

## Chapter 3

### In Praise of Humanism

#### HUMANISM: FRIEND OF THE REFORMATION

No greater insult could be made of a Reconstructionist than to call him a “pietist”; except perhaps to call him a “Humanist.” “Humanism” is surely the great bugaboo of Reconstructionism, and more recently (and more evidently) of Fundamentalism. Indeed, to the extent that Humanism exalts man’s thinking against the Scriptures it is a great evil.

But the Reconstructionists have also pointed out that the work of the Law of God is written on every man’s heart (Rom. 2:14-15); that every man is created in the image of God, thus rendering it impossible that any man or party (even the Humanists) can be wrong 100% of the time. We should expect, therefore, that even the Humanists will be right sometime, and that at times we will have to follow them, because at times they will be ahead of us in following the Bible (even if they will not acknowledge the Bible as the source of the truth they advocate).

This leads us to an important point: a person can be a Humanist and in his beliefs or actions be substantially right, substantially wrong, or anywhere in between. A person can be trained as a Humanist, convert to Biblical Christianity, and be a very Godly Christian because of the good things he learned as a Humanist (discarding the bad). On the other hand, he may be trained as a Humanist, convert to Christianity, and turn out to be a somewhat unGodly man because he hangs on to the worst elements of Humanism and neglects the good.

All of the Reformers, including many Anabaptist leaders, were educated as Humanists. Breen tells how the Reformation sprang from an important tenet of Humanism, namely intellectual honesty:

All the Reformers had diligently studied the Humanists. Their early religious zeal was largely a passion for intellectual honesty. Their study of the fathers of the church, their Biblical scholarship, their faith in the principles of “*libre examen*” and in the right of private judgment hail from Humanism.<sup>1</sup>

A. G. Dickens adds these details:

Between Colet, Reuchlin, Lefevre and Erasmus many distinctions may be made, yet the unifying feature of this great phase of humanism cannot be missed; it lies in a

historical approach to the “prescribed texts” of the Christian religion. These men were seriously trying to penetrate the clouds of ecclesiastical accretion and of irresponsible fantasy; they were attempting to answer the question: what exactly did Christ and St. Paul teach? Art how should their teaching be understood in the context of that distant age of primitive Christianity?

In view of the official rigidities of our period this approach was always potentially disruptive, yet it was not wholly new. Two centuries before Reuchlin...Nicholas of Lyra...had insisted upon the unremitting duty of scholars to seek the precise and literal sense of the Bible, as opposed to the imaginative allegorizing of the [scholastics].<sup>2</sup>

The early Luther delighted the Humanists with his opposition to Scholasticism, as Bernd Moeller notes,

Luther voice[d] certain demands which were closely parallel to those of the humanists, and which explain their sense of solidarity with him. First of all, there is Luther’s rejection of scholasticism. The Reformer spoke the inmost thoughts of a humanist with sentences like this one from the “Disputation against Scholastic Theology” (1517): “All of Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light,” or of this one from a letter to Lange in 1517: “Our theology and that of St. Augustine are advancing very well.... Aristotle is gradually declining. “The fight of Erasmus and his friends for the simplicity, purity, and reasonableness of Christianity was after all a bitter battle against [the life-denying scholastic system with its obscurity and lack of concern for the sources], and against the narrow-mindedness of its contemporary representatives. For example, Mosellanus, in his enthusiastic report on the Leipzig disputation, wrote that “he (Luther) has hissed the Aristotelian philosophy off the theological stage.” And Melancthon described the same disputation as a fight between primitive Christianity and Aristotle. The humanists reveled in the fact that Luther was

<sup>1</sup> Quirinus Breen, *John Calvin; A Study in French Humanism*, Archon Books, (1931) 1968. Foreword by John T. McNeill. p. ix.

<sup>2</sup> A. G. Dickens, *Reformation and Society in 16th Century Europe*, London: Harcourt Brace and World, 1966, p. 32. As with the Anabaptists, there were many who were searching the Scriptures centuries before the Reformation.

leading theology away from abstract speculation and back to life itself.<sup>3</sup>

The assistance the Reformers received from the Humanists was invaluable in turning the Reformation from an underground, “grass-roots” movement, into a state-supported, cultural phenomenon.

