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CRITICAL COMMENTARY

WITH

A NEW TRANSLATION

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Desiderius Erasmus  
THE PRAISE OF FOLLY  
AND OTHER WRITINGS

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A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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of the Christian religion, what I want most is an eloquence very different from Cicero's, less ornate than his, perhaps, but more effective. Indeed, if this is possible, I would like powers such as the ancient poets properly attribute to Mercury, who with magic wand and holy lyre sends sleep and dispels it as he chooses, leading souls down to hell and bringing them out again; or such powers as they ascribe to Amphion and Orpheus, one of whom moved heavy stones and the other oaks and ash-trees by the power of their song. Or else I'd like the power that the Gauls attributed to their Ogrnius,<sup>2</sup> who is said to have led all mortals around by little chains reaching from his tongue to their ears—or perhaps the powers that ancient fabulators attributed to Marsyas—or else (not to linger too long among the fables) such a power as Alcibiades attributed to Socrates and the Old Comedy to Pericles<sup>3</sup>—a power which not only tickled the ears with momentary pleasure, but which fixed a stinging dart deep in the mind of the hearer, pulling him out of himself, transforming him utterly, and sending him away a very different person than he came. The great musician Timotheus, by playing Dorian melodies on the lyre, is said to have been able to rouse Alexander to martial fury.<sup>4</sup> Antiquity knew others who considered the incantations they called *epodes* just as efficacious. If there were any such magic formula, any power of harmony that could produce true *enthusiasm*, if Pytho has any power to stir the soul,<sup>5</sup> such power I would implore to persuade all men of the most wholesome truth there is. Although it would be even better if Christ himself, whose case is being pleaded, would so temper the chords of my lyre that this song might affect the minds and stir the souls of all—to effect which there really is no need of rhetorical argumentation and verbal agglomerations. For what I seek to declare is nothing but the truth itself, the simplest expression of which is always the most forceful.

And in the first place, it's not pleasant to raise the complaint, not altogether new but all too just and never more timely than in these days when men are applying themselves singlemindedly each to his own studies, that the philosophy of Christ is singled out for derision even by some Christians—is ignored by most and cultivated (coldly at that—I won't say insincerely) by only a few. In all other disciplines where human energy is invested, there's nothing so obscure and elusive that lawless curiosity has not explored it. Yet how does it happen that even those of us who lay claim to the Christian name fail to embrace this philosophy in full sincerity, as we should? Platonists, Pythagoreans, Academics, Stoics, Cynics, Peripatetics, and Epicureans<sup>6</sup> all know the doctrines of their

2. It is not known where Erasmus found the story of Ogrnius.

3. Plato, *Symposium*; Aristophanes, *Acharnians* 530 ff.

4. The legend about Timotheus and Alexander is an old and probably inaccurate one; Dryden used it as the basis for his ode "Alexander's Feast."

5. *Enthusiasm* is given in the Greek, Pytho (from whom we get the name of the serpent genus *python*)

was a giant snake associated with worship of Apollo, also a secret genius or demon who entered men's minds and influenced their acts.

6. These are all names of ancient philosophical schools; Erasmus might have cited more modern instances, and doubtless wanted his readers to think of them, but he did not want to be responsible for naming them. This is sometimes called "Aesopian" language.

but he devoted much more time and thought to the various preparations, precautions, and self-purifications that must be undertaken before an untrained mind plunges into the Word of God. For nothing is easier and more tempting, in interpreting a complex text that can be read on several different levels (as history, as parables, as allegory, as divine revelation, literally and figuratively) than to make it endorse one's own private interests or prepossessions. Being able to shelter one's personal concerns under the infallible cloak of holy writ is a terrible temptation for headstrong men. Nobody could appreciate that better than Erasmus, who opened the gates of biblical interpretation just a bit, and saw the irresistible floodwaters of the Protestant reformation come pouring through them.

For time moved very fast in the second and third decades of the sixteenth century. Erasmus, seeking to reform the old Vulgate, produced his new Greek-Latin text in 1516; by 1522 Luther had already published his German translation of the New Testament, Jacques Lefèvre produced a French version in 1524, Tyndale his English version in 1525, and in 1526 a Swedish version was begun. These were all ingredients of a word-war that immediately—and against the wishes of almost all the parties to it—turned violent on a scale never conceived before. It is hard to name an exact point in time when the wars of religion began, but the German peasant wars of 1524–25 and the ghastly sack of Rome in 1527 certainly marked major stages in the massive, continent-wide orgy of bloodshed and sectarian persecution that would not end till—well, in some parts of the world it has not ended yet. Erasmus did not foresee the full extent of that centuries-long holocaust; but he was given pause by the very threat of it. He did not retreat from his stance of 1516, if anything he widened his attack; but he also added to his third edition of the New Testament (1522) words of caution and self-restraint that render his final position characteristically balanced. The Paraclesis did not disappear altogether, but it was no longer called such; key phrases and concepts are retained in the new introduction, but they become part of something larger, more careful, and, it may be thought, more wise. Both versions are given here; they will reward close comparison.

