

# ERASMUS, REFORM, AND THE REMNANT

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *While it is not a major function of THE FREEMAN to argue theological matters or to reprint sermons as such, it seems appropriate that we explore the methods of freedom as set forth by businessman Robert Thornton in an address at St. John's Congregational Church, Covington, Kentucky, March 12, 1967.*

LAST YEAR was the 500th anniversary of the birth of Erasmus of Rotterdam. How much public mention was made of the great Christian scholar I do not know, but the occasion was acknowledged from one pulpit — that, appropriately, of the Rev. Angus MacDonald, minister of First Congregational Church in Hutchinson, Kansas.

Erasmus is, of course, not so well known as the other great figures of the Reformation. But even before Martin Luther burst on the scene in the early sixteenth century, Erasmus had for some years been speaking out plainly about the shortcomings of the church and the decline in true Christian living among both lay folk and the clergy. However, when both sides in the Reformation vainly sought his favor and open support, he refused to come out unequivocally for either party. Consequently, one denounced him as a heretic, the other as a coward. But after his death in 1536, when strong feelings had subsided, he once again was embraced by Protestants and Roman Catholics alike. But Erasmus is not the kind of man who may be claimed as the exclusive property of any organization. "I tried to find out," wrote one of his contemporaries, "whether Erasmus of Rotterdam was an adherent of that party,

but a certain merchant said to me: 'Erasmus stands alone.'"

Erasmus believed his vocation to be the advancement of learning and of the Christian religion. His office was that of the thinker and expositor and persuader whose opportunity of influencing men lies in his gifts of lucidity and eloquence. He worked incessantly, producing dozens of volumes, many of which were useful or popular or both, for generations. Erasmus' goal was, then, to employ humanism in the service of religion, that is, to apply the new scholarship of the Renaissance to the study and understanding of Holy Scriptures and thereby to restore theology and revive religious life. Scholarship was not to be an end in itself, but was to conduct men to a better life. Though aware of the limitations of human learning, he understood it is knowledge, not ignorance, that will reveal God's truth and God's way.

### **An Inner Grace**

Erasmus' dream was a return to the early Christianity of practice, not of opinion, where the church would no longer insist on particular forms of belief and hence mankind would cease to hate and slaughter each other because they differed on points of theology. To Erasmus, religion meant purity



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and justice and mercy, with the keeping of moral commandments, and to him these Graces were not the privilege of any peculiar creed.

Erasmus helped to produce a new birth in the life of Europe for he had a kindling power which set alight persons who were to become saints and transmitters of new life. Although himself neither mystic nor saint, his greatest influence was on the lives and writings of that remarkable group of sixteenth and seventeenth century men called Spiritual Reformers. These men scorned the emphasis on ritual and dogma to the exclusion of true religion. Wrote one of them, Hans Denck: "There is no salvation to be found which

does not involve a change in heart, a new attitude of will, an awakened and purified inner self."

This echoes Erasmus' insistence that in the Christian experience something had to happen to a man's heart and mind. Another member of this group, Sebastian Franck, declared that "the true Church is not a separate mass of people, not a particular sect to be pointed out with the finger, not confined to one time or one place. It is rather a spiritual and invisible body of all members of Christ, born of God, of one mind, spirit, and faith, but not gathered (i.e., organized) in any one external city. It is a Fellowship which only a spiritual eye would see. It is the assembly and communion of all truly God-fearing, good-hearted, new-born persons in the world, bound together by the Holy Spirit in the peace of God and the bonds of love."

Erasmus had the vision of an inward religion and he wanted to offer a corrective for what he had come to see as the common error of all those who were turning religion into an empty ceremonialism. He believed that religion consists primarily not of outward signs and devotions but of the inward love of God and neighbor. He urged that the essential dogmas of Christianity be reduced to as few as possible, leaving opinion

free on the rest. If we want truth, he said, every man ought to be free to say what he thinks without fear; and wherever you encounter truth, look upon it as Christianity. If Protestantism may be defined as a claim to liberty for the individual to reach his own conclusions about religion in his own way and express them freely without interference, Erasmus was in this sense closer to Protestantism than many who are now assigned the mantle.

