmus was a prolific writer, and each main category of his works reveals something of his personality:
 - “First, he produced many scholarly books including historical material, lexicons, translations, and critical editions of earlier books. His purpose was to combat ignorance. He believed truth was attainable through clarity of expression.

A second element of his approach is revealed in his satirical works such as *Praise of Folly*. Here Erasmus ridicules humanists and scholars who take themselves too seriously, but he saves his most biting satire for bigoted churchmen, pompous lawyers, warmongering rulers.

A final category of his work, the more overtly Christian writings, demonstrates that neither scholarship nor humor was to be an end in itself. These elements were pursued to reach the goal of the restoration of primitive Christianity. Erasmus felt called to cleanse and purify the church through the application of humanistic scholarship to Christian tradition.” (Elwell, 384)
- According to Alister McGrath, *Handbook of the Christian Soldier* was a landmark in religious publishing.

- “Although the work was first published in 1503, and then reprinted in 1509, its real impact dates from its third printing in 1515. From that moment onward it became a cult work, apparently going through twenty-three editions in the next six years. Its appeal was to educated lay men and women, whom Erasmus regarded as the most important resource that the church possessed.” (McGrath, 47)
- The *Handbook of the Christian Soldier* developed the revolutionary thesis that the church of the day could be reformed by a collective return to the writings of the Fathers and Scripture. The regular reading of Scriptures is put forward as the key to a new lay piety, on the basis of which the church may be renewed and reformed . . . Erasmus does not understand Christianity to be a mere external observance of a moral code. His characteristically humanist emphasis upon inner religion leads him to suggest that reading Scripture transforms its readers, giving them a new motivation to love God and their neighbors. (McGrath, 47)

Erasmus and the Greek New Testament

- Bible collector and historian Donald L. Brake notes in *A Visual History of the English Bible* that from the birth of printing in 1450s until years of the 16th century, no Greek New Testament had been printed.
 - “It may seem strange that for more than fifty years after the invention of moveable type, no Greek New Testament had been printed. The absence of the forbidden English Bible is understandable, but there was no printed Greek New Testament either.” (Brake, 92)
- One cannot adequately tell the story of the first Greek New Testament without noting the role that the fall of Constantinople played (See Lesson 99).
 - “Greek learning remained the domain of the Eastern Church until the fall of Constantinople (1453). When the Turks took control of this center of learning, scholars fled to the West and with them came the resurgence of the Greek language.

Both the emphasis on the interpretation of Scriptures, not available to all, and the rebirth of Greek language studies brought great promise for a resurgence of a reformed Christianity. The recipients of the new academic climate were the pre-reformed and able humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam and a Roman Catholic priest and scholar, Ximenes of Alcala, Spain.” (Brake, 92-93)

- E.H. Broadbent, author of *The Pilgrim Church*, highlights that the single biggest outcome of the Renaissance’s (humanist) interest in classical literature was the restoration and publication of the text of the Greek New Testament. (Broadbent, 134)
- The first printed Greek New Testament was published by Erasmus in 1516. Bible historians such as David Daniell and Donald L. Brake note that while Erasmus was first to publish with his Greek New Testament, he might not have been the first to produce such an edition. Regarding the matter, Brake states the following:
 - “Cardinal Ximenes edited the first printed Greek New Testament in his massive six-volume multilingual bible in 1514. His carefully edited Greek New Testament was not published until 1520. It could have been the standard for years to come except for the

work of Johann Froben, an enterprising publisher who wanted to be the first to publish a New Testament in Greek.

A modern business person will not be surprised that an entrepreneur would emerge to fill the economic gap. Johann Froben, seeing an opportunity, employed Desiderius Erasmus to edit a Greek New Testament after receiving word or rumor of Ximenes's project. In 1515, Erasmus began searching for manuscripts of sufficient quality to be typeset. Since the project required the utmost haste, Erasmus did not take the time to find a complete manuscript of the Greek New Testament. After all, these manuscripts were hand copied centuries before and were quite rare even in the sixteenth century. With approximately five manuscripts in hand, he began the task of editing. When parts of the text were indecipherable, Erasmus used the Latin text and translated it back into Greek. Oddly, several of his renderings do not appear in any known Greek manuscripts, and they are still used in some modern translations.

Although Erasmus's text appeared to be inferior in quality to the one produced by Ximenes, it gained early dominance because it was published in 1516, four years before Ximenes's *Complutensian* (1520)." (Brake, 93)

- Regarding Cardinal Ximenes' *Polyglot*, Dr. William W. Combs adds:
 - "The *Complutensian Polyglot* was actually a complete Bible in six volumes. The OT had the Hebrew, Latin Vulgate, and Greek Septuagint texts in parallel columns, and in the NT, the Latin Vulgate, and Greek in parallel columns. Only 600 copies of the *Complutensian Polyglot* were ever printed. Because of its expense, its influence was limited in comparison to the more popular editions of Erasmus." (Combs, 7)
- Historical evidence has caused some to believe that when Erasmus came to Basel in 1514 it was not with the intention of publishing the Greek New Testament but rather to print his life's work to date, i.e., a copy of the Latin Vulgate accompanied by his *Annotations*. In addition, Combs reports that Erasmus may have not originally planned on using Froben to print his volume, favoring a printer named Aldus instead. But alas, Aldus died in February 1515 thereby forcing Erasmus to find a different printer. It is at this point that many scholars believe that Froben heard of Cardinal Ximenes's project and persuaded Erasmus against his original plans to include the Greek New Testament in his work. (Combs, 8)
- Dr. Combs states the following regarding the inaugural edition of the *Novum Instrumentum* by Erasmus in 1516.
 - "... Erasmus' Greek NT of 1516 was the first one to be published. It was, as has been noted, a Latin-Greek edition, which he called *Novum Instrumentum*. Years later, in 1527, Erasmus explained that he "chose the word *Instrumentum* in the title because it conveyed better than *Testamentum* the idea of a decision put down in writing: *Testamentum* could also mean an agreement without a written record." More than one thousand pages of *Novum Instrumentum* contain three parts: the Greek text, Erasmus' Latin translation [not the Vulgate], and his *Annotationes in Novum Testamentum*. The latter. . . were his explanatory remarks. Erasmus felt they were essential in order to explain and defend his Latin translation according to its Greek base. The Greek and Latin texts are set out in parallel columns with *Annotationes* following on separate pages. To forestall criticism Erasmus prefaced the text of the NT with a number of apologetic writings. These