## Paraclesis: or, An Exhortation (1516)

### *Erasmus of Rotterdam to the Pious Reader*

The famous Lactantius Firmianus, oh best of readers, whose eloquence Jerome particularly admires,<sup>1</sup> when he undertook to defend the Christian religion against the pagans, begged for a gift of eloquence second only to that of Cicero—thinking, I suppose, that it would be impious to ask for equal gifts. For my own part, if prayer counts for anything in these matters, now that I am calling men—indeed, challenging them as with a trumpet's blast—to undertake the most sacred and salutary study

1. Lactantius, a native of North Africa, wrote the seven books of his *Divine Institutes* at the beginning of the fourth century; the passage in question is at the start of the third book. Saint Jerome expressed his admiration for Lactantius (popularly dubbed "The Christian Cicero") in a letter to Paulinus, *in.*, 58, par. 10.

particular sects, they learn them by heart, and fight fiercely for them, ready to die rather than abandon the cause of their particular patron. Why then don't we stand up even more spiritedly on behalf of our maker and our leader, Christ? Wouldn't anyone consider it shameful for a professed Aristotelian not to know the opinion of the master on the causes of lightning, the essence of matter, or infinity? These are matters that neither render us happy when we know them nor make us wretched when we don't. Yet we, brought to Christ through so many initiations, confirmed by so many sacraments, think it no shame or disgrace to be ignorant of his teachings which promise supreme happiness to all. But what is the point of drawing out this argument, since it's a kind of impious madness in the first place even to think of comparing Christ with Zeno or Aristotle, or to pose his teachings against the trivial precepts of mannikins—not to put the matter more strongly—like that? Let the philosophical partisans cling to the leaders of their sects as hard as they can, as much as they want. Beyond doubt, only Christ was a teacher descended from heaven, only he (who was eternal wisdom itself) could teach positive certainties, only he (the unique author of human salvation) could teach us saving doctrine, only he could exemplify what he taught and grant us whatever he promised. Something which is presented to us as coming from the Chaldeans or Egyptians we examine with eager curiosity as the product of a remote part of the world, and that very strangeness becomes part of its value. Then frequently we are carried away by the speculations of a petty pedant, not to say an impostor, who wastes our time to no good purpose—there is worse I could say, but this is bad enough. Yet how does it happen that the same sort of curiosity does not intrigue Christian minds, who are firmly persuaded—as in fact is true—that their doctrine derives not from Egypt or Syria, but from heaven itself? Why don't we all reflect: this must be a new and marvelous philosophy since, in order to reveal it to mortals, he who was god became man, he who was immortal became mortal, he who was in the Father's bosom descended to earth? It must be a mighty doctrine, and by no means trite whatever else it may be, which that marvelous author came to teach after so many schools of excellent philosophers, so many famous prophets. Why don't we explore its details with pious curiosity, particular concern, avid interest? Especially since this special mode of wisdom, so extraordinary that it renders foolish all the wisdom of the world,<sup>7</sup> can be drawn from these few books as from the purest fountains, with far less labor than the doctrine of Aristotle can be extracted from his many thorny volumes and their immense body of commentaries by quarrelsome interpreters—and, I may say, with far more profit. For here there's no need to fortify yourself with all those laborious disciplines. The path is direct and ready for anyone to take. Only bring a pious, alert mind and above all one imbued with a pure and simple faith. Simply make yourself teachable, and you have made long strides in this philosophy. It

7. I Corinthians 1:18 ff.

supplies, of its own, the teaching spirit which nowhere finds shelter more gladly than in simple souls. Other philosophies, apart from the fact that they promise a false felicity, discourage the minds of many students simply by the difficulty of their teachings. This one adjusts itself to the capacities of everyone alike, lowering itself to the little ones and accommodating itself to their abilities; it nourishes them with milk,<sup>8</sup> carries them about, fosters and supports them, doing everything for them until they grow up in Christ. Yet it is not so fitted to the lowest that it does not present marvels to the very highest. In fact, the further you progress in this wisdom, the more you set it apart from, and above, the highest reach of any other. For the little ones it is a trifle, for grownups it is more than the greatest matter in life. It bypasses no age, no sex, no condition of fortune or rank of society. The sun itself is not so open and exposed to every gaze as is the teaching of Christ. It conceals itself from no one, unless some person, suspicious of himself, chooses to keep away.

