

# An Exhortation to the Diligent Study of Scripture<sup>1</sup>

DESIDERIUS ERASMUS

## Introduction

**T**he importance of the *Paraclesis* (*Exhortation*) for understanding Erasmus should not be underestimated. James McConica states, while exposing Erasmus's central theme of "the philosophy of Christ," that "it is really sufficient to read the *Paraclesis* to grasp the heart of Erasmus' personal faith and concerns. All the great issues are there."<sup>2</sup> And, according to Margaret Mann Phillips, "A simple way to discover just where Erasmus stood at this important junction of his life is to analyse the famous preface to the first edition of Erasmus's New Testament (1516), called the *Paraclesis*."<sup>3</sup> Later she adds that it "became famous, and rightly so, as it is almost a summary of Erasmus's contribution to the Renaissance."<sup>4</sup> She singles out three characteristics of the *Paraclesis*: humanist optimism in contrast to the Reformers' pessimism with regard to human nature, "distrust of intellectual subtlety," and the fact that its arguments "were almost all to become the arguments of the Reformers."<sup>5</sup>

The structure and genre of the *Paraclesis* is debated. Erasmus composed it rather hastily to be one of the introductory texts in his 1516 edition of the

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<sup>1</sup> The text presented here (Desiderius Erasmus, *An Exhortation to the Diligent Study of Scripture, made by Erasmus Roterodamus. And translated into Englishh* [1529]) is modernized and edited by Bernard Aubert and Paul Wells.

<sup>2</sup> James McConica, *Erasmus, Past Masters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 46.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Mann Phillips, *Erasmus and the Northern Renaissance* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1949), 77.

<sup>4</sup> Mann Phillips, *Erasmus and the Northern Renaissance*, 81.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 81–84.

New Testament. The haste of composition partly explains its unclear structure. Pierre Mesnard suggests that it contains ten peaks (themes) organized around the gospel. Gerhard Winkler, for his part, discerns in this preface a twofold elaborate rhetorical structure (introduction [I], part one [II–V], part two [VI–VIII], conclusion). Both authors discover symmetry between the first and second halves, as themes either repeat themselves or contrast with one another. This text, with its repetitions and exhortative character, is considered by many to belong to the homiletic genre.<sup>6</sup> The title, *Paraclesis*, the Greek meaning “summons,” “exhortation,” or “consolation,” indicates the rhetorical or homiletic character of the text. In the New Testament it is used in the context of the church (Rom 12:8; Heb 13:22), but it is also employed in classical rhetoric, an example being the description of Dio Chrysostom, the philosopher, addressing the emperor Trajan (Dio Chrysostom, *Kingship* 1.9). So Erasmus may well be following both biblical and classical paradigms.

There is in Erasmus a paradox between his desire to reach ordinary Christians and his own complex literary style. Silvana Seidel Menchi expresses this well:

A glaring contradiction is in fact apparent in the high-profile manifestos. In the first and most famous one—the *Paraclesis*—Erasmus declares that his objective is to put the New Testament into the hands of the simple Christian: the weaver, the peasant farmer, the *muliercula*. But then what does he do? He formulates this programme in refined Latin, he locks his idea in complex syntax, he lards his periods with sophisticated erudition.<sup>7</sup>

A similar contradiction appears in the consideration of the genre of the *Paraclesis*. In the introduction, Erasmus claims to restrict himself to the persuasion of Christ, yet in his style he does not separate himself entirely from the rhetoric of orators and the power of poets.

The central and recurring theme of this short work is the philosophy of Christ. In it Erasmus adopts a polemic stance against the scholastics and the monastic life, and the philosophy of Christ is defined in contrast to pagan philosophy (Delègue). Further, the exhortation ends with a commendation of the teaching of Christ in the Gospels and epistles in opposition to popular piety and superstition.<sup>8</sup> He reacts against the dogmatic and philosophical

<sup>6</sup> See for instance Ch. Béné in Desiderius Erasmus, *Opera Omnia*, 5.7 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 282.

<sup>7</sup> Silvana Seidel Menchi, “How to Domesticate the New Testament: Erasmus’ Dilemmas (1516–1535),” *Basel 1516*, 218.

<sup>8</sup> Note that Erasmus had a fairly low view of the Old Testament.

theology of the scholastics and replaces it with a focus on life and Christ.<sup>9</sup> Jacques Étienne warns, however, that Erasmus's concept of the philosophy of Christ, though far from that of Martin Luther, should not be equated with a mere moral philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, a key to Erasmus's philosophy of Christ is the notion of rebirth or renaissance through Christ and his word.

