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III

Erasmus and Luther: Answering Why They Did What They Did

By Anthony N. Delcollo '08



Studies regarding the character of Luther and the character of Erasmus independent of one another and side-by-side are fairly common.¹ However, the fact remains that an evaluation of Luther and Erasmus's character and attributes in a specific fashion has yet to be evidenced. Thus, the issue at hand is not simply one which aims to point out the differences between Luther and Erasmus so as to gain a better understanding of the character, but rather on a deeper level a character study of Luther and Erasmus so as to gain a clear understanding of how each in terms of their goals developed said goals as a result of their character. Thus, one can rightly say that the answer to why Luther was able to play the role of the leader of the Reformation and contrastingly why Erasmus did not side fully with Luther has its answer in the following: in the case of each individual, their character and resulting interests and attributes determined their goals.² Since the goals of Luther and Erasmus were different, as well as their interests and character, they ended up playing distinctly different roles with regard to the Reformation. Thus, Luther played such a role as he did due to his unique attributes and his paramount goal to provide for the truth of the gospel so as to ensure the salvation of souls. In contrast, Erasmus's goals were informed by his dream of a unified Europe due to his humanism

⁶² Examples of such studies include both books and scholarly articles. Some of these which will be used in this work include *Here I Stand* by Bainton, *Confrontation at Worms* by Jenson, *Religious Ecstasy in Saupitz and Young Luther* by Steinmetz, and *Erasmus and Luther: Continuity and Discontinuity as Key to their Conflict* by O'Malley. For the sake of brevity, all such studies shall not be mentioned. Of course, a complete list of studies used to bolster argumentation will be included in the bibliography.

² Such a view regarding the questioning and examination of character for the sake of determining the differences in Luther's and Erasmus's goals is supported by O'Malley. Although he terms the issue in a more unified sense as "heuristics," the essence of the mode of argumentation in this paper and in O'Malley's are none the less similar. The primary difference is that whereas O'Malley generalizes and starts with the idea of heuristic attitudes, this study goes back a step further to examine the character of Luther and Erasmus and then reflect upon the role of each individual in reference to the Reformation. O'Malley also limits the scope of his application of heuristic attitudes to the idea of theological and philosophical dispute, whereas the application in this study is aimed not only at the points of Luther's and Erasmus's disputes but also the application of their disputes to the broader question of why Luther played the role of the reformer and Erasmus the role of idealistic academic. O'Malley's point is presented thus: "In other words, beyond specific points on which they differed, there is in each of the protagonists a radical heuristic framework which imposed on them a response-pattern to practically every major question they addressed." John W. O'Malley, "Erasmus and Luther, Continuity and Discontinuity As Key to Their Conflict" *Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (October 1974), 48. <http://www.istor.org/>

and intellectuality, thus resulting in the lack of a stern conviction for an absolute split with the Church that could stand on par with Luther's.

As history has made abundantly clear, it was Luther who became the champion of the Reformation, and not Erasmus. From the posting of the *95 Thesis* on the church doors of Wittenberg, to the debate at Leipzig, and all the way to the final trial at Worms and the ensuing debate between Erasmus and Luther on divine justification, Luther has proven himself to have a unique character. What has been referred to as "heuristic inclination" but what is more properly termed Luther's character coupled with the concerns which grew from his character commingled to form his goal, which first and foremost is the salvation of souls, whether it be his own or of his fellow Christians.³ In addition, the secondary goal which sprang from Luther's desire to facilitate the salvation of souls and which was possible for him to maintain due to other aspects of his character came to be that for which the Reformation is most noted, namely the complete and unyielding split with the Roman Catholic Church. These goals, which will be examined in more depth later, have as their origin several aspects of Luther's character, namely his stubbornness and courage, his inclination toward religious depression and spiritual sensitivity, and his intellectual ability which was grounded in scholasticism.⁴

As to Luther's stubbornness and courage coupled with a certain down-to-earth vulgarity, which helped to finalize the split with the Church when the time came for Luther to stand in defiance at Leipzig and Worms, a prime example is evidenced in comments from Jenson's work:

[...] a book defending papal power [...] aroused Luther's indignation. Immediately he responded with a vernacular pamphlet [...] now the bleating of a little sheep had become the roaring of an aroused lion declaring, "Christ cannot have a vicar in his church. This is why neither pope nor bishop can ever become Christ's vicar or regent." "Let the pope be the pope" if he likes, Luther raved, but "I shall accept what the Pope establishes and does only on the condition that I judge it first on the basis of Holy scripture." Later, in response to Prierias's attack on this work, Luther wrote vehemently, "If we punish thieves with *furca* [a two pronged instrument of sixteenth century punishment], brigands with the sword, and heretics with fire, why don't we rather take these miserable monsters—these cardinals, these popes, and the whole swarm of Roman Sodomites

³ This overriding concern with religion and salvation is supported abundantly in numerous texts, most notably by Bainton. Bainton is very explicit in his explanation of Luther's bouts of temptation and early depression, and is equally clear in his explanation that Luther entered the Augustinian order so that he might ensure the health of his immortal soul. Ronald H. Bainton. *Here I Stand* (New York: Meridian 1995), 18-24.