I absolutely dissent from those people who don't want the holy scriptures to be read in translation by the unlearned—as if, forsooth, Christ taught such complex doctrine that hardly anyone outside a handful of theologians could understand it, or as if the chief strength of the Christian religion lay in people's ignorance of it. Perhaps the state secrets of kings have to be concealed, but Christ wanted his mysteries to be disseminated as widely as possible. I should prefer that all women, even of the lowest rank,<sup>9</sup> should read the evangelists and the epistles of Paul, and I wish these writings were translated into all the languages of the human race, so that they could be read and studied, not just by the Irish and the Scots, but by the Turks as well, and the Saracens. The first step is simply to understand. Many will ridicule, no doubt, but some will be intrigued. As a result, I would hope that the farmer might chant a holy text at his plow, the spinner sing it as she sits at her wheel, the traveler ease the tedium of his journey with tales from the scripture. Let all conversation between Christians draw from this source, for almost all of us are as our daily conversation forms us. Let each individual grasp what he can, and give expression to what he feels. Let the slowest not envy the quickest, and let the leader encourage the follower, not despair of him. Why should we restrict the allegiance of all to just a few? It makes no sense when baptism (in which we all first profess the Christian religion) along with the sacraments and the final reward of immortality are open equally to all, that doctrine should be confined to just a handful. I mean those to whom common opinion nowadays assigns the names of theologians and monks; not only are they a tiny minority of the Christian populace, but I could wish they were more like what their names signify. For among the theologians I fear too many can be found who betray the

8. I Corinthians 3:1-2.

9. Women in the sixteenth century got very little education, and if they were of the lower classes, none at all; to read one of the gospels, they would have to do so in a vernacular translation. If Erasmus

did not translate into a contemporary vernacular, it was apparently because he did not know any one of them well enough to do it. His "native" tongue was Latin.

title they bear by dealing in earthly affairs, not divinity; and among the monks who profess the poverty of Christ and contempt for the world can be found something even worse than worldliness.

In my opinion he is truly a theologian who teaches, not by contorted syllogisms, but by his very demeanor and facial expression, by his eyes and the tenor of his whole life, that riches are to be despised, that the Christian should not rely on the protections of this world, but put his entire trust in heaven. He should not revenge injuries done him, should pray for those who wish him ill, should seek to do good to those who have done wrong, should choose as his special friends good men, wherever found, since they are all members of the same corporation, and should tolerate evildoers if he cannot correct them. He should believe that those who are stripped of their goods, spoiled of their belongings, and acquainted with grief are truly blessed, and not at all to be pitied; he should even think that death itself will be welcomed by the truly devout, since it is nothing but a passage to immortality. If anyone stirred by the spirit of Christ preaches doctrine of this sort and not only inculcates it but encourages, animates, and incites others to it, then indeed he is truly a theologian, whether he is a ditch-digger or a weaver. If anyone in his person and in his daily life exemplifies these doctrines, he is in truth a great doctor. Someone else, perhaps not even a Christian, may discourse more elegantly on the process by which the angels achieve understanding; but persuading us to live an angelic life, free from all slant, in the here and now—that in brief is the true task of a Christian theologian.

Someone may complain that these ideas are obvious and stupid; I can only answer that these obvious ideas are what Christ particularly taught, they are what the apostles repeat, these ideas (however stupid they may be) begot for us a multitude of true Christians and attracted a swarm of illustrious martyrs. This philosophy, unlearned as it appears to some, has brought under its sway the highest kings in the world, and nations and peoples without number—as neither mere force nor philosophical erudition could do. Certainly I don't object to that abstract philosophy being discussed by the learned, if they think it worth doing. But just as surely common Christian folk can content themselves with that general name, since the apostles and the church fathers, whether they understood these subtleties or not, certainly did not teach them. If princes put into daily practice these principles which I've described as plebeian, if preachers in their sermons set them forth, if schoolmasters would convey them to their pupils instead of that pompous erudition they derive from Averroes' and Aristotle—then Christendom might not be convulsed by these all-but-endless wars, people might not be racked by such an insane

1. Averroes was the twelfth-century Arabic (i.e., Muslim) philosopher through whose commentaries the works of Aristotle reached the west. Till the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Averroes was practically the only conduit of Aristotle's thought; he therefore had great, though often unavowed, influence on the scholastic philosophers.

fury to pile up riches any which way, sacred and profane business alike would not be torn up by such furious litigation, and finally we should not quarrel so much over mere manners and ceremonies with those who do not profess the philosophy of Christ.