The version of the *Paraclesis* printed here is a modernization of the first 1529 English translation by William Roye. Roye has a very different translation philosophy from that of modern translators.<sup>11</sup> For example, he often translates one Latin word by a pair of synonyms and adds explanatory phrases. He also adorns the original with biblical imagery. As a whole his translation is a faithful rendering of the Latin original; at points, however, he modifies the text in a more Protestant direction. For instance, the original title is simply *Exhortation*, while the translation renders it as *An Exhortation to the Diligent Study of Scripture*. On several occasions the translation emphasizes Reformed themes such as human depravity and grace, the glory of God, and faith alone. Besides modernizing the text, the present translation has removed some of the synonyms and redundant expressions and indicated some of the modifications of Roye's translation from the original.<sup>12</sup>

It is significant that the 1529 edition of the *Paraclesis* was published together with one of the first translations of a work by Luther, a commentary on 1 Corinthians 7. It was the first and last time that Erasmus and Luther were thus joined together.<sup>13</sup> Though the situation is more complex, it is an example of a publisher using Erasmus for the Protestant cause. In Erasmus we see a move from bold and optimistic advocacy of reform in 1516 to a more defensive stance in the face of an accusation of heresy in the ensuing years. Thus, the reform-minded *Paraclesis* was excluded from his 1527 and 1535 editions of the New Testament.<sup>14</sup>

The legacy of the *Paraclesis* lies primarily in its advocacy for the translation of the Bible into the language of the people and the reading of the Bible by lay Christians. It is also a program of educational reform for Christendom.

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<sup>9</sup> This nondogmatic stance perhaps manifested itself in another direction later in his debate over the bondage of the will with Luther.

<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Étienne warns against identifying Erasmus's teaching with Friedrich Schleiermacher's version of the Christian faith.

<sup>11</sup> For more details, see Douglas H. Parker, ed., *William Roye's An exhortation to the diligent studye of scripture and An exposition in to the seventh chapter of the pistle to the Corinthians* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 28–36.

<sup>12</sup> Brackets have been used to mark out added elements in Roye's translation and supplementary information has been supplied in the notes.

<sup>13</sup> Parker, ed., *William Roye's An exhortation and An exposition*, 4–5.

<sup>14</sup> Seidel Menchi, "How to Domesticate the New Testament," 220.

Erasmus only wrote in Latin and labored more in scholarly endeavors. At the same time, the popularization of the message of the Bible was taken over by the Reformers.<sup>15</sup> However, Erasmus's manifesto and New Testament editions had a great impact on the flourishing of translations such as the German translation by Luther in 1522 and the 1525 New Testament in English by William Tyndale (see Robert Adams), who was assisted by none other than William Roye.

In short, Erasmus's *Paraclesis* is a vital summary of the thought of one of the leading Christian humanists and precursors of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. It conveys his view of the philosophy of Christ and advocates for the reading of the New Testament by all.

## An Exhortation to the Diligent Study of Scripture

### I. *Eloquence and Truth*<sup>16</sup>

Lactantius Firmianus, Christian<sup>17</sup> reader, whose eloquence Jerome greatly admires,<sup>18</sup> endeavoring to defend the Christian religion against the pagans, sought zealously to attain an eloquence akin to that of Cicero, as he thought it presumptuous to aspire to be his equal. As for me—if wishes could avail anything, at least while I exhort mortals to the most holy and salutary study of Christian teaching [*Christianae philosophiae*]<sup>19</sup>—I sincerely desire another type of eloquence be given to me, far greater than ever Cicero had. ... It is better and more fitting to desire that Christ himself would tune the strings of our instrument that this song may effectively attract and move the mind of all.<sup>20</sup> To this end, we have little use for the colored arguments and conclusions of the rhetoricians, for nothing can accomplish what we desire so well as the truth itself, which is most effective in persuasion when it is most plain.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 220–21.

<sup>16</sup> The headings in this text are not original but are added for ease of reading. The Latin is cited from Holborn's edition.

<sup>17</sup> Lit., "excellent."

<sup>18</sup> Lactantius (ca. 240–ca. 320) was a Christian apologist from North Africa. Cf. Jerome, "Letter LXIII. To Paulinus," 10 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 6:122); Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes* 3.1.1 (FC 49:164).

<sup>19</sup> The Latin adds here, "and I, as it were, summon them, sounding the bugle." Thus, Erasmus conceives his rhetoric as a trumpet call for battle.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Ps 33:2. Some have suggested that the song is a reference to the Bible.

