

ERASMUS AND CALVIN ON THE FOOLISHNESS OF GOD

Reason and Emotion in the Christian Philosophy

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KIRK ESSARY

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Reason and Emotion in
the Christian Philosophy

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Abbreviations and Early Modern Editions

Note on Texts and Translations

I made use of good modern English translations of sixteenth-century texts where available, occasionally with modifications. Otherwise, translations of primary sources are my own. The Latin or French original is provided in the notes, taken either from reliable modern editions or from sixteenth-century printed editions.

Common Abbreviations for Modern Editions

- ASD *Opera omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami* (Amsterdam, 1969–).
Cited by *ordo*, volume, and page number.
- LB *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami opera omnia* (ed. Jean LeClerc, 10
vols. [Leiden, 1703–6]). Cited by volume, column, and column
section number.
- CWE *Collected Works of Erasmus*. 1974–. Ed. Richard J. Schoeck, and
Beatrice Corrigan. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- CO *Calvini Opera (Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, ed. Guilielmus
Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, Eduardus Reuss); *Corpus*
Reformatorum Series II (vols. 29–87).
- COR *Ioannis Calvinii opera omnia denuo recognita et adnotatione critica*
instructa notisque illustrata. Geneva, Droz, 1992–.

Early Modern Editions Commonly Cited

Erasmus' New Testament and Annotations

- *Novum Instrumentum omne: diligenter ab Erasmo Roterodamo recognitum and emendatum ... una cum Annotationibus*. Basel: Johannes Froben, 1516.

x Abbreviations and Early Modern Editions

- *Novum Testamentum ... cum Annotationibus*. Basel: Johannes Froben, 1539–40.
- *Erasmus' Annotations on the New Testament: Romans, I and II Corinthians: Facsimile of the Final Latin Text with All Earlier Variants* (ed. Anne Reeve and M.A. Screech; Leiden: Brill, 1990).

Erasmus' Paraphrases

- *Paraphrasis in duas epistolas Pauli ad Corinthios*. Basel: Joannes Froben, 1519.
- *Tomus primus Paraphraseon Des. Erasmi Roterodami in Novum Testamentum*. Basel: Johannes Froben, 1541.
- *Tomus secundus continens Paraphrasim in omnes epistolas apostolicas*. Basel: Johannes Froben, 1532.

Calvin's New Testament Commentaries

- *Joannis Calvini commentarii, in quatuor Pauli Epistolas: ad Galatas, ad Ephesios, ad Philippenses, ad Colossenses*. Geneva: Jean Girard, 1548.
- *In omnes Pauli apostoli Epistolas, atque etiam in Epistolam ad Hebraeos, item in canonicas Petri, Johannis, Jacobi, et Judae, quae etiam catholicae vocantur, Joh. Calvini Commentarii*. Geneva: Robert Estienne, 1556.
- *Harmonia ex tribus Evangelistis composita, Matthaeo, Marco, et Luca ... cum Johannis Calvini commentariis*. Geneva: Nicolas Barbier & Thomas Courteau, 1563.

Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion

- *Institutio christianae religionis*. Geneva: Robert Estienne, 1559.

Heinrich Bullinger

- *In priorem D. Pauli ad Corinthios epistolam*. Zurich: Froschauer, 1534.
- *In D. Apostoli Pauli ad Galatas, Ephesios, Phillipen. et Colossenses epistolas*. Zurich: Froschauer, 1535.
- *In sacrosanctum Iesu Christi domini nostri Evangelium secundum Matthaeum commentariorum libri XII*. Zurich: Froschauer, 1542.

Philip Melancthon

- *Brevis et utilis commentarius in priorem epistolam Pauli ad Corinthios*. Wittenberg: Johannes Crato, 1561.

Konrad Pellikan

- *In omnes apostolicas epistolas, Pauli, Petri, Iacobi, Ioannis, et Iudae*. Zurich: Froschauer, 1539.

Huldrych Zwingli/Leo Jud

- *Annotatiunculæ per Leonem Iudæ, ex ore Zvinglij in utranq; Pauli ad Corinthios Epistolam publice exponentis conceptæ*. Zurich: Froschauer, 1528.

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Preface

The poet only asks to get his head into the heavens. It is the logician who seeks to get the heavens into his head. And it is his head that splits.