The business of founding or advancing the Christian religion has been assigned to three classes of men in particular; to the princes and the magistrates who act in their behalf, to the bishops and their delegate priests, and to those teachers who inspire the young to seek knowledge. If these men, setting aside their own personal interests, were to work together heartily in behalf of Christ, we should no doubt see emerging everywhere not too many years hence an authentic and (as Paul says) a genuine variety of Christians, people who would restore the philosophy of Christ not just in ceremonies and logical propositions but in the human heart and in the total life of the individual. By these weapons the enemies of the Christian name will be attracted to the faith of Christ far more quickly than by threats or weapons. To join all our energies together no force is more powerful than the truth itself. He is no Platonist who does not read the books of Plato—how can he be a theologian, let alone a Christian, who has not read the book of Christ? "Who loves me," he said, "keeps my word";<sup>1</sup> it is the very mark that he himself designated. Well, then, if we are really Christians in our hearts, if we actually believe he was sent from heaven to teach us what the philosophers could not, if we really expect from him rewards such as no prince however opulent could ever give us, why is anything more precious to us than this text? How can anything carry weight which is not in harmony with these teachings? Why, in dealing with these sacred texts, do we allow ourselves liberties such as, or even greater than, those assumed by profane interpreters in their discussions of secular laws or medical textbooks? Like performers on a public stage, we twist the text around, saying about it whatever comes to mind, distorting it and obscuring its sense. We drag down the teachings of heaven and force them like a Lydian rule<sup>2</sup> to fit our own life-patterns, and while we make great shows of erudition by gathering together scraps of pagan literature, we—I won't say we corrupt the main point of Christian religion, but—we restrict to a very few men matters that Christ wanted to be diffused as widely as possible; and that nobody can deny. The Christian philosophy is scated more deeply in the emotions than in learned syllogisms; for it, life is more than logic, inspiration is more than erudition, transfiguration more than argumentation. Very few can be learned, but no man is denied permission to be a Christian, no man is forbidden to be pious, and, I will add boldly, nothing prevents any man from being a theologian.

Our philosophy sinks easily into the human mind because it is so largely in accord with human nature. What else is this philosophy of Christ, which he himself calls being born again,<sup>3</sup> but renewal of a human

2. Genuine is given in the Greek.

3. John 14:15 and 23.

flexible: it was used to model curves and irregular surfaces.

4. The Lydian rule was made of lead, therefore John 3:3.

nature originally well formed? By the same token, though nobody taught this philosophy more authoritatively and effectively than Christ himself, many things can be found in the books of the pagans that agree with his teachings. No philosophical school ever existed so crass as to teach that money makes a man happy. None was ever so impudent as to place the final good of life in the vulgar honors and pleasures. The Stoics recognized that no man was wise unless he was also good; they knew that nothing was truly good or honest except real virtue, nothing evil or shameful except dishonor alone. In Plato's dialogues Socrates repeatedly teaches that an injury should not be repaid with an injury; he also teaches that since the soul is immortal, those men are not to be bewailed who depart this life for a better one with a clear consciousness of having behaved virtuously.<sup>6</sup> He taught besides that the soul should be freed in every possible way from the claims of the body, and led toward those things which truly exist though they are not seen. Aristotle in his *Politics* wrote that nothing can be pleasant to us which is not in one degree or another degrading, with the solitary exception of virtue.<sup>7</sup> Even Epicurus concedes that nothing in man's life can be pleasurable unless he possesses a mind conscious of no wrong in itself—from which alone, as from a fountain, true delight gushes forth.<sup>8</sup> What shall we say of this, that a great part of Christ's doctrine is to be found in some of the philosophies, notably Socrates, Diogenes, and Epicurus? But since Christ taught his doctrine much more fully, and exemplified it even better, is it not monstrous that his teachings are ignored, neglected, or even mocked by Christians? Whatever in these writers of antiquity coincides closely with Christianity, let us follow by all means. But if there are certain things which alone can make a proper Christian, why do we look on them as almost more archaic and obsolete than the books of Moses?<sup>9</sup> The first step is to know what he taught, the second to put it in practice. I don't think anyone should consider himself a Christian simply because he can carry on a dispute about instances, relations, quiddities, and formalities, involving the question in a thicket of thorny abstractions—but only if he holds to the lessons that Christ taught and exemplified, holds to them, and exemplifies them himself. Not that I want to condemn the industry of those who exercise their mental powers in perfectly praiseworthy arguments of an abstract nature; it's no part of my intent to offend anyone. But it's my opinion—and a proper one, unless I'm badly mistaken—that the pure and genuine philosophy of Christ is drawn from no other source than the evangelical books and the letters of the apostles. Any man who piously reflects on these writings, praying rather than disputing, and seeking to be transformed within rather than armed for battle,<sup>1</sup> will cer-