## II. *Lament over the Neglect of the Philosophy of Christ*

I do not consider it appropriate now to renew the sorrowful complaint [*querelam*]<sup>21</sup>—never more true than at this present time—that while much new knowledge is sought with great effort, yet only the immortal fountain of Christ’s pure teaching<sup>21</sup> is depreciated, even by those who profess to be Christians. These healthy springs are sought by few [*a paucis tractari*], and those who seek them do so unfruitfully.<sup>22</sup>

In all other sciences pursued by human enquiry, no mystery is so dark and secret that the quickness of our mind has not clarified it, nothing is so hard that diligent labor has not overcome it.<sup>23</sup> How is it then that we do not embrace with faithful hearts this pure teaching,<sup>24</sup> since we profess the holy name of Christ? Plato’s adherents, Pythagoras’s students, the Academics, Stoics, and Epicureans, Aristotle’s followers, and Diogenes’s disciples know by heart the traditions of their own school, and contend fiercely for them, ready rather to die than to forsake their patron. And why do we not give our minds much more to our master and prince, Christ? ... Should not we, who are in so many ways consecrated and bound to Christ by many sacraments, think it shameful to be ignorant of the [Scripture and] teaching that give us most sure consolation?<sup>25</sup> Is it not pure folly to compare Christ with Zeno and Aristotle, and his heavenly doctrine with their trifling traditions?

## III. *Christ the Only Teacher*

Let them say and dream up as much as they will about the founders of their schools. Only this teacher came from heaven: he alone could teach sure things, since he is the everlasting wisdom [of the Father], he alone taught saving doctrine [*salutaria*], being the only author of human salvation [*unicus humanae salutis auctor*],<sup>26</sup> he alone completely accomplished all that he taught, and he alone performs whatever he has promised.

<sup>21</sup> Lit., “Christ’s philosophy,” *Christi philosophiam*.

<sup>22</sup> The following sentence was added in the English translation: “By adding their own glosses and opinions, they seem to trouble and defile these springs of life rather than to drink of them sweetly, so that they might have in themselves floods of living water running into the everlasting life that should be to the glory of God and profit of the Christians.”

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Virgil, *The Georgics* 1.145: “Labor conquers all things.”

<sup>24</sup> Lit., “philosophy.”

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Matt 8:23–27. The ET adds here “and which are the anchor of the soul both sure and stable (Heb 6:19), preserving us from perishing in all tempests of temptation.”

<sup>26</sup> The ET has here, “the foundation of everyone’s health” (cf. 1 Cor 3:10–11; Jer 30:17).

If something is brought from the Chaldeans or Egyptians, we greatly desire to know it, because it comes from a foreign country. ... I wonder that this desire does not likewise entice Christian hearts, who know full well that this wholesome doctrine did not come from Egypt or Syria, but from heaven itself [and the seat of God]. Why do we not understand that this must be new and wondrous learning [*novum et admirabile philosophiae genus*], since he who was God became man [John 1:14], he who was immortal became mortal, and he who was at the right hand of his Father<sup>27</sup> descended into this wretched world to teach us it? It surely is a high and excellent thing, and no trifle, that this [heavenly and] glorious master came to teach openly. Why do we not endeavor to know, search, and discern this fruitful philosophy with godly curiosity?

Above all, this wisdom is so exceptional that it utterly confounds as foolishness the wisdom of this world,<sup>28</sup> and it may be gathered out of so few books, as from the most pure springs, and that with much less labor than the teaching of Aristotle out of so many contentious books, or from an infinite number of commentaries that simply disagree. ... The way to this true wisdom is easy and available [to all]. Only bring a godly and diligent mind [*animus*], endowed with plain and pure faith [*fide*], desirous to be instructed in this meek teaching,<sup>29</sup> and you will profit much. Your master and instructor (the Spirit of God), who is never more gladly present than with those of simple heart [*simplicibus animis*], will not be absent from you.<sup>30</sup> Human teaching and traditions<sup>31</sup> (besides promising false happiness) mislead the minds of many and make them despair because they are so obscure, subtle, and contradictory. But this [delectable] doctrine speaks equally to all, adapting to us when we are children [*parvulis*; cf. 1 Cor 3:1], modifying her tune according to our need, feeding us with milk [cf. 1 Pet 2:2], bearing, nourishing, sustaining, and doing all things, until we grow in Christ. It is simple and uncomplicated for the weak, but high and marvelous for the perfect; the more you dig into the treasures of this science, the farther you are from attaining her majesty.<sup>32</sup> To the young she is simple and plain, and

<sup>27</sup> The ET perhaps echoes the Apostles' Creed; Acts 7:55; and Rom 8:34. The Latin translates literally, "in the heart of the Father," *in corde patris*.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 3:19. Erasmus expands on this theme in his famous *Praise of Folly*.