The Humanists of Luther’s day were members of the “Establishment,” in more or less good standing. Remember, the Roman Church was more Humanistic than Biblical, and the Humanists were quite active in the Church to reform it according to their own standards. Sometimes this was good, as their Humanistic ideals were also Scriptural ideals. But at any rate, the more enlightened popes even considered themselves Humanists, and didn’t feel that the more reform-minded Humanists were much of a threat, as Durant explains:

The Humanists had made remarkable headway within the Catholic fold; in Nicholas V and Leo X they had captured the papacy; popes had not only tolerated but protected them, and had helped them to recover lost treasures of classic literature and art -- all on the tacit understanding that their writings would be addressed, presumably in Latin, to the educated classes, and would not upset the orthodoxy of the people.<sup>4</sup>

To make the Reformation an establishment-supported movement rather than a movement of “the masses” (opposed by the powers that be), Luther had to gain the approval of the establishment Humanists. The fact that he did raised Luther even above the figures of previous reformers like Hus and Wyclife, and certainly above the many unknown Christians who opposed the Romanized church with their whole lives.

In those first years there was no real Lutheran movement among the people, and there seem to have been remarkably few pamphlets or preachers from that time that laid claim to Luther’s ideas and distributed them farther. For this audience Luther was known not as a party but as a pastor. It was otherwise among the humanists. They were enthusiastically on his side from the time the [ninety-five] theses were posted; they declared their unity with him and made his cause a matter of party principle. By their applause and their complementary efforts they drove him forward, carrying his name into

<sup>3</sup> Bernd Moeller, *Imperial Cities and the Reformation*, Phila: Fortress Press, 1972, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization* Part VI, *The Reformation*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957, p. 425.

town council chambers and into the halls of princes as well. In this way Luther finally became a factor in the calculations of the politicians, although not on any large scale before 1520. The humanists were the one united group of men to stand behind Luther in the first years. However inappropriate their position as representatives of public opinion in Germany, there can be no doubt that it was the humanists who were decisive in dragging the Reformation movement, against Luther’s will, out of the obscurity of the humble University of Wittenburg, into the light. Luther’s cause would not have gone on to victory without the approval of the humanists. It seems obvious that the common opinion that humanism had no significance for the Reformation is false when expressed so simplistically. The humanists were the first to accept Luther and give him a lasting following. It was they who first made his cause into a far-reaching movement. Without them he would have failed as did many before him who had tried to stand up against the old church. One can state this pointedly: No humanism, no Reformation.<sup>5</sup>

Although Luther and the humanists originally seemed to have similar ideas on the meaning of the Scriptures, it soon became apparent that, to his credit, Luther was taking the Scriptures a little more seriously. Thus, the original support of Luther by the Humanists was based on a misunderstanding. But, as Moeller observes,

It was a constructive misunderstanding that made the humanists into supporters of Luther.... Luther himself had no small part in this misunderstanding. From 1517 on he energetically sought contacts with the humanists. For some time he signed his letters “Eleutherius” (Greek for “free”), and corresponded with Reuchlin and Erasmus.<sup>6</sup>

In particular, Erasmus, as we shall see in some detail, was something of a statist. He enjoyed the “comfort and security” of a well-regulated State. In the end, Luther’s desire for reform outstripped that of the Humanists; Luther was tied to Scripture too much to suit them. He had received his last support from the statist Humanists. Thus when Luther asked Erasmus for

<sup>5</sup> Moeller, *op. cit.*, pp. 25f., 36.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29f. Could Luther have hoped for the truth of which Moeller would one day speak: “It is not too much to say that this misconception raised the Reformation from the concern of one man to a revolution in world history”? (*Idem.*)

his support, the Humanist had some thinking to do:

Luther himself had read...nearly everything ... published by Erasmus, and he told his friends that he was merely giving more direct form to what the famous humanist had said or hinted for many years past. On March 18, 1519, he wrote to Erasmus humbly and reverently, soliciting his friendship and, by implication, his support.

Erasmus had now to make one of the pivotal decisions of his life, and either horn of the dilemma seemed fatal. If he renounced Luther he would be called a coward. If he associated himself with Luther in rejecting the Roman Church he would not merely forfeit three pensions and the protection that Leo X had given him against obscurantist theologians; he would have to abandon his own plan and strategy of Church reform through the improvement of minds and morals in influential men. Already he had (he thought) made real progress on this line with the Pope, Archbishop Warham, Bishop Fisher, Dean Colet, Thomas More, Francis I, Charles V. These men, of course, would never consent to renounce the Church; they would shrink from disrupting an institution which in their view was inextricably allied with princely government in maintaining social stability; but they could be enlisted in a campaign to reduce the superstitions and horrors in the prevailing [church], to cleanse and educate the clergy, to control and subordinate the monks, and to protect intellectual freedom for the progress of the mind.”<sup>7</sup>

In their studies in the School of Life, all the Reformers would learn the fundamentals of power politics, as we shall see. Of immediate importance for us is the fact that one can learn both good and bad from the Humanists. To merely assert that one was a Humanist, or that his education was Humanistic, does not *unfailingly* assure us that he is incapable of speaking the truth. But to the extent that one does not speak the truth, his education may be at fault.

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<sup>7</sup> Durant, p. 429.