– G.K. Chesterton

Nonne infatuavit deus sapientiam mundi huius? Thus Erasmus, and Calvin after him, render Paul's Greek at 1 Corinthians 1:20. "Has God not made foolish the wisdom of this world?" It is a rhetorical question: according to Paul, God had indeed. And alongside his denunciations of human wisdom in his first letter to the Corinthian churches, Paul further writes that he had refrained from using human forms of eloquence in his preaching to the new Christians at Corinth. Though he knew that they had desired solid food, Paul, realizing their shortcomings, fed them only milk. Paul's insistence that the cross of Christ is an offence and stumbling block to those who try to comprehend it through human reason and the mundane philosophies which attend it, or who try to express it with the eloquence of the Greek and Roman orators, led prominent sixteenth-century interpreters to suggest that an alternative religious epistemology, as well as a new method of teaching, is necessary for Christian wisdom to be fully realized. In the dedicatory epistle to Erard de la Marck, Bishop of Liège, appended to the 1519 edition of his *Paraphrase* on 1 and 2 Corinthians, Erasmus describes the situation in first-century Corinth (and, it might be pointed out, in sixteenth-century Europe as well):

Such a mass of weeds sprang up, which almost overwhelmed Christ's sowing while it was still young and still in the blade; nor was it long before

worldly philosophy and Jewish superstition, as though they had deliberately joined forces, were conspiring against Christ. Philosophy threw doubt on the resurrection and began to some extent to spoil the simplicity of the gospel with quibbles of men's making ... Philosophy at that time, led by sage fools (*morosophos*) with tongue and pen and even by tyrants with the sword, was advancing against Christ's small and innocent flock and has left traces which remain to this day.¹

A student of Erasmus immediately recognizes here the language of the *philosophia Christi* or, perhaps more accurately, the *philosophia Christiana* (a designation he uses vastly more often), which encourages simplicity in teaching and concord in the Church. Not very subtle either is a reference to the contemporary situation, and more specifically to Erasmus' and other biblical humanists' contentions against a form of university theology which they thought brought unnecessary complications (*humanis argutiis*) to what was supposed to have been a simple gospel.

Erasmus had already gestured towards the importance of Pauline folly and its attendant methodology for his conception of the Christian philosophy in the preface to his revolutionary *Novum Instrumentum* – the first-ever published Greek edition of the New Testament accompanied by a fresh Latin translation in parallel columns – a work that would shake the foundations of sixteenth-century biblical studies and theology. One of several prefatory works to Erasmus' new New Testament was, in a later edition, subtitled "an exhortation to the study of the Christian philosophy" (full title: *Paraclesis, id est, adhortatio ad christiane philosophiae studium*). The *Paraclesis* begins with a contrast between Christian and Ciceronian eloquence, and an elaboration on the title: "so long as I exhort all men to the most holy and wholesome study of Christian philosophy and summon them as if with the blast of a trumpet, that an eloquence far different from Cicero's be given me: an eloquence certainly much more efficacious, if less ornate, than his."² Wishing that "if Peitho moves any heart" his own exhortation too would persuade all of the wholesome truth, Erasmus then acknowledges that Christ, rather, would "deeply affect and move the minds of all," without need of the proclamations and exclamations of the orators.³ Several comparisons of Christ with ancient philosophers as well as Christianity with pagan philosophies follow, the purpose being to encourage his readers to study the *Christian* philosophy above all others, and to do so with pious rather than profane curiosity.⁴

"This kind of wisdom," Erasmus continues, "so extraordinary that once for all it renders foolish the entire wisdom of this world, may be drawn from its few books as from the most limpid springs with far less labor than Aristotle's doctrine is extracted from so many obscure volumes."⁵ Unlike the unnecessarily obscure nature of other philosophies, "this one accommodates itself equally to all, lowers itself to the little ones, adjusts itself to their measure, nourishing them with milk."⁶ Thus, in Erasmus' preface to the New Testament we find outlined his Pauline doctrine of accommodation, infused with themes from 1 Corinthians, together constituting an outline of his attempts to articulate a renewed approach to theological study and discourse. Repeated appeals to the simplicity of the gospel, and arguments for democratic access to it in the form of vernacular versions, run through the economical exhortation. Not just "little women," but Scots and Turks should have access to the biblical text, and a farmer should sing its verses at the plow, all thus becoming the true theologians. "This kind of philosophy," Erasmus writes, "is seated in emotions rather than in syllogisms, is a life rather than a disputation, inspiration rather than erudition, transformation rather than reason."⁷ The Christian philosophy is an affective rather than purely intellectual endeavour.

John Calvin, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, first published in Strasbourg in 1546, writes that the "foolishness of preaching" described by Paul at 1 Cor. 1:21 is not truly foolish, but is only regarded as such "by those sage fools (*morosophoi*), who, drunk on false confidence, hold nothing sacred when it comes to subjecting the inviolable truth of God to their own tasteless censorship."⁸ The Greek term *morosophos* used here first appears in Lucian, but Calvin almost certainly borrowed it from Erasmus, who, apart from the instance cited above, uses it multiple times throughout his vast oeuvre.⁹ It would be only one of many examples of the positive reception of Erasmus' exegesis to be found in Calvin's commentaries, and the primary purpose of this book is to examine the relationship between these two exegetes from the perspective of their reception of Pauline folly and their conceptions of what they both called a *philosophia Christiana*. Interpretations of Paul's discourse on worldly wisdom and divine folly bore implications not only for abstruse debates among intellectuals over propriety in sixteenth-century academic theology, but also for approaches to Christian preaching, and for conceptions of religious knowing and feeling in the Christian tradition.