6. Plato, *Gorgias*, and repeatedly in the *Phaedo*.

7. This sentiment has not been traced in Aristotle.

8. Cicero, *De finibus* 1, 16.

9. The Old Law, as prescribed in *Leviticus* and *Deuteronomy* (traditionally written by Moses), was presumed to have been abrogated by the New Law

tainly find that there is nothing pertaining to the felicity of man, nothing relating to our conduct in this world, nothing about the great problems of life, that is not treated here, explained and resolved. If we want to learn something, why should any author be more agreeable than Christ himself? If we want a pattern for living, what model is more suitable than Christ the archetype? If we crave some medication against the foul lusts of the mind, why do we suppose a better remedy can be found somewhere else? If we want reading to stir up a soul grown torpid and weary, where, I ask you, will you find sparks so lively and vital? If you want to raise your mind above the vexations of this life, why should you suppose other delights will prove more alluring? Why have we regularly preferred to learn the lessons of Christ from the writings of men other than Christ himself? And because he promised to be with us even to the end of time,<sup>2</sup> he is present most especially in these writings in which even now he lives, breathes, and speaks to us, more forcefully (I might almost say) than when he lived among men. The Jews saw less and heard less than you see and hear in these evangelical writings, if you will only bring to them eyes to see and ears to hear him.

What sort of business is this, anyhow? We keep letters written by a friend, we kiss them, we carry them about with us, we read them over and over; and yet there are thousands of Christians who, though otherwise learned enough, have never read through the evangelists and the apostolic books even once in their lifetime. The Mohammedans hold to their tenets, the Jews even today study the books of Moses from their very cradles. Why don't we in the same way devote ourselves to the study of Christ? Those who follow the discipline of Benedict accept a rule written by a mere man, and what is more an uneducated man writing for men even less educated than himself;<sup>3</sup> yet they study it closely and incorporate it in their lives. The Augustinian monks learn all about their founder. The Franciscans adore the little traditions of their Saint Francis; they embrace the rule passionately, surround themselves with it, and carry it with them wherever in the world they go, not thinking themselves safe unless they have the little booklet on their person. Why do they honor more a rule devised by a mere man than the entire Christian church honors its rule which Christ granted to everyone, to which all of us alike have pledged ourselves in baptism? Finally, even if you should cite an infinitude of other rules, can any of them be more holy than this? Paul once said that by contrast with the glories of the evangelists the laws of Moses seemed less than splendid;<sup>4</sup> in the same way I wish that the gospels and the apostolic letters should be so highly prized that by contrast with them all the pagan writings would appear commonplace. Whatever tribute anyone wants to pay to Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, Aegidius Colonna, Richard of Saint Victor, or William of