### **Quiet Reasoning**

Erasmus realized that waging the Christian battle required vigor of mind more than intensity of feeling. Detesting fanaticism and bigotry, as do reasonable and cultivated men of all ages, he rejected the either/or zealotry and passion, and in his work there is an awareness that truth must be sought in humility. While so many men of his time were concerned with proving their adversaries wrong or wicked or heretical, Erasmus, ever sensitive to the human situation, was concerned with *winning* others to piety and to Christ. He was convinced that neither side in an argument can completely express the truth, and he did not suffer the delusion which makes a man feel he can at one blow destroy all that is bad upon this earth. "Old institutions,"

he said, "cannot be rooted up in an instant, and quiet argument may do more than wholesale condemnation."

Erasmus practiced what has been called a kind of low-tension Christianity. Unfortunately, there are relatively few who can understand a person whose faith may indeed be so real, so present, and so homely, that one jests with and about it, as if it were a friend or a brother. Erasmus, writes H. H. Hudson, "bids us hold our convictions with some lightness, and to add grace to life. Our best work will be done in a critical spirit, which turns upon ourselves and itself the same keen gaze and feasting irony with which it views the world."

### **What Can I Be?**

The Erasmian concept of reform as a matter of individual change is unpopular in our age of political action and mass movements. The interest today is not changing ourselves but other people, preferably in great numbers. Our method is not persuasion, as was Erasmus', but coercion. There is a demand for *action now* with concrete results. Life itself, as Joseph Wood Krutch has remarked, is looked upon as a collection of problems, and we are constantly badgered to *do* something about them.

But some persons do *not* look upon life as merely a collection of problems. Rather they would say with Edmund Opitz that "life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be lived." The question they ask is not "What can I *do*?" but "What can I *be*?"

Christians, wrote the authors of *Understanding the New Testament*, believe that "the new life is not to be measured primarily by what the Christian does, but by what he *hopes, believes, and loves* — in brief, then, by what he *is* instead of what he *does*. But it should be understood that "the Christian's primary concern with faith does not free him from responsibility for his actions." Rather, "the God who has called them out of their aimless ignorance is holy, and he demands that Christians be holy in all their conduct as he is holy."

Perhaps this point will be made clear by considering the nature of sin. Mary Ellen Chase writes that "sin is far more than only the performance of wrong acts. It is a condition of moral and ethical blindness; it is indifference to the things of the spirit and, therefore, spiritual death. In other words, right and wrong are more than behavior; they are states of the human mind and soul." Or, in the words of William Barclay, "Sin is the failure to be

what we ought to be." To Jesus, writes Barclay, "sin is *an attitude of the heart*." Outward actions may be beyond reproach but the deciding factor is that attitude of the heart. "The differences in human life depend, for the most part," says Elton Trueblood, "not on what men *do*, but upon the meaning and purpose of their acts." "What we are," writes Dean Inge, "matters much more than what we do or say."

### **To Be a Better Self**

We should, I think, concentrate on efforts to *be* good instead of seeking first to *do* good. Follow the latter course and the temptation is to reform our fellows instead of trying to improve ourselves. Norman Ream expressed it this way: "The proper question, however, is not what you can *do*, but what you can *become*. It's a lot easier to do something than to be something. When you are tempted to ask if there isn't something you can do, remember there is always something you need to be, namely a better self."

"What God cares about," said C. S. Lewis, "is not exactly our actions. What he cares about is that we should be creatures of a certain kind or quality—the kind of creatures He intended us to be." There are some persons, writes William Barclay, "who help us,

not by anything they say or write, but by simply being what they are, men whom to meet is to meet God."

The teaching of Jesus, wrote Albert Jay Nock, "appears to have been purely individualistic. In a word, it came to this: That if every *one* would reform *one* (that is to say, oneself) and keep *one* steadfastly following the way of life which he recommended, the Kingdom of Heaven would be co-extensive with human society. The teaching of Jesus, simple as it was, was brand-new to those who listened to it."

There is, wrote Hanford Henderson, only *one* major problem in the whole world "and that is the salvation of the individual soul. Our own personal problem is quite the same as that of every other sane, red-blooded, earnest man or woman in the whole world. It is to make ourselves as big and fine and useful and human as we possibly can and, were we so fortunate as to have well-born sons and daughters, to help them to be bigger and finer and more useful and more human than we are. It is a much less spectacular job than the artificial problems of government, dynasty, empire, ecclesiasticism, trade unionism, socialism, communism, commercial supremacy, dictatorship, and all the other aggressive mass movements; but it

is the one real and important problem whose solution will bring peace and tranquillity and worth to a world now very much distraught."