The reception of Paul's discourse on the foolishness and wisdom of God is itself a fascinating and seriously neglected topic in the history of

biblical interpretation. In the words of L.L. Welborn, from his study on the Greco-Roman context of 1 Corinthians 1–4, “the assumption of self-evidence and the familiarity of the theme have erected an invisible barrier to exploration of one of Paul’s most astonishing formulations. Until such an investigation is undertaken, a chapter in the history of Christian theology remains unread, and it is one of the most interesting.”¹⁰ What’s at stake in taking Paul’s condemnations of worldly wisdom seriously is the extent to which the human disciplines of philosophy and rhetoric ought to be explicitly permitted to undergird theological discourse – an issue of perennial import, whether explicit or implicit, in the history of Christian thought. The tension involved in negotiating the contours of Paul’s “astonishing formulations” in the intellectual context of sixteenth-century biblical humanism are illustrated in Calvin’s comments on 1 Cor. 3:19 (“For the wisdom of the world is folly in the eyes of God”):

This is an argument from the contrary. The confirmation of the one means the destruction of the other. Therefore since the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God, it follows that the only way we can be wise in God’s sight is to be foolish in the world’s ... for natural insight is a gift of God. The arts men naturally pursue, and all the disciplines by which wisdom is acquired are also gifts of God. But they have their definite limits, for they do not penetrate into the heavenly Kingdom of God. Accordingly, they ought to be maid-servants, not mistresses. Besides that, they must be looked upon as useless and worthless until they are subordinated completely to the Word and Spirit of God. But if they set themselves up against Christ they must be considered injurious pests. If they maintain that they are capable of anything by themselves, they must be regarded as the worst of hindrances.¹¹

Calvin is clear that worldly wisdom is insufficient for understanding the mysteries of God, but he is always careful to avoid an apparent lapse into philistinism. The early chapters of 1 Corinthians serve as a substantial foundational text for the articulation of the methodological underpinnings of a “Christian philosophy” for Erasmus and for Calvin. Exegesis of these chapters lies at the very heart of their approaches to theology at a time when questions about the nature of theology and how it ought to be carried out took on great significance for a quite prominent group of European intellectuals. In the exegetical writings of Erasmus and Calvin on Pauline folly one finds excurses on epistemology, anthropology, Christology, and the

role of rhetoric in theological discourse, not to mention exhortations to humility, utility, and efficacy in developing a Pauline approach to Christian learned piety. Moreover, the language of a theology of foolishness makes its way into a number of other works by Erasmus and Calvin, both exegetical and not. This is not surprising, of course, given the importance of Paul and Paulinism in sixteenth-century Christianity. But “Paulinism” is a rather malleable category, as Paul himself was, in the words of Erasmus, a chameleon.¹² While Richard Muller can refer to the “Pauline center of biblical interpretation” in describing Calvin’s *Melanchthonian* approach to method, the law/gospel dichotomy that pervades Melanchthon’s exegesis is only one aspect of his Paulinism, and Melanchthon is not always the most fitting forerunner for understanding Calvin’s reception of Paul. As Bruce Gordon has noted, Calvin’s Paul, like Erasmus’, is multidimensional: “the educated Jew well versed in the Law; the rhetorician addressing the Greeks and Romans in classical terms; the towering figure of authority; the patient pastor, full of love and humility.”¹³

Lutherans did not monopolize Paul in the early sixteenth century, however hard they tried. Erasmus published his *Paraphrase on Romans* in November 1517, just as Wittenberg was first becoming acquainted with Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses*, which he had sent to Albert of Brandenburg, Archbishop of Mainz, on 31 October (a moment whose quincentennial commemoration is already beginning to overshadow celebrations of Erasmus’ 1516 *Novum Instrumentum* as this book goes to press at the end of 2016). Erasmus, too, thought of Paul as the “foremost interpreter of our religion,” as he puts it in his dedicatory epistle to the *Paraphrases* on 1 and 2 Corinthians. And as Gordon points out further, Calvin’s multifaceted reception of, and attempt to emulate, Paul “derived from his reading of Erasmus.”¹⁴ The rich content of the unit comprising 1 Corinthians 1–4 provides us with an opportunity to examine some of the ways in which Erasmus’ Paul was taken up and modified by the next generation’s foremost interpreter. A comparison of their interpretations and use of Pauline folly will provide not only a portrait of the significance of a comparatively neglected Pauline text in the history of interpretation for the broader history of ideas in early modern Christian thought, but also a fertile context for studying the relationship between Erasmus and Calvin, two of the most influential readers of the Bible in the history of Christianity.

