

**Desiderius Erasmus**  
*An Exhortation to the Diligent Study of Scripture*  
**Antwerp, 1529**

Edited from the original text by Frank Luttmer

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Eramus's Paraclesis, or Exhortation, was prefaced to his 1516 edition of the New Testament in Greek with facing Latin translation. Made famous by his call for making the scriptures available and accessible to the unlearned, the Paraclesis also succinctly summarizes Erasmus's "philosophy of Christ." The following excerpt is taken from an anonymous English translation. Spelling and punctuation have been modernized.

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It (the ◆philosophy of Christ◆) must needs be a new and marvelous kind of learning since that God Him self which was immortal became a natural man and mortal descending from the right hand of his Father into this wretched world to teach it unto us. It must needs be a high and excellent thing and no trifle which that heavenly and marvelous master came to teach openly. Why do we not go about to know search and try out with a godly curiosity this fruitful philosophy: since that this kind of wisdom being so profound and inscrutable that utterly it damnth and confoundeth as foolish all the wisdom of this world and may be gathered out of so small books as out of most pure springs. And that with much less labor than the doctrine of Aristotle out of so many brawling and contentious books, or of such infinite commentaries which do so much dissent. Besides the incomparable fruit which needeth not here to be spoken of. Neither is it needful that thou be clogged with so many irksome and babbling sciences. The means to this philosophy are easy and at hand. Do only thy diligence to bring a godly and ready mind chiefly endowed with plain and pure faith. Be only desirous to be instructed and confirmable to this meek doctrine and thou hast much profited. Thy master and instructor (that is the spirit of God) will not from thee be absent, which is never more gladly present with any than with simple and plain hearts. Men's doctrines and traditions (besides the promising of false felicity) so confound many men's wits and make [1] them clean to despair because they are so dark, crafty, and contentious, but this delectable doctrine doth apply her self equally to all men submitting her self unto us, while we are children, tempering her tune after our capacity, feeding us with milk, forbearing, nourishing, suffering, and doing all things until we may increase and wax greater in Christ. And contrariwise it is not so low and depressed unto the meek but it is as high and marvelous to the perfect. Yea the more thou wadest in the treasures of this science, the farther thou art from attaining her majesty. To the children she is low and plain, and to greater, she seemeth above all capacity. She refuseth no age, no kind, no fortune, no state and condition . . .

And truly I do greatly dissent from those men, which would not that the scripture of Christ should be translated in to all tongues, that it might be read diligently of the private and secular men and women. Other as though Christ had taught such dark and insensible things, that they could scant be understand of a few divines. Or else as though the pith and substance of the Christian religion consisted chiefly in this, that it be not known. Peradventure [2] it were most expedient that the counsels of kings should be kept secret, but Christ would that his counsels and mysteries should be spread abroad as much as is possible. I would desire that all women should read the gospel and Paul's epistles, and I would to God they were translated in to the tongues of all men, so that they might not only be read, and known, of the Scots and Irishmen, but also of the Turks and Saracens. Truly it is one degree to good living, yea the first (I had almost said the chief) to have a little sight in the scripture, though it be but a gross knowledge, and not yet consummate, be it in case that some would laugh at it, yea and that some should err and be deceived. I would to God, the plowman would sing a text of the scripture at his plowbeam, and that the weaver at his loom, with this would drive away the tediousness of time. I would the wayfaring man with this pastime, would express the weariness of his journey.

And to be short I would that all the communication of the Christian should be of the scripture, for in a manner such are we our selves, as our daily tales are. Let every man prosper, and attain that he may, and declare effectuously,[3] his mind unto his neighbor. Let not him that commeth behind envy the foremost. Let also the foremost affect him that followeth, ever exhorting him not despair. Why do we apply only to certain the profession, which is indifferent and common to all men? Neither truly is it mete,[4] since that baptism is equally common unto all Christian men, wherein consisteth the first profession of the Christian religion. Since other sacraments are not private, and to conclude. Since the reward of immortality pertaineth indifferently unto all men, that only the doctrine should be banished from the secular, and possessed only of a few whom the commonality call divines, or religious persons. And yet I would that these (all though they be but a small company in comparison to the whole number which hear the name of Christ and are called Christian) I would (I say) desire with all mine heart, that they were indeed such as they are called, for I am afraid that a man may find some among the divines which are far unworthy their name and title, that is to say, which speak worldly things and not godly: yea and among the religious which profess the power of Christ and to despise the world, thou shalt find more worldly pleasure and vanity, than in all the world besides.

Him do I count a true divine which not with crafty and subtle reasons, but that in heart, countenance, eyes, and life doth teach, to despise riches. And that a Christian ought not to put confidence in the succor, and help of this world: But only whole to hang on heaven. Not to avenge injury. To pray for them that say evil by us. To do good against evil. That all good men should be loved and nourished indifferently, as the members of one body. That evil men if they can not be reformed and brought into a good order ought to be suffered. That they which are despoiled of their goods, and put from their possessions, and mourn in this world, are very blessed and not to be lamented. That death is to be desired of the chasten,[5] since it is nothing else, but a going to immortality. If any man being inspired with the Holy Ghost do preach and teach these and such other things, if any man exhort, entice, and bolden his neighbor unto these things, be ye a very and true divine, though he be a weaver, yea though he dig and delve. But he that accomplisheth and fulfilleth these things in his life and manners, he really is a great doctor. Peradventure another which is not Christian shall more subtly dispute, by what manner the angels understand: howbeit to persuade and exhort, that we may here live pure and immaculate from all vices and iniquities. And to lead an angelic life, that is the office and beauty of a Christian and divine. If any man would object, and say that these are gross, and unsavory things. To him would I none otherwise answer. But that Christ chiefly hath taught these things. And that the Apostles to these have us exhorted. This learning and doctrine be it never so unsavory hath brought us forth so many good Christian, and so thick swarms of faithful martyrs. This unlearned (as they call it) philosophy, hath subdued under her laws the most noble princes so many kingdoms, so many nations . . .