### ***The Salt of the Earth***

But, some may complain, even if a few individuals do reform themselves, what good will it be when the great majority fail to do so? What possible difference can a handful of reformed persons make in a society of millions? But these complainers are judging by "the wisdom of the world instead of a higher sort of wisdom which," explains H. H. Hudson, "reveals to every man who has it that whatever he may do is in itself vain and dispensable yet the soul which he throws into it and the life he builds through it are not necessarily so. Put into other terms, except God build the house, they labor in vain that build it."

"Even that which in the concrete world can never be victorious remains in that other as a dynamic force," wrote Stefan Zweig, "and unfulfilled ideals often prove the most unconquerable. Those ideals only which have failed to put on concrete form are capable of everlasting resurrection."

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said to his disciples: "Blessed are you, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and

shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. Ye are the salt of the earth."

The *salt of the earth* was no mean title for the disciples because salt was greatly valued in the time of Christ, being indispensable for the preservation of food. The meaning, in part, of the parable is that society easily becomes corrupt and the forces of death are not stayed unless some folks are salt. It makes no difference that the group is small because a pinch of salt is effective out of proportion to its amount. Nor is their call to sensational witness because salt is inconspicuous, ordinary, and mixed with common things.

The method Jesus suggested to his disciples has been called by Lao-Tze "creative quietism." The object, writes Leonard Read, is "to work privately as extensively as possible but shy away from becoming a public spectacle. Instead of seeking publicity, creative quietism suggests concentration on the perfecting of thought to which others will be drawn. Have no fear that one's light will be hidden; be confident, rather, that any light, if strong enough, will penetrate the darkness."

This echoes the words of Tolstoy

on the power of truth: "No feats of heroism are needed to achieve the greatest and most important changes in the existence of humanity; neither the armament of millions of soldiers, nor the construction of new roads and machines, nor the arrangement of exhibitions, nor the organization of workmen's unions, nor revolutions, nor barricades, nor explosions, nor the perfection of aerial navigation; but a change in public opinion. And to accomplish this change it is only needful that each individual should say what he really feels or thinks, or at least that he should not say what he does not think."

**A New Public Opinion —  
Private and Unobtrusive**

A new public opinion will be created privately and unobtrusively. "The existing one," continues Albert Schweitzer, "is maintained by the press, by propaganda, and by financial and other influences which are at its disposal. The unnatural way of spreading ideas must be opposed by the natural one, which goes from man to man and relies solely on the truth of the thoughts and the hearer's receptiveness for new truth."

Those called by Jesus the salt of the earth were in the Old Testament called The Remnant, a leaven

that would transform the loaf of mankind. "If we belong in the remnant," wrote Albert Jay Nock, "we will proceed on our own way, first with the more obscure and extremely difficult work of clearing and illuminating our own minds, and second, with what occasional help we may offer to others whose faith, like our own, is set more on the regenerative power of thought than on the uncertain achievements of premature action." Such persons have the power "to see things as they are, to survey them and one's own relations to them with objective disinterestedness. Those who have this power are everywhere; everywhere they are not so much resisting as quietly eluding and disregarding all social pressure which tends to mechanize their processes of observation and thought."

"It was not an accident," wrote Rufus Jones, "that the two greatest prophets of the ancient world — Plato and Isaiah — made so much of the 'remnant' in the formulation of their hope for the better world of the future." Ideally, a remnant is comprised of a "small, outstanding group of persons who have vision of the true line of march for their age and people, clear insight into the underlying principle of life and action, and a faith that ventures everything to achieve what ought to be." These

spiritual rebels care more for truth than for mere unity.

The first Christians, wrote Jones, "who in the early chapters of Luke's second book, *The Acts*, are called 'those of the way,' felt themselves to be 'a peculiar people,' a 'remnant,' 'a true Israel within Israel.'" While there are different interpretations of the "beloved community," they all agree that "this inner, intimate beloved community is a spiritual remnant, living and fulfilling its mission within a wider world of men unilluminated and unsaved." That is, it must "mature and ripen its *idea* and finally carry it into the life of the wider circle out of which it came." The great historical importance of remnant groups is that "over and over again" they "have discovered, preserved, and passed on some of the most precious truths and ideals of our noblest faith of today." The true *remnant-idea*, then, is "the formation of a small prepared group of persons awakened, quickened, vitalized and so made the bearers of spiritual life to the wider world, the 'seed' of an immense harvest."