Sustained analysis of Erasmus’ influence on one subsequent thread of the Protestant biblical-humanist exegetical tradition has several

distinct advantages. First of all, the reception of a multivalent Pauline text has implications in a number of diverse areas of theology from a cross-confessional perspective. More broadly, it opens up the possibility for illuminating further the complexities involved in the relationship between the “Renaissance” and “Reformation” or “humanist” and “reformer” from an exegetical perspective – and it further exposes the problematic nature of using these terms and others related to them as exclusive categories. Finally, it allows us to take advantage of the relatively recent scholarly appreciation of Erasmus the theologian from the perspective of his reception in Calvin’s thought, as well as his influence on other sixteenth-century thinkers. Such a study might take various forms, and a comparative analysis of the reception of Pauline folly and related texts is necessarily limited to certain themes and sixteenth-century works. This book is not meant to serve as a comprehensive study of Calvin’s Erasmianism, nor as a comprehensive account of the exegetical influences on Calvin’s reception of Pauline folly. Rather, it represents an attempt to demonstrate that Erasmus and Calvin were operating in a common interpretive and theological milieu in virtue of their understanding and use of certain New Testament texts, including 1 Corinthians 1–4, Colossians 2, and the Gethsemane scene in the synoptic gospels. This book, finally, is not only about reception history, but it takes biblical interpretation as a starting point from which to examine assumptions about the nature of theology in the sixteenth century, how it was understood by leading humanist reformers, and how ideas about philosophy and rhetoric were received, appropriated, and shared in a complex intellectual and religious context.

[Chapter 1](#) introduces the historiographical and methodological questions of the book, and then considers Erasmus’ and Calvin’s dedicatory letters for their exegetical works on 1 Corinthians. [Chapters 2, 3, and 4](#) consist of an analysis of the exegesis of Paul’s discourse on folly in the first half of the sixteenth century. These chapters offer a close comparison of the translations and interpretations of Paul’s letter by Erasmus and Calvin, but they also refer to other interpretations and sixteenth-century readings (primarily those of Heinrich Bullinger and Konrad Pellikan, who are clearly indebted to Erasmus’ exegetical works, and whose works Calvin also would have read). [Chapters 2 and 3](#) focus primarily on the question of the role of Pauline folly in the religious epistemologies of Erasmus and Calvin. The analysis follows the order and main themes of the first two chapters of 1 Corinthians in order to

give readers an idea of the similarities and differences of the sixteenth-century reception of Paul in this respect.

Chapter 4 considers the implications of Paul's claims to ineloquence in Erasmus' and Calvin's reception of 1 Corinthians, and the importance of a shared conception of rhetorical and theological accommodation in their thought. The role of rhetoric in theological discourse and in Christian teaching and preaching comes to the fore here. I argue that Erasmus and Calvin advocated for a similar *theologia rhetorica* based on Paul's reformulations of eloquence rooted in his writing about the folly of the cross, which was to employ simple and unadulterated discourse that is, at least theoretically, altogether different from both philosophical dialectic (which, in the eyes of Erasmus and Calvin is often abstruse and superfluous) and classical rhetorical eloquence (which, to them, is overly ornate and distracting). In Calvin's commentary in particular it becomes clear that this issue needs to be handled with kid gloves, given, on the one hand, his biblical-humanist interest in learned piety (itself an Erasmian impetus, taken up by Melanchthon and a number of other sixteenth-century Protestants) and, on the other, Paul's explicitly stated rejection of classical eloquence. The significance of Pauline accommodation, an important aspect of these exegetes' reception of this text, is shown here to be a meaningful common factor in Erasmus' and Calvin's attempts to defend, and elevate as a model, Paul as the Christian pedagogue par excellence.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine the significance of a conception of the Christian philosophy from the perspective of works outside the commentaries on 1 Corinthians in the sixteenth century. They show how far-reaching the implications of taking Paul's discourse on folly seriously can be in the construction of Christian philosophies by the biblical humanists. Chapter 5 analyses the reception of Paul's use of the word *philosophia* in Colossians 2:8 by Erasmus, Melanchthon, Bullinger, Pelikan, and Calvin. It compares the translations and interpretations of key concepts from Colossians 2 in these authors' commentaries in order to provide a broader view of how Paul's ideas were understood in a wider Christian-humanist context, and also to connect the Pauline criticism of *philosophia* to the discourse on foolishness, which connection is explicit in the exegetical works themselves. It then turns to the definitions of the *philosophia Christiana* in Erasmus and Calvin in comparison with treatments of the concept in the twentieth century, and shows how the "Christian philosophy" was grounded in the Pauline texts under consideration in previous chapters.