<sup>29</sup> Lit., "in this philosophy," *in hac philosophia*.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Matt 5:8.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Mark 7:6–9; the Latin does not have this wording, but "the other disciplines," *illorum disciplinae*.

<sup>32</sup> Perhaps Erasmus is echoing the saying of Gregory the Great about Scripture, "It is as it were like a river, broad and deep, in which both a lamb walks and an elephant swims [*planus et altus, in quo et agnus ambulet et elephas natet*];" "Ad Leandrum 4," in *Moralia* (CCL 143.6).

to the greater she seems above their capacity. She turns away no age, sex, fortune, or condition.

#### IV. *All Christians Are Theologians*

The sun, like the teaching of Christ, shines forth for all, rejecting no one, except those who abstain willingly, interested only in their own gain. I greatly disagree with those who do not want the Scripture of Christ<sup>33</sup> to be translated into all tongues,<sup>34</sup> to be read diligently by the common men and women, as though Christ taught such dark things that they can only be understood by a few divines, or that the substance of the Christian religion [*religionis Christianae*] consisted mainly in what cannot be known. Perhaps it is fitting that the mysteries of kings should be kept secret, but Christ desires that his mysteries should be spread abroad as much as possible. I would that all women read the Gospels and Paul's epistles, and that they be translated into the common language so that they be read and known not only by the Scots and Irish, but also by the Turks and Saracens. Truly it is a great thing to have a little insight into Scripture, even if it is only a scant and incomplete knowledge.<sup>35</sup>

Some may smile, but others may be convinced. I would that the plowman sing a text of the Scripture at his plow, that the weaver at his loom use it to drive away the tediousness of time, or that the traveler make the time pass and rid his journey of weariness and, in short, that the conversations of the Christians be from the Scriptures, for we ourselves are what our daily stories make us. Let every one attain the level he can, and speak his mind openly to his neighbor.<sup>36</sup> Let those who are less advanced not envy the one in front; let also those in front encourage those who follow, ever exhorting them not to despair. Why do we restrict to a few the calling that is common to all? Neither is it fitting that doctrine should be banished from the common people and known only by a few divines or persons in orders [*vulgus theologos aut monachos*]; baptism, the first profession of the Christian religion [*Christianae philosophia*], is common to all Christians, the other sacraments are not private, and the reward of immortality belongs indifferently to all. I would with my whole heart that these divines and religious professionals (a

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<sup>33</sup> Lit., "divine letters," *divinas litteras*.

<sup>34</sup> Lit., "the vulgar tongue."

<sup>35</sup> The Latin here translates literally, "Truly the first step is to understand one way or another."

<sup>36</sup> Lit., "express what he may." Some consider that the ET translation might suggest the Reformed view of good works (cf. Rom 15:2).

small company in comparison to the whole number that bear the name of Christ) be indeed what they are called.

I am afraid that one may find some among the divines who are unworthy of that name, who speak worldly things and not godly; and that also among those in religious orders<sup>37</sup> who profess the poverty of Christ and despise the world you may find only worldliness. I consider a true divine [*vere theologus*] to be one who in heart [*affectu*], appearance, and life teaches to despise riches without crafty and subtle reasons [*syllogismis*]. A Christian ought not to put confidence in the help of this world, but to hang only and wholly on heaven [cf. Matt 6:19–21]; not avenging injury, praying for those that say evil about us, and doing good against evil [Matt 5:39–42, 44]. Good people should be loved and upheld without respect of person as members of the one body; evil people, if they cannot be reformed, ought to be suffered; they who are despoiled of their goods and deprived of their possessions and mourn [in this world] are blessed and not to be pitied [cf. Matt 5:4, 10–12]; and death is to be desired for Christians,<sup>38</sup> since it is nothing but a passage to immortality. If someone inspired by the Holy Spirit [*spiritu Christi*] preaches and teaches these and other such things, if someone exhorts, encourages, and emboldens his neighbor in these things, that person is a true divine [*vere theologus*], though a weaver or a laborer. Those who do these things in this life are truly great doctors. Perhaps even someone who is not a Christian may speculate as to the way angels [*angeli*] think. However, persuading us to live here untainted by vice and to lead an angelic life [*vitam exigamus angelicam*], is the office of a Christian divine [*Christiani theologi*].<sup>39</sup>

## V. The Impact of Christ's Teaching on the World

If someone object that these are unlearned and elementary things, I answer nothing but that Christ taught these simple things, and that the apostles exhorted us in them.<sup>40</sup> Although this doctrine is unsophisticated, it has given us many good Christians and armies of faithful martyrs.<sup>41</sup> This unlearned (as they call it) philosophy has subdued under her laws the most noble princes, many kingdoms and peoples, something which no king's power [*vis*], no learning of the philosophers, was ever able to do. I will not

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<sup>37</sup> Lit., “monks,” *monachos*.

