



DESIDERIUS ERASMUS 1469-1536

The Protestant Reformation might have never taken place if it had not been for the work of Erasmus. This Dutch scholar lived during the medieval period when new ideas were swirling through Europe. As a priest ordained in 1492 that practiced personal moderation, he was frustrated with the corruption and excesses within the church. He was a prolific and sought-after scholar of literature, history and languages, and through his writings, he attempted to influence others to change the church from within. He traveled and studied throughout Europe and in 1509 wrote, *The Praise of Folly*, a book which comically critiqued various abuses in the Catholic Church. He made some enemies with his criticism, but many people enjoyed his clever wit and social commentary.

As a Christian humanist (a movement during the Renaissance period devoted to human welfare), Erasmus advocated religious and biblical education toward a simple faith accessible to all. These ideas further riled the Catholic establishment and heavily influenced Reformers such as Martin Luther and Zwingli. But Erasmus also found himself at odds with the Reformation, a movement he never joined, because of his distaste for its tumults and his emphasis on the ethics of a good Christian life rather than on doctrines. He and Luther famously argued in writing in 1524-25 about sin, grace and free will. Although he wanted the church to correct its abuses, he disagreed with Martin Luther that the church should depart from the authority of the church consensus from the past. While the Reformation raged on in Germany and in Switzerland, Erasmus was supportive, but unwilling to take an active part in it. He remained devoted to the Catholic Church, and would stay with it, he said, unless it departed from Christ.

The major contribution for which Erasmus is known is his translation of the New Testament into a more readable version written in Greek and in Latin. Although it was mostly read only by scholars and priests, it later inspired others to translate the Bible into their own languages. His translation was so popular that both Kings and the Pope offered him financial incentives to re-locate to their countries to continue his work. He continually refused all offers to exalt himself and made it clear that he desired nothing except the leisure to pore over the Holy Scriptures in order that he may write something in order to bring peace to the church. Today, he is often considered the intellectual father of the Reformation.