Chapter 6 maps the connections between the reception of Pauline folly and the importance of affectivity in the exegetical theologies of Erasmus and Calvin. Affectivity plays a fundamental role in sixteenth-century religious thought, something increasingly appreciated by historians of the period, and thus I will consider its significance in the context of the Christian philosophy by examining the interpretation of Christ's emotions in the Gospels, in theological and exegetical works, and in a sermon. The diminution of reason as unequivocal hegemon in biblical-humanist anthropology and epistemology makes room for a fuller appreciation of the role of the emotions in piety and in theological discourse in their works. This becomes clear not only in Erasmus' and Calvin's criticisms of the "frigid" philosophizing of university theologians, but also in their understanding of certain New Testament scenes; for example, Christ's fear and sorrow in the Garden of Gethsemane.

An exhaustive reception history would consider not only the direct exegetical material on a passage, or textual unit, but its appearance (explicit or only through reverberation) in other contexts, whether theological, literary, or otherwise. However, the sheer volume of works produced by Erasmus and Calvin, and their persistent interest in issues relevant to their reception of Pauline folly, make a complete inventory of such references impracticable, much less a consideration of their unique contexts. That said, while the relevance of foolish wisdom in other exegetical settings will become apparent from our studies in chapters 5 and 6, there are notable texts in Erasmus' and Calvin's corpora where foolishness features heavily as an important rhetorical-theological device. Thus, at the end of chapters 2, 3, and 4, respectively, the reader will find brief excursions on the role of Pauline folly in Erasmus' immensely popular satire *The Praise of Folly*, in Calvin's theological masterwork *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and on its connection to Christ's kenosis (from Philippians 2). This will allow readers to see, if in a limited way, how ideas laid out in an exegetical context are carried over into broader literary and theological works (or vice versa), which further demonstrates their fundamental role in Erasmus' and Calvin's theologies in general, connects them to other areas of their thought, and situates them in the broader intellectual and religious context of sixteenth-century biblical humanism.

ERASMUS AND CALVIN ON THE FOOLISHNESS OF GOD

Reason and Emotion in the Christian Philosophy

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Chapter One

Calvin's Erasmus, *Theologia Rhetorica*, and Pauline Folly

Thus is apparent the barbarous tyranny with which the *theologastri* violently castigated Erasmus for changing one word for the better.

– Calvin, *Commentary on John* 1:1

Calvin's Erasmus

Erasmus' New Testament scholarship was extraordinarily influential across Europe throughout the sixteenth century. In 1516 he provided the (highly) educated public with the first opportunity to consult the Greek original in printed form, complete with a controversial alternative Latin translation to the Vulgate, which latter had been the predominant version in the West since the early Middle Ages. From the first edition, he appended *annotationes* to the text, which consisted early on primarily of philological notes and justifications for his alternative translation, but through successive editions came to contain more and more theological and historical commentary.¹ These versions, with the notes, would become standard editions for Protestant exegetes as well as editors and translators of new Latin and/or vernacular editions. But also, beginning in 1517, with Paul's letter to the Romans, Erasmus began publishing *Paraphrases* of the books of the New Testament in Latin, all of which (excluding Revelation, which he never paraphrased) were in print by 1524, and they were followed closely by translations into vernacular languages.² The *Paraphrases* offer readers (ostensibly, at any rate) a more accessible version of the text – a 1522 Froben edition of paraphrases of all the NT epistles describes them on the title page as a *liberior ac dilucidior interpretatio* (a more free and clearer version) – but they also contain clear instances

of Erasmus' own theological disposition through the translations themselves, in amplifications of the text, and in decidedly sixteenth-century theological determinations.³ That they constitute a kind of commentary is not only confirmed by a number of recent scholarly studies,⁴ but also in the fact that early modern readers recognized them as more than literal paraphrases. This is true not only of Erasmus' allies (in Konrad Pellikan's ample borrowings for his own commentaries, for example), but also of his enemies (Noel Beda, in the words of Erika Rummel, "found what he considered to be significant theological errors in the *Paraphrases*" and published a critical review of them at the behest of the faculty of theology at Paris in 1526).⁵ Taking the vast influence of his New Testament works into account, and including his literary and polemical works as well as the substantial number of editions of classical and patristic authors he edited and published (to say nothing of widely published popular works like the *Adagia* and the *Moria*), all of which were ubiquitous in Northern Europe from the fifteen-teens onwards, it becomes clear that the towering figure of Erasmus would have been unavoidable.⁶