2. Matthew 28:20.

3. Saint Benedict of the sixth century successfully avoided the Roman schools as hotbeds of an

4. Hebrews 3:3; the epistle "To the Hebrews" was still in Erasmus's time thought to be the work of Saint Paul.

Ocean<sup>5</sup> is perfectly all right with me; I don't want to denigrate anyone or attack established courses of study. But let human teachings be as learned, as subtle, even (if you prefer) as scrupulous as may be,<sup>6</sup> it must be confessed that these scriptural teachings are the most certain. Paul asks that the spirits inspiring prophets be judged whether they be of God.<sup>7</sup> Augustine, who read every book of every author with reserved discretion, asks nothing more than a similar reading for his own books.<sup>8</sup> In these sacred writings alone, what I cannot understand, I adore. It is no school of theologians that commends these writings to us, but the heavenly Father himself, speaking in his own divine voice, and on two separate occasions. One was by the river Jordan at the baptism of Christ, the other on mount Tabor at the transfiguration. "This," he said, "is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased; hear him."<sup>9</sup> O solid authority, and truly, as the theologians say, irrefragable! What about this phrase, Hear him? Surely it means he is the one teacher, we should be disciples of him alone. Let every individual devote himself as much as he will to studying his own personal authorities, this injunction has been made without exception for Christ alone. On him alone the dove first descended to confirm the testimony of the Father.<sup>1</sup> Peter next assumes this spirit, to whom the supreme pastor, not only once but again and a third time, entrusted the feeding of his flock—and what were they to be fed but the sound staple of Christian doctrine? The same spirit was, as it were, reborn in Paul, whom Christ himself called a chosen vessel and illustrious beacon of his name.<sup>2</sup> What John drew from the holy wellspring of Christ's bosom he expressed in his letters. Let me ask what there is of a similar nature in Scotus (not that I would seem to be speaking invidiously), or what is there in Thomas? I may admire the ingenuity of the one and reverse the sanctity of the other. But why should we do all our thinking only in the bounds laid down by these great men? Why must we carry them around with us, have them always to hand, why must we constantly hunt through them, scrutinizing their writings and looking into their implications? Why should a greater part of our life be given over to Averroes than to the evangelists? Why spend almost our entire life on the assertions of mere men and contradictory interpretations of them? Perhaps these interpretations are the work of sublime theologians, if that's what you want to call them; but it is from the teachings of Christ that the great theologian of the future will learn the first principles of his art.

May all of us who in baptism pledged ourselves in the very words of Christ, if we did so sincerely, imbibe the teachings of Christ even amid the embraces of our parents and the caresses of our nurses. For whatever

5. These are all medieval philosophical systems, highly esteemed in Erasmus's day.

6. Erasmus glances at adulatory titles for scholastic philosophers. Scotus was the "subtle doctor," Bonaventura the "scrupulous doctor," etc.

7. The actual passage Erasmus has in mind is 1 John 4:1.

8. Augustine against Faustus the Manichaean, 11:5.

9. Matthew 3:17 and 17:5.

1. The dove descending symbolizes the settling of the holy spirit on Christ.

2. Acts 9:15.

the new-formed soul first receives sinks deeply and clings tenaciously. May the first babblings of children be of Christ, may the first stages of infancy be modeled on the example of one whom I should like babes to know from their infancy and toddlers to love even as little children. For just as the strictness of some teachers causes students to hate good letters even before they know them, so there are some preachers who make the philosophy of Christ seem grim and sour, though really there is nothing more delightful. Let young people be trained in these studies, then, until by the silent passage of time they have matured into vigorous adults in Christ. Other men's writings are such that the effort devoted to them has often seemed vain in the end, and it happens that after devoting their entire lives to supporting some last-ditch cause, men change their minds and at the final moment defect. But happy the man whom death overtakes in the act of meditating this philosophy of Christ. Let us all, then, immerse ourselves in it, embrace it, practice it night and day, kiss it greedily, and die in it after we have been transformed into it, thus confirming the saying that "studies culminate in manners."<sup>3</sup> Anyone who cannot follow this path (but whoever really wants to can do it) may worship these writings as a treasure bequeathed by that divine bosom. If someone should show us the footprints of Christ, how eagerly would we Christians bow down in worship before them! Why then don't we venerate his living and breathing image in these writings? Should anyone produce a tunic worn by Christ, we would hurry to the ends of the earth to kiss it. But you might assemble his entire wardrobe, and it would contain nothing that Christ did not express more explicitly and truly in the evangelic books. To show our love of Christ we lavish gold and precious stones on a statue of stone or wood. But why wouldn't it be better to use these gems and golden ornaments—or anything else, more precious still, if it can be imagined—to adorn these writings which bring Christ before us more effectively by far than any graven image? An image, if it represents anything at all, represents only the form of the body, but these writings set before you the living picture of his sacred mind, Christ as he actually spoke, healed, died, and rose from the grave, rendering him so completely present that you would see less of him if you had him directly in front of your eyes.

*Foreword to the paraphrase on Matthew!*  
*Foreword to the Third Edition (1522)*

### Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam to the Pious Reader, Greetings

As I recall, most excellent reader, I've declared on a number of occasions that I disagree completely with those who say that laymen and the unlearned should be altogether excluded from reading the holy scriptures—that nobody should be admitted within those sacred precincts

3. The saying *Abecur studia in mores* comes from Orid's *Heroides*, "Sappho. to Phaoen."