<sup>38</sup> Lit., “the pious.”

<sup>39</sup> Commentators see here a polemical allusion to Thomas Aquinas often called the *Doctor angelicus*.

<sup>40</sup> Lit., “that the apostles have inculcated them.”

<sup>41</sup> Lit., “distinguished martyrs.”



resist those who want to dispute subtle questions [*sapientiam istam*] among the more perfect [cf. 1 Cor 2:6]; however, the unlearned multitude of the Christians may be comforted, because truly the apostles never taught such things; whether they knew them or not, I let others judge.

But truly if princes would set themselves to practicing this simple learning with pureness of heart, if preachers in their sermons would expose this doctrine, if schoolmasters would instruct their children with this simple science rather than with the traditions of Aristotle and Averroes,<sup>42</sup> then Christianity would not be disturbed by perpetual storms of war; the unreasonable desire for gain, longing insatiably for riches, whether by fair or foul means, would be someday assuaged; contentious arguments over everything [sacred or profane] would have an end; we would differ not only in name and ceremony from the unfaithful<sup>43</sup> [but also in the pure conduct of our life]. And no doubt in the three orders of men—princes and officers who are their ambassadors; bishops and priests, who are their representatives; and those who educate tender youth, who are formed and reformed as their master instructs them—lies the possibility either to increase the Christian religion [*Christianae religionis*] or to restore it again [when it has long been in decay]. Now if they would put aside their own private interests for a while and lift up their hearts with pure intent to Christ [*ex animo conspirare in Christum*] [seeking only his glory and the profit of their neighbor], we should undoubtedly see in a few years a true and godly kind of Christian<sup>44</sup> springing up in every place, who would profess the name of Christ [*Christi philosophiam*] not only in ceremonies and words, but in heart and true conversation of life. With this armor we would much sooner prevail over<sup>45</sup> the enemies of Christ, than with force or threat.<sup>46</sup>

Join together all armies, there is nothing stronger than the truth! We cannot call anyone a Platonist unless he has read the works of Plato. Yet we call them Christians, and divines [*theologus*], who have never read the words of Christ [*Christi litteras*]. Christ says, “He that loves me keeps my sayings [*sermones*]” [John 14:23], which is the practice he has prescribed. Therefore, if we are true Christians in heart [*ex animo*], if we sincerely believe that he was sent down from heaven to teach us such things as the wisdom of the

<sup>42</sup> Averroes (1126–1198), Arabic scholar who first channeled Aristotle’s teaching to the West.

<sup>43</sup> Lit., “from those who do not profess the philosophy of Christ [*Christi philosophiam*].”

<sup>44</sup> The original has here, “a true, and as Paul says genuine [Gr., *gnēsiōn*] race of Christians” (cf. 2 Cor 8:8).

<sup>45</sup> Lit., “entice to faith in Christ.”

<sup>46</sup> Lit., “weapons.” Cf. Rom 13:12; Eph 6:11–12. The Pauline theme of spiritual warfare was dear to Erasmus as seen in his *Enchiridion militis christiani* or *Handbook of a Christian Soldier* (1501), a work that contained many themes also found in the *Paraclesis*.

philosophers could never attain, if we faithfully look for such things from him that no worldly prince can give us, why do we revere something more than his Scripture [*litteris*] [which he left here among us to be our consolation (cf. 2 Cor 1:5)]? Why do we consider something that dissents from his doctrine [*decretis*] to be wisdom? Why do we allow ourselves more liberty with this heavenly learning [*adorandis litteris*] than the profane interpreters with the civil law<sup>47</sup> or books of physics<sup>48</sup>? We treat as a trifling game, commenting, criticizing, and wrapping up whatever comes out of our mouths. We apply this heavenly doctrine [*caelestia dogmata*] to our life and measure it after our vain standards, as if it were flexible.<sup>49</sup> And we do this because we do not want to appear ignorant, but rather want to show that we have read much [secular literature, *profanarum literarum*]. I dare not say that we pollute these fruitful springs,<sup>50</sup> but no one can deny that we restrict to a few what Christ would have come to many. And this teaching consists in the thoughts of the heart [*affectibus*] rather than in subtle reasons [*sylogismis*]. It is living rather than disputations, inspiration rather than science [*eruditio*], and renewal rather than reasoning [*ratio*]. Learning is the exception, but it is possible for everyone to be a Christian, to live a godly life, and I venture to say, for everyone to be a divine.<sup>51</sup>