This is confirmed in the case of John Calvin, as Erasmus' name appears more frequently than that of any other exegete in his New Testament commentaries.⁷ An accounting of all the instances where Calvin uses the texts of Erasmus, whether the Greek or Latin versions of his *Novum Testamentum* or the *Annotations* and *Paraphrases* Erasmus composed in order to aid readers of the sacred text, would be enormous (and perhaps not very interesting to read).⁸ T.H.L. Parker has alerted us already to Calvin's continued use of Erasmus in his New Testament commentaries, with special attention to the explicit disagreements, and Anthony Lane has demonstrated how Calvin's use of the sources he often criticizes can be a sign of subtle appreciation.⁹ Parker has provided many examples (and compiled statistics) of Calvin's use of Erasmus' New Testament Latin translation, although the fact that he focuses on the explicit cases where Calvin disagrees with Erasmus is somewhat misleading: after all, Calvin adopts Erasmus' translation vastly more often than he rejects it, but we would not expect him to point out each case.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Parker documents twenty-two new citations of Erasmus in the 1556 revised edition of the Romans commentary alone, demonstrating that Calvin never abandoned the works of Erasmus as a valuable source for biblical studies. A quick glance at the footnotes of Helmut Feld's critical editions of Calvin's commentaries on some of Paul's letters gives the reader an idea of how much Erasmus figured into the Reformer's New Testament studies, especially in his attempts

to offer his own translation. In his introduction to the critical edition of Calvin's commentaries on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, Feld suggests that, in terms of sources he's wrestling with, Erasmus' *Annotations* have the most import for Calvin's commentary.¹¹

In terms of judgment, Calvin's use of Erasmus, in conformity with his use of extrabiblical sources in general, is varied: he will happily criticize him and borrow from him in the same breath. He dismisses the Dutchman's "cavils" regarding his refusal to use Philippians 2:6 against the Arians, but defends his translation of *Logos* as *Sermo* in the Johannine prologue against Erasmus' scholastic critics. He uses him most when composing his own translations of New Testament works, which are embedded in his running commentaries. Unlike with Beza, however, who voiced his opinion about Erasmus in print, we are unable to construct anything like a "portrait" of Erasmus from the mind of Calvin, which, in the case of analysing his debts to him, is probably in fact a benefit.¹² We are left, rather, with the assessment of Erasmus' work as a philologist and exegetical theologian as it might be discerned in Calvin's commentaries on the New Testament. The fact that Calvin read his works closely and continued reading them throughout his life itself warrants closer scholarly attention to the ways in which he might have been indebted to the great Dutch humanist.

While Erasmus' influence on Calvin has not gone unacknowledged, given the stature of the two figures in their own time as well as their importance for posterity, the relative paucity of direct studies of their relationship is surprising. Studies of Calvin's humanism have long recognized that any humanistic study in the first half of the sixteenth century would have meant a substantial acquaintance with Erasmus' works.¹³ William Bouwsma has put forth the strongest case for Calvin's Erasmianism in terms of a shared *theologia rhetorica*, and his work is directly relevant to our study.¹⁴ In an early study, Francois Wendel suggests a broad influence of Erasmus on Calvin, discernible from his Seneca commentary throughout his career.¹⁵ Almost any study of Calvin's hermeneutics must reckon with the prospects of Erasmus' influence, at least in passing.¹⁶ Olivier Millet's massive and thorough work is especially important in situating Calvin's understanding of Christian rhetoric in its humanist context; and Erasmus' works, according to Millet, would be put to use by Calvin throughout his career, even if they served the function more of "classical texts in a student's hand than a strong personal influence," and even if he opposed certain of Erasmus' ideas.¹⁷ Debora Kuller Shuger has shown, among other things, how much there

is to be learned from a comparison of Erasmian and Calvinist readings of the suffering of Christ.¹⁸

In one of the few direct case studies of the influence of Erasmus' exegesis on Calvin's on any biblical text (in this case Galatians), Riemer Faber suggests in his conclusion that the *nachleben* of Erasmus on the Reformation has been underappreciated, something suggested also by studies of Erasmus' influence on other Protestant thinkers.¹⁹ Christine Christ-von Wedel, for example, has analysed the reception of Erasmus among Zurich Reformers.²⁰ Aside from his direct reading of Erasmus, Calvin was very much a part of a network of theologians who owed a great deal to Erasmus for their approach to theology and exegesis. Of course each of these exegetes also went their own way, and none was a slavish devotee: the "ambivalent" reception of Erasmus, as Hilmar Pabel refers to it, was a common phenomenon especially among sixteenth-century Protestants.²¹ Nevertheless, as N. Scott Amos puts it, Erasmus "exercised an enormous influence in his time, and in particular upon many of the first generation of Reformers – not only in their exegetical practice (a commonly accepted point), but also in their assumptions as to what constituted the task and purpose of theology."²² Both of these aspects of the reception of Erasmus will be under consideration in what follows.