included a letter addressed to the reader, a dedication to Pope Leo X, an appeal to study Scripture (*Paraclesis*), a program of theological studies (*Methodus*), and a defense of his work (*Apologia*)." (Combs, 9)

- Many scholars have questioned whether Erasmus' main purpose behind the *Novum Instrumentum* was to produce the first Greek New Testament.
 - "Erasmus and his contemporaries regarded the *Novum Instrumentum* and its later editions in the first place as the presentation of the NT in a new Latin form, and not as an edition of the Greek text." The primary purpose of Erasmus was to publish his annotations along with his Latin translation. The Greek text was only there for the purpose of confirming the Latin translation. This is easily demonstrated." (Combs, 9-10)
- In order to prove this assertion, Combs goes on to state the following:
 - "First, the title under which Erasmus published his work includes these words, *Novum Instrumentum . . . recognitum et emendatum*, which means "The New Testament. . . revised and improved." These words must refer to the Erasmus' Latin translation, not to the Greek text, since there was not at that time a printed edition of the Greek NT in circulation that could be "revised and improved." They mean: here you have a NT, obviously in the language in which it was current, Latin, but in an improved and revised form, i.e., no longer the generally current Vulgate version. The title offers no evidence at all that *Novum Instrumentum* contains an edition of the Greek text.

Second, in his dedication to Pope Leo X, Erasmus says:

I perceived that the 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. As so I have revised the whole New Testament (as they call it) against the standard of the Greek original. . . I have added annotations of my own, in order in the first place to show the reader what changes I have made, and why; second, to disentangle and explain anything that may be complicated, ambiguous, or obscure.

In Erasmus' own words, then, what he offers is his new translation based on the Greek. In addition, he has included his explanatory remarks (*Annotationes*), which were to justify the new translation's deviations from the Vulgate. In all of this, Erasmus gives not a hint that he is also offering an edition of the Greek text.

Third, numerous statements in the *Apologia* clearly demonstrate that what Erasmus was defending was not the Greek text, but his new Latin translation. At one point he says the "Greek text has been 'added' so that the reader can convince himself that the Latin translation does not contain any rash innovations, but is solidly based." This is not to say that the Greek text was not important, but clearly it was subordinate to the Latin translation. Erasmus was concerned about the Greek text only to the extent that it proved his Latin translation was not plucked out of thin air. That he was not primarily interested in the Greek text is clear from the fact that he never brought out a separate edition of just the Greek text, in spite of the fact he was encouraged to do so." (Combs, 10-11)

- While I do not agree with Combs' conclusion regarding preservation and the Biblical text, his comments regarding the primary motives of Erasmus in publishing *Novum Instrumentum* appear to be consistent with the historical facts. Erasmus' main goal was not to produce the first Greek New Testament as much as it was to textually justify his new Latin translation. Furthermore, viewing Erasmus' work in this fashion places him in complete agreement with his idol and fellow humanist Valla.

Conclusion

- Will Durant, in his landmark series the Story of Civilization, states the following regarding the publication of the Greek New Testament.
 - “These two works marked the application of humanistic learning to the early literature of Christianity, and the beginning of Biblical criticism which in the nineteenth century restored the Bible to human authorship and fallibility.” (Durant, 283)
- “Reuchlin and Erasmus gave the Bible to the learned; Luther gave it to the people.” (Miller, 501)
 - Erasmus performed the necessary groundwork of compiling the correct Greek text. This is the foundation for Tyndale's English Bible, Luther's German Bible, etc., which made the word of God available in the vernacular tongues.
 - Since God's word does not return unto him void but accomplishes that which he pleases (Isaiah 55:11), the translation of the word of God into the vernacular tongues was the most enduring and impactful consequence of the Reformation.
- In the next Lesson we look at what Erasmus based his Greek text upon as well as discuss criticism that has been levied against it.

Works Cited

- Beck, Roger B., and others. *World History: Patterns of Interaction*. McDougal Littell, 2007.
- Brake, Donald L. *A Visual History of the English Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008.
- Broadbent, E.H. *The Pilgrim Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Gospel Folio Press, 1931.
- Combs, William W. “Erasmus and the Textus Receptus” in *Biblical and Theological Essays: Selections from the Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal: 1996-2000*. Winona Lake, IN: BHM Books, 2010.
- Durant, Will. *The Reformation: A History of European Civilization from Wyclif to Calvin: 1300-1565*. New York, NY: MJF Books, 1957.
- Elwell, Walter. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996.
- Hills, Edward F. *The King James Version Defended*. Des Moines, IO: The Christian Research Press, 1956.
- McGrath, Alister E. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1997.