## VI. *Philosophy, Scholasticism, and Christ*

Now everyone's mind inclines to what fits their nature. And what is the teaching of Christ [*Christi philosophia*] which he calls regeneration [*renascentiam*],<sup>52</sup> if not a restoring of our nature which in its first creation was good?<sup>53</sup> One may find many things in pagan books that do not contradict this teaching, although no one has explained it so completely and with such power as Christ himself. For no school of philosophy, however primitive, ever taught that happiness [*felicem*] comes down to money, and none was so shameless as to affirm that the good life [*finem boni*] consists in this-worldly honor and pleasure. The Stoics acknowledged that no one might worthily be called wise unless good; that nothing was good and honest but virtue alone, and

<sup>47</sup> Lit., "laws of Caesar."

<sup>48</sup> That is, medical books.

<sup>49</sup> The original has here, "as if it was a Lydian rule [*Lydius lapis*]"; the Lydian rule "was made of lead, therefore flexible," Abraham Friesen, *Erasmus, the Anabaptists, and the Great Commission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 142, cf. 21, 146.

<sup>50</sup> Lit., "Christian philosophy," *Christiana philosophia*.

<sup>51</sup> Lit., "it is lawful for everyone to be a theologian," *nulli non licet esset theologum*.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. John 3:3; Titus 3:5.

<sup>53</sup> Here Erasmus defines renaissance in terms of rebirth.

nothing was evil and to be abhorred but vice [*turpitudinem*]. Socrates, as Plato says, reasoned that injury should not to be avenged by injury.<sup>54</sup> He also taught that since the soul is immortal, those who depart are not to be mourned if they have lived well, because they have gone to a better life [*in vitam feliciorum*]. Finally, he taught all to subdue the desires of the body and to apply their souls to the contemplation of those things that are immortal and not seen [with these bodily eyes].<sup>55</sup> Aristotle writes in his *Politics* that only virtue delights us without displeasure.<sup>56</sup> Epicurus grants that there can be nothing pleasant in life unless the mind, from which all pleasure springs, is free from evil.<sup>57</sup> Besides, some have lived according to their teaching—above all Socrates, Diogenes, and Epictetus.

However, since Christ himself taught and did these things more perfectly than any other, is it not astonishing<sup>58</sup> that they are not only unknown to those who profess the name of Christ, but also despised and made a laughing-stock by them? If there is something that comes closer to Christianity, let us follow it. But since nothing else can make a true Christian, why do we consider this immortal doctrine more irrelevant than the books of Moses? The first point of Christianity is to know what Christ taught; the next is to practice it [as far as God gives us grace].<sup>59</sup>

I don't think that people should consider themselves Christian because they can reason with subtly tedious entanglements of words [*instantibus*], relations, quiddities, and formalities,<sup>60</sup> but because they acknowledge and practice what Christ taught and accomplished. I do not say this to condemn the labor of those who have exercised their minds in these subtle novelties, but rather because I believe that the pure and natural philosophy of Christ [*Christi philosophiam*] can be gathered nowhere more fruitfully than from the Gospels and epistles of the apostles. When people studies them attending more to prayer than arguing, desiring to be made a new creature rather than to be armed with Scripture for battle, they will without doubt find that there is nothing pertaining to happiness or conduct in this present life that is not proposed, explained, and brought out there. If we are to learn anything,

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Plato, *Republic* 1.335E.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Plato, *Gorgias* 469B–C; *Phaedo* 63E–64C, 79C–D, 80E–811A, and 83A.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Politics* 7.1.3–5; and *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.8.14–15 (1099A), 10.3.8 (1173B), and 10.6.4 (1176A).

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Cicero, *De finibus* 1.9.29–30.

<sup>58</sup> Or, “monstrous,” *prodigii*.

<sup>59</sup> This addition in the ET reflects for some a stronger view of human depravity and grace than in the original.

<sup>60</sup> These four words belong to scholastic technical terminology.

why should another instructor<sup>61</sup> be more pleasing than Christ himself? If we seek a pattern to live by, why do we embrace another example rather than the exemplar [*archetypus*] who is Christ himself? If we desire a medicine against the harmful appetites of our minds, why do we not seek here the most fruitful remedy? If we want to quicken with reading our dull and fainting mind, where shall we find such quick and fiery sparks? If we aspire to withdraw our minds from the tedious cares of this life, why do we seek any other pleasurable pastimes? Why do we prefer to learn the wisdom of Christ from human books rather than from Christ himself? It is he who in this Scripture accomplishes what he promised when he said that he would continue with us to the end of the world [Matt 28:20]. So in this his testament [*in his litteris*] he speaks, breathes, and lives among us more effectively than when he was bodily present in the world. The Jews did not see and hear as much of Christ as you may daily hear and see in the evangelical writings [*in euangelicis litteris*]; there nothing is wanting if you bring the ears and eyes [of faith] with which he may be heard and seen.<sup>62</sup>