Clarifying the relationship between Erasmus and Calvin, which is at many points positive, is also important for reasons extending beyond the continent. Gregory Dodds' book, *Exploiting Erasmus*, analyses the significance of the reception of the *Paraphrases* in England, where, in 1547 by order of Edward VI – and at the behest of Cranmer and Nicholas Udall, both Protestants – they were to be placed in churches throughout the kingdom. Alongside Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* and Calvin's *Institutes* lay Erasmus' *Paraphrases* as one of the most significant theological works accessible to the layman during the English Reformation.²³ Of course, the irony was not lost on the Protestant translators of Erasmus' works, as Dodds points out: Miles Coverdale, translator of the Romans paraphrase, included William Tyndale's overtly Lutheran prologue to Romans by way of introduction to Erasmus' rendering. In any case, and without delving into the labyrinth of "Calvin vs. Calvinism" scholarship,²⁴ what's important for our purposes is that Dodds' description of Erasmus' paraphrases as "non-Calvinist," or as put to use by anti-Calvinists, while no doubt meaningful in the context of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century religious debates in England, might not apply to John Calvin's own reception of Erasmus' theology as it appears in his

New Testament works.²⁵ In other words, a further contribution of our study lies in pointing out that the later judgment of Erasmus by Calvinists, prevalent and vocal as it may have been, cannot be confused with the reception of Erasmus by Calvin himself.

There is a methodological problem looming. Analyses of "Erasmianism" have a long history in scholarship on the early modern period, and the subfield has undergone some important methodological changes in recent years.²⁶ The term "Erasmianism" itself has fallen into disfavour for its nebulosity, and there has been encouragement to focus on the reception of Erasmus by subsequent thinkers in order to determine how his ideas are moulded and shaped in the varied contexts of later traditions.²⁷ Like many scholarly constructs, "Erasmianism" has become problematic when employed to pick out an essential cluster of characteristics embodied, ostensibly, in the historical person of Erasmus, which characteristics (perhaps not all of them) are then identified in later thinkers or even entire intellectual or political movements that themselves thus obtain the same label. The problem is clear for any student reared in a contemporary historicist intellectual milieu: a monolithic Erasmus, even if such a person could be circumscribed, certainly doesn't survive intact in the manifold ways and contexts in which his works and ideas are received. As Enenkel puts it, "numerous, totally different intellectuals with extremely different opinions and convictions may be labeled 'Erasmians,'" and thus the term is judged useless.²⁸ The language of "reception" thereby becomes more appropriate, along with a focus on the recipients of Erasmus' ideas, for these ideas invariably take on different shades of significance when employed by another thinker in a wholly other context, whether political, religious, or literary.

This is a useful approach when considering Calvin, whose large and complex theology differs in many crucial ways from Erasmus'. Furthermore, while we will argue for Erasmus' influence, based on much exegetical and theological common ground related to the reception of Pauline folly, we will also point to areas of divergence in Calvin's thoughts on the matter. Moreover, reception history, it should be pointed out, is not a science – we are almost never dealing with straightforward instances of Calvin's copying sections of text from Erasmus' works (as we find in Pellikan's approach, for example). And because Calvin was not only reading Erasmus, but in addition reading other exegetes who were also demonstrably reading Erasmus very closely, in cases where specific linguistic evidence cannot be adduced but where the force of

an idea appears to be the same, it often becomes more accurate to speak of a common intellectual, exegetical, or interpretative milieu, which is nonetheless “Erasmian.” Indeed, the fact that Calvin himself lists three Protestants – Melancthon, Bullinger, Bucer – as his exegetical forebears in an oft-cited passage from the dedicatory epistle that prefaces his Romans commentary of 1539 might suggest that Erasmus’ influence could easily be overstated.

In the first place, however, Calvin is expressly speaking of exegetes alive in his day (*hodie vivunt*), while Erasmus had died three years earlier. Furthermore, as Bruce Gordon points out in his biography of Calvin, his dedicatory letter in this way was more a deft rhetorical and political move, tying Calvin and Geneva to the other major centres of reform, than a comprehensive genealogy of the origins of his exegesis.²⁹ This is further confirmed by Joel Kok’s work, which argues, first with respect to Bucer and then Bullinger, that Calvin seems to have been less indebted in his exegesis of Romans to those mentioned in the letter to Grynaeus than he had insinuated.³⁰ While Calvin no doubt read and used the works of these exegetes, explicit references to Erasmus dwarf all three combined. It is only through close-reading and comparison of exegetical works that the true nature of these relationships can be established. As for examining 1 Corinthians 1–4, some further potential methodological confusion in this regard will be alleviated by the fact that some of the usual suspects for sixteenth-century influence on Calvin didn’t compose commentaries on the text: Neither Bucer nor Luther, for example, composed one, and Melancthon’s *Annotationes* of 1522 are – aside from being published without his permission by Luther, and having been written in his very early days at Wittenberg – brief in the extreme (although we will have occasion to refer to them).³¹