But truly if that the princes for their part would remember them selves, and go about to fulfill with pureness of living, this humble and rude learning (as they call it), if the preachers in their sermons would advance this doctrine, exhorting all men unto it, and not to their own fantasies and imaginations, if schoolmasters would instruct their children rather with this simple science than with the witty traditions of Aristotle and Averroes, then should the Christianity be more at quietness. And not be disturbed with such perpetual storms of dissension and war. Then should this unreasonable desire of avarice, which appeteth [6] riches insatiably whether it be right or wrong, be somedea [7] assuaged, and cease of his rage. Then should these contentious pleadings, which now in all things admit them selves, have an end . . . Then should we not differ only in title and certain ceremonies from the heathen and unfaithful. But rather in the pure conversation of our life. And no doubt in these three degrees of men--that is to say, in princes and officers which are in their stead, in bishops and other priests which are their vicars, and in them that bring up the tender youth, which are formed and reformed even as their master enticeth them--doth chiefly consist the whole power other to increase the Christian religion. Or else to restore it again which hath long been in decay. Now if these would a while seclude their own private business and lift up their hearts with a pure intent unto Christ seeking only His gaze, and the profit of their neighbor, we should see verily within few years, a true and godly kind of Christian spring up in every place, which would not only in ceremonies, dispicience,[8] and titles profess the name of Christ, But in their very heart and true conversation of living. By this armor should we much sooner prevail against the unfaithful, and enemies of Christ, than with strength, violence, and threatenings. Let us join together all arms, powers, and might of sword, yet is there nothing stronger than the truth. We can not call any man a Platonist, unless he have read the works of Plato. Yet call we them Christian, yea and divines, which never have read the scripture of Christ. Christ sayeth, he that loveth me doth keep my sayings, this is the knowledge and mark which he hath prescribed. Therefore if we be true Christian men in our hearts, if we believe unfeignedly that he was sent down from heaven to teach us such things as the wisdom of the philosophers could never attain, if faithfully we trust or look for such things of Him, as no worldly prince (be he never so rich) can give unto us, [then] why have we any thing in more reverence and authority, then his scripture, word, and promise, which he left here among us to be our consolation? Why recount we any thing of gravity or wisdom, which dissenteth from his doctrine? . . .

And this kind of philosophy doth rather consist in the affects of the mind, than in subtle reasons. It is a life rather than a disputation. It is an inspiration rather than a science. And rather a new transformation, than a reasoning. It is a seldom thing to be a well learned man, but it is leeful [9] for every man to be a true Christian. It is leeful for every man to live a godly life, yea and I dare be bold to say it is leeful for every man to be a pure divine. Now doth every man's mind incline unto that which is wholesome and expedient for his nature. And what other thing is this doctrine of Christ which he calleth the new regeneration, but a restoring or repairing of our nature which in His first creation was good: we may find many things in the gentiles' books, which are agreeable unto this doctrine. Although no man hath showed it so absolutely, nether yet with such efficacy [10] as Christ him self. For there was never such a rude and gross sect of philosophy, which did teach that man's felicity rested on money. There was none so shameless to affirm that the chief point and ground of goodness consisted in this worldly honor and pleasures. The Stoics did knowledge [11] that no man might worthily be called wise except he were a good and virtuous liver, nether that anything was verily good and honest, but only virtue. And that nothing was evil and to be abhorred, but only vice and sin. Socrates (as Plato maketh mention) did teach by many reasons, that injury ought not to be avenged with injury. He taught also that since the soul is immortal, they are not to me mourned for which depart hence, if they have lived well, because they are gone in to a more prosperous life. Finally he taught and exhorted all men to subdue the affections of their bodies. And to apply their souls to the contemplation of those things, which truly are immortal, although they be not seen with these bodily eyes. Aristotle writeth in his Politics that there can nothing be so sweet and delicious to man but that at sometime doth displease him, only virtue except. The Epicure granteth that there can be nothing delectable and pleasant in this life except the mind and conscience from whence all pleasure spring be clear, and without grutch [12] of sin. Besides that there have been some, that have fulfilled a great part of this doctrine, and chiefly of all Socrates, Diogenes, and Epictetus. Howbeit since Christ himself hath both taught and also done these things more consummately than any other, is it not a marvelous thing that these things are not only unknown of them which profess the name of Christ . . . The first point of Christianity is to know what Christ hath taught. The next is to do there after and to fulfill it as nigh as God giveth us grace.[13]

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Footnotes

1. drive
2. perhaps, if by chance
3. with powerful effect, earnestly
4. fitting
5. chaste
6. seeks after, covets
7. somewhat, partly
8. discussion, disputation
9. lawful
10. efficacy, power to produce effects
11. acknowledge
12. grudge, injurious influence
13. The latter phrase was inserted by the translator, perhaps to bring the text more in line with the Protestant theology of grace.

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