## VII. *Human or Divine Authority?*

What a strange world this is! We keep letters written by our friends, we treasure them and carry them about, we read them over again and again. Thousands of Christians esteem great literature and yet have not once in their lives read over the Gospels and epistles of the apostles.<sup>63</sup> The followers of Mohammed are all well instructed in their own school, and the Jews to this day, even from a tender age, study Moses diligently. Why do we not give such honor to Christ [embracing his precepts, which bring eternal life]? Those who follow the rule of Benedict (a rule written by a man of small learning and for the unlearned) observe it, learn it by heart, and drink it in. Augustine's followers are not ignorant of their rule.<sup>64</sup> Francis's friars observe and promote<sup>65</sup> their patron's precepts and carry them about wherever they go, thinking they are safe only when their book is with them. Why do they live more by their rule, written by a man, than the whole of Christianity by the Holy Scripture, which Christ preached openly to all and which we have

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<sup>61</sup> Lit., "author."

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Matt 13:15. Here again, perhaps the addition "of faith" in the ET goes in the direction of a Reformed understanding of *sola fide*.

<sup>63</sup> Lit., "the evangelical and apostolic books."

<sup>64</sup> Lit., "the rule of their founder [*auctoris*]." The Rule of Augustine is followed for example by the Augustinians and Dominicans.

<sup>65</sup> Lit., "adore and embrace."

all professed in baptism? And to sum up, it is still most holy among all other precepts, even if you gathered hundreds of others together. As Paul wrote: I would that the law of Moses had no glory in comparison to the glory of the gospel that succeeded it,<sup>66</sup> and that the Gospels and epistles [*omnibus euangelia et apostolorum litterae*] would be esteemed so holy by Christians that the doctrines of men in comparison might not seem holy at all.

I accept that everyone should promote their beliefs to their own satisfaction. Let them extol Albert, Alexander, Thomas, Aegidius, Richard, and Occam.<sup>67</sup> I do not want to diminish anyone's glory or to belittle the old method of study. Let them be subtle [*subtilia*] or evangelical [*seraphica*],<sup>68</sup> but they must admit that the ancient doctors are most true.<sup>69</sup> Paul [and John]<sup>70</sup> recommend that we judge the spirits of the prophets whether they are of God [cf. 1 Cor 14:32 and 1 John 4:1]. Augustine read all the books of others with discernment, and he claimed no special authority for his own books.<sup>71</sup>

Only in the Scriptures [*In his solis litteris*], when I cannot understand something, I submit myself to it.<sup>72</sup> And our doctor (who is Christ) was not authorized by the schools of theologians, but by the heavenly Father's own divine voice bearing witness and that twice: first, at the Jordan when he was baptized [Matt 3:17], and later in his transfiguration on Mount Tabor, when God said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am pleased, hear him" [Matt 17:5]. O, the certain authority which has no contradiction! What does this mean, "Hear him"? If he is the only true instructor,<sup>73</sup> we ought to be his disciples alone. Now let everyone praise their authors as they will, only this voice spoke of Christ [our Savior], upon whom the Holy Spirit descended in the likeness of a dove, confirming the testimony of the heavenly Father [Matt 3:16]. Peter was endowed with this Spirit by the over-shepherd when Christ three times committed his sheep to be nourished, with nothing other than [that he should instruct them with] the [heavenly] food of Christian doctrine [*Christianae doctrinae pabulo*].<sup>74</sup> In Paul, called by Christ himself a

<sup>66</sup> Cf. 2 Cor 3:7–8 and Heb 3:3.

<sup>67</sup> That is, Albertus Magnus (1193–1280), Alexander of Hales (ca. 1170–1245), Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274), Giles of Rome (ca. 1243–1316), Richard of Middleton (d. ca. 1300), and William of Ockham (ca. 1280–ca. 1349); all these are medieval philosophers or theologians.

<sup>68</sup> John Duns Scotus (1266–1308) was nicknamed "Subtle Doctor" and Bonaventura (1221–1274) "Seraphic Doctor."

<sup>69</sup> That is, Christ and the apostles.

<sup>70</sup> Added in the ET.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Augustine, *Against Faustus the Manichaeon* 11.5 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 4:180) and *The Trinity* 3, Preface, 2 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 3:56).

<sup>72</sup> Lit., "I worship," *adoro*.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Matt 23:10.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. John 21:15–17.