"Books and articles and public addresses," notes Rufus Jones, "except in the rare cases where they come from the pen or lips of a genius, leave the world pretty much unmoved and undisturbed." But, on the other hand, "the for-

mation of a remnant brings a vigorous challenge. It puts the issue sharply. It breaks the existing lethargy. It disturbs the even tenor of life." Under usual conditions "there is no way forward except by the way of the remnant. The truth must now be matured and tested in a group of persons who accept it with conviction and are ready to suffer for it or stake life on it."

### ***Preserving the Faith***

The remnant, says Jones, "possess consciences that are more acute than those of their fellows. They are more detached from the world and more ready than most people to forego the advantages of a successful career and the rewards which go with conformity to prevailing customs, in order to champion the cause of truth and light, and to work for *what ought to be*. They preserve a fundamental faith in the conquering power of truth, and they believe all things, hope all things, and are ready to endure all things, in the great business of making others see what they see."

The individual, continues Jones, "has creative work to do and he has his spiritual additions to make to the score of truth and life. He must, above everything else and as a sacred duty, insist upon his personal freedom as a man, whom



God has made in His own image and likeness. There are occasions when an individual can serve society best and most fittingly, not by yielding to its conventions nor to its historic customs and estimates but by standing out under the compulsion of some vision of advance in the championship of an ideal which ought to prevail but does not yet prevail. If there is vitality to this vision of advance and if it is grounded in eternal reality, it will awaken a response in the souls of others and gather a group of loyal supporters, and thus produce a remnant." The real mission and service of the remnant, concludes Rufus Jones, is to "go forward with a venture of faith and to put its vision of advance, its ideals of what ought to be, into practice here and now. It often means moving along the line of greatest resistance. And it is likely to entail much suffering."

### **A Responsible Remnant**

The true remnant does not seek privileges but rather is completely willing, even eager, to accept responsibilities. Nor does it wish to withdraw from the world, however unpleasant it may appear to be. A true remnant, if it is to live, must embrace the world, must ever go out into the world performing its rightful mission, working as a leaven in the lump.

A true remnant must do its work with joy. Yes, even in an age such as ours when things seem to be getting worse, not better — "a time of turmoil, war, economic catastrophe, cynicism, lawlessness, and distress," writes R. J. Rushdoony. But, he continues, "it is also an era of heightened challenge and creativity, and of intense vitality. And because of the intensification of issues, and their world-wide scope, never has an era faced a more demanding and exciting crisis. This then above all else is the great and glorious era to live in, a time of opportunity, one requiring fresh and vigorous thinking, indeed a glorious time to be alive."

Shouldn't we reflect, wrote John Bright, "that times that seem evil to us may serve a better purpose than times that are good? This may seem a strange thing to say, but there is much truth in it. The good times that we desire are times of freedom from disturbing bother. But perhaps from the divine point of view they are not. For the purpose of God for us is not the comfort of our bodies or the preservation of our interests, but the discipline of our spirits that we may become truly his people. Let it never be forgotten it is precisely in suffering that the people of God are selected; in suffering they are *known*. The tragedy

of the times, therefore, becomes to us a personal summons to decide for the calling of God and, in tragedy, to serve him. And though we may not see how that Kingdom could come soon, or prove that it will come at all, we will face the dark future with faith and pray for its coming. And we

will take courage. As civilization and material property, nations and churches, are tossed into the caldron of history and seemingly destroyed, we will reflect upon Isaiah's words: "There is always a Remnant, a people of God, a true church. And with these God works his will." ♦

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ALMOST EVERY PIECE of price-fixing legislation produces results opposite to those intended. Whether one examines the outcome of interest rate regulation or minimum wage legislation, the lesson repeats itself; interferences with the price system lead to unintended and unexpected consequences. And more, the consequences aggravate the original situation the legislation had meant to ameliorate. Finally, the aggravation caused by the initial legislation generates further clamor for bigger governmental programs and stiffer Federal controls.

At this point even the most informed citizen loses the ability to differentiate sense from nonsense. Thoroughly confused, he resigns

himself to the fact that free enterprise has obviously failed, and that like it or not, it's time that the government "did" something. He is usually completely unaware that it is the government intervention which has failed, and not the free market. The following analysis will attempt to highlight the evidence for this contention.

The most important function of a free price (a price not fixed or regulated by the state) is its ability to serve as an indication of the relative scarcity of a commodity, and automatically ration that scarce commodity to the highest demander. As long as the price of an article is allowed to fluctuate and match the supply with demand, there will be neither surpluses nor shortages, i.e., the market will be cleared at some equilibrium price.

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