The necessity and heuristic usefulness of using the language of an exegetical or interpretative milieu can be illustrated with a brief example: Erasmus, Heinrich Bullinger, and Calvin all repeatedly denounce the use of *adminiculis* and *praesidia humana* (i.e., human “aids” or “props”) for the purpose of grounding theological truth, and they use this language in similar contexts to similar ends in their commentaries on 1 Corinthians (and elsewhere). We know that Calvin read Erasmus closely, and Calvin himself says that he used Bullinger’s commentaries on some level for his own exegesis. It is also demonstrably true that Bullinger followed Erasmus’ NT translation along with his *Annotations* and *Paraphrases* closely when writing his own commentaries – he reproduces Erasmus’ Latin New Testament verbatim (at least for the passages we examined) for the

text he comments upon, and cites whole swaths of text from Erasmus' exegetical works in the commentary itself. This can be said with even more emphasis of Konrad Pellikan, whose edition of commentaries on all of Paul's letters was published in Zurich in 1539, and who reproduces entire paragraphs of Erasmus' *Paraphrase* on 1 Corinthians in his commentary without notice.³² While there might be certain specific cases where we can determine which exegete Calvin had most closely at hand when writing, it isn't possible to know definitively one way or another, and there are decent reasons for assuming either one: Calvin *says* he's reading Bullinger, after all, so perhaps we take him at his word. On the other hand, he almost never cites Bullinger in his commentaries, and he repeatedly cites Erasmus, in which case Ockham's Razor would seem to stipulate that we settle on Erasmus as the primary source in such cases. Ultimately, this is likely a false dichotomy, and the reality was no doubt more complicated – Calvin could have had multiple texts at hand or could have been relying on memory in a particular case – which further makes the language of a common interpretative milieu often more appropriate. Thus, in considering the commentaries of Bullinger and Pellikan, in addition to Calvin, we are able to show just how influential Erasmus was, not only in establishing philological and exegetical methods that were taken up by Protestant commentators – something long recognized – but in articulating a Pauline position on the nature of theology in relation to philosophy and rhetoric.

Erasmus Theologus

We must take seriously the idea of "Erasmus the theologian" in the context of reception history of his New Testament works and not only look to his influence in areas of philology and text-criticism. Work on Erasmus' theology, which came on in full force in the 1970s, especially in North America, has clarified the nature of Erasmus' thought by making available and analysing theological works (and, especially, exegetical works) that had been theretofore comparatively neglected.³³ In the work of Manfred Hoffmann, to take one prominent example, we find an Erasmus whose interest in faith and piety is not an afterthought, but a central and determining feature of all his intellectual endeavours.³⁴ More generally, work on Renaissance philosophy and theology has revealed that humanist theologians were not mere grammarians and metaphysical relativists, even if they did believe that the schools' *quaestiones* and *disputationes* were often deleterious to a theology of moral substance.

At the heart of the matter is the role of rhetoric in theological discourse in Renaissance thought, and this relationship has been clarified in a variety of ways in the scholarly literature. Susan Schreiner, in her excellent work on certainty in the early modern period, has taken cues from Ernesto Grassi in pointing out that even the most ostensibly “rhetorical” of early modern thinkers bore substantial philosophical predispositions.³⁵ As Schreiner puts it, the dispute over rhetoric and philosophy in the early modern period was really a dispute over “where truth lay,” and not an argument over whether it was accessible.³⁶

One particular obstacle that it is necessary to move past for our study is the tendency, once quite common among historians of the period, to understand Renaissance thinkers as subscribing to a form of rhetorical theology which eschews a commitment to dogmatic truth in favour of a kind of scepticism, and which is interested in *mere* persuasion rather than Truth (a theology which *moves* but does not necessarily *convince*). This issue has direct bearing on the reception of Paul’s teachings on wisdom and folly, given the significance 1 Corinthians 1–4 has for questions surrounding religious epistemology. Erasmus in particular has long been misunderstood for his ostensible penchant for scepticism, and it would seem that his debate with Luther over the freedom of the will, where he obliquely voiced (with some irony) his own sceptical tendencies, has done much in the way of preventing his influence on Protestants in other areas of thought and method from being fully appreciated. It is no longer tenable, however, to understand thinkers along the humanist theological trajectory from Petrarch to Erasmus as hard sceptics interested in *mere* persuasion.³⁷

The past few decades have seen scholarship on Renaissance philosophy in general and on Erasmus’ theology in particular that has complicated such generalizing accounts. Even if we adhere to Erasmus’ debate with Luther, where Erasmus himself claimed to side with the sceptics on certain questions (especially what he deemed *adiaphora*), we find recent revisions in the scholarship.³⁸ Irena Backus has argued convincingly that, though Erasmus purported that he would rather side with the sceptics than *assert*, the entirety of the rest of the treatise is good evidence that Erasmus isn’t a sceptic about free will, and that Erasmus’ tendency to use phrases like “I do not wish to debate,” e.g., are rhetorical ploys to gain favour with his audience and not abstentions from truth-seeking.³⁹ Earlier, Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle had clarified Erasmus’ relationship to different types of scepticism in antiquity, arguing that Erasmus’ particular Ciceronian brand of scepticism did not entail