“chosen vessel” [Acts 9:15] and a pure<sup>75</sup> preacher of his name [and glory], Christ seemed in a way to be born anew. John expressed in his writings [*litteris*] what he had brought out of the holy fountain of Christ’s bosom.<sup>76</sup> What is there to compare with this in Scotus<sup>77</sup> (I do not want you to think that I speak out of envy), or what is there in Thomas?—although I commend the one’s holiness<sup>78</sup> and marvel at the subtle wit of the other. Why do we not all apply our diligent study to these great authors [I mean, Christ, Peter, Paul, and John]?<sup>79</sup> Why do we not carry about these in our hearts? Why do we not have them ever in our hands? Why do we not hunt for and seek out these things with diligence? Why do we give a greater portion of our life to the study of Averroes than to the gospel of Christ?<sup>80</sup> Why do we respect human decrees and vain opinions which differ among themselves? Perhaps great divines made these constitutions, yet only in Christ’s word consists the exercise of the one who aspires to be a great divine before God.

### VIII. *Christ Teaches through the Scriptures*

It is fitting for all who have professed the name of Christ, if we have promised with mind and heart,<sup>81</sup> to be instructed with the teaching of Christ [*Christi dogmatis*] while yet [tender infants] in our parents’ arms and in our nurses’ care. What the rude and unformed clay of our soul has initially received is deeply impressed on them and cleaves to them. I would then that our first inarticulate speech should sound Christ. I would that our ignorant<sup>82</sup> childhood be so informed with Christ’s gospel and that Christ be taught to children so that they might be enflamed to love him<sup>83</sup> and that later they should progress little by little, and that they might imperceptibly grow from the ground up to be strong in Christ.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Lit., “distinguished,” *insignem*.

<sup>76</sup> Lit., “out of his heart,” *illo pectoris*.

<sup>77</sup> Duns Scotus.

<sup>78</sup> That is, Thomas’s holiness.

<sup>79</sup> The ET added the reference to Christ and the apostles. The Latin original translates literally, “Why do we not all philosophize (*philosophamur*) with these great authors?”

<sup>80</sup> Lit., “the Gospels.”

<sup>81</sup> The first half of this sentence translates literally, “As much as in baptism we have sworn the words of Christ, if nevertheless we have sworn out of the heart (*ex animo*).”

<sup>82</sup> Lit., “earliest.”

<sup>83</sup> In the 1522 version, the following sentence was added here: “For just as the austerity of certain tutors makes pupils hate letters before they become acquainted with them; thus there are those who make the philosophy of Christ sad and morose, while it is nothing but sweet.”

<sup>84</sup> Lit., “That from being occupied with these studies, then by quiet growth they might grow up (*adulescant*) into robust men in Christ.”

Other human traditions are such that many regret having invested so much effort on them. And often it happens that those who have most vigorously sought throughout their life, even to death, to defend human teachings, yet at the point of death they [have abandoned their defenses and] make a clean break with their received wisdom. But blessed is he whom death assails when his heart is taken up with wholesome doctrines [*in hisce litteris*]. Let us therefore with fervent desire seek these spiritual springs. Let us embrace them. Let us be studiously familiar with them. Let us embrace the sweet words of Christ with a pure affection. Let us be transformed anew into them, for our lives are such as our studies are.<sup>85</sup> And to be short, let us die in them. If someone cannot attain to them (but who cannot, if they wish) let him submit to them, considering them as the treasure of God's own mind<sup>86</sup> [from whence comes all goodness].

If someone were to show us Christ's footprint, good Lord, how would we kneel and worship it! And why do we not rather honor his living and breathing image which is expressly contained in these books? If someone would bring us Christ's coat, where would we not run headlong to kiss it? Even if you brought out all his household stuff, nothing more truly and really represents Christ than the Gospels and epistles.<sup>87</sup> We adorn an image of wood or stone with gold and precious stones for the love of Christ. But why are these writings not garnished with gold and gems even more precious, since they present us Christ more really than any image? As for images, what things can they portray but the form of his body—even if they express that? But the gospel represents the living image of his most holy mind [*sacrosanctae mentis illius*], and Christ himself speaking, healing, dying, rising again, and all his parts. So much so that even if he were present before your eyes, you would not see him so plainly and profitably.

End of the exhortation [*Paracleseos Finis*]

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<sup>85</sup> Or, "seeing that 'studies become habits.'" *Abeunt studia in Mores* is a famous Latin saying, Ovid, *Heroides* 15.83.

<sup>86</sup> Lit., "divine heart," *divini pectoris*.

<sup>87</sup> Lit., "the gospel letters," *euangelicae litterae*.



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