⁴ That Luther was intelligent cannot be brought into doubt. The attributes which have been described can be summed up under the heading of a sort of general versatility which allowed Luther to appeal not only to the theological dissenters with his own interests, but also to the varying success of the movement of German nationalism as well as Renaissance Humanism. This versatility, which came about as a direct result of Luther's character and appealed to a much broader demographic than Erasmus, was what enabled Luther to follow through and survive as he did that which he felt was necessary in his pursuit for genuine religious faith and the salvation of souls.

who corrupt the youth and the church of God—and put them to the sword and wash our hands in their blood?”⁵

Clearly a man who refers to the Pope and the Roman Curia as monsters and Sodomites is not only vulgar but also possessed of a definite iron or strength of character. Furthermore, the above statement from Luther connects to his common appeal and his spiritual depression which is the primary source for Luther’s total split with the Church.

Concerning then Luther’s spiritual sensitivity and common appeal, it is appropriate to point toward Luther’s superstitions and fear of damnation as evidence of his spiritual sensitivity⁶. In a separate matter, Luther’s common appeal has as its source both his intellectual keenness and his vulgarity, with combinations of both serving to appeal mutually to the Humanists as well as the nationalist movement of Germany.⁷ A direct example of Luther’s spiritual sensitivity comes through in comments regarding the true nature of Luther’s *Anfechtung* such as, “It may be the trial sent by God to test a man, or an assault by the Devil to destroy man. It is all the doubt, turmoil, pang, tremor, panic, despair, desolation, and desperation which invade the spirit of man.”⁸ This spiritual sensitivity, as well as his intellectual keenness and vulgarity are what combined to create Luther’s broad appeal. Another example of Luther’s much vaunted spiritual sensitivity can be seen in his recognition of German mysticism and the sense of ecstasy which he elicited once he finally rarified his doctrine of faith by itself and support of the scriptures.⁹ This message of faith alone and the authority of the scripture clearly put him in opposition to Rome. Thus one reason that Luther’s message was so universal is that it placed him in direct opposition to Rome, which was perceived by German nationalism as

⁵ Lamar Jensen. *Confrontation at Worms* (Utah: Brigham Young University Press 1973), 29.

⁶ Schultz touches on the issue of Luther’s spiritual temptations and sensitivity in his explanation of the *Anfechtung* phenomenon, which is a term that Luther used to refer to his great spiritual strife in dealing with the fear of damnation and temptation and certitude regarding salvation. Schultz states, “Luther’s spiritual temptations (*Anfechtung*) were among the most important of his real reasons for entering the monastery. Luther’s concept of such temptation is typical of his thinking and combines many perspectives and problems, some of which are theological, others personal. Finally, Luther’s spiritual temptations focus on the question of the worthiness of people before God, that is, on the question, How can I find a merciful God?” Bernard Lose. *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1986), 23.

⁷ Bainton yet again appropriately addresses this issue, most notable in the section of his book *Here I Stand* entitled “The German Hercules.” The illustration at the beginning of the Chapter shows a publication of a cartoon in which Luther is referred to as *The German Hercules* as he is throttling his opponents, including the pope and Eck, with a large club. Reference to Luther as the German Hercules at this point means that in the mind of the people Luther was being identified not only as a religious leader but also as a figure for German nationalization. Thus Luther is supported by people like Hutten and Sickingen. Such a sense of Luther’s strength resulted from publications of his debate at Leipzig and the promulgation of his work *Address to the Christian Nobility of The German Nation for the Reform of the Christian Estate*. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 93; Jansen, *The Conflict at Worms*, 29.

⁸ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 31.

⁹ Evidence of Luther’s recognition of the importance of religious experience can be seen in Steinmetz: “Luther liked what Tauler and the *Theologia Deutsch* had to say about unconditional resignation to the will of God [...] about willingness to be damned for the glory of God.” The fact that such feelings are identified as being part of the theological position of the young Luther goes to show that his interest in spirituality really does extend into his early stages and permeate his entire career. David C. Steinmetz *Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring, 1980), 24. <http://www.jstor.org/>

an oppressor of German freedom through such devices as indulgences.¹⁰ Furthermore, Luther was concerned with salvation of the soul, an issue which was certainly at the forefront of the minds of the common people, whether they were nationalist in their inclinations or not.¹¹ Additionally, Luther's vulgarity, which was communicated to the common people through cartoons and his comments regarding Rome, endeared him to the people of Germany.¹² And finally, Luther's intellectual ability which is exemplified with such savvy moves as the publication of the *Address to the Christian Nobility of The German Nation for the Reform of the Christian Estate* allowed him to appeal to both Humanists and Nationalists because his message was able to be delivered intelligently, not only in the context of popular cartoons.¹³ Therefore, in the light of the evidence especially concerning Luther's spiritual sensitivity, his courage, vulgarity and stubbornness, and his intellectual acuity, one can see that is a direct result of aspects in Luther's character which allowed him to become the leader of the Reformation and gain strong allies from Humanists and German Nationalists.

Having thus evaluated Luther's character, and his concepts of religion, it is now appropriate to touch more soundly upon the specific doctrines which came out of these interests and how such doctrine came to inform his stance toward the Church. As was mentioned earlier, Luther's concern with salvation inevitably led him to question the validity of indulgences and the authority of the pope in terms of ensuring salvation.¹⁴ As a response to what Luther came to see as a lack of efficacy for salvation on the part of the teachings and the Church and the Pope, Luther's religious doctrine solidified, which necessarily required that he split from the Church given the current state of affairs at Rome.¹⁵ Although it was Luther's courage and stubbornness that allowed him to stand

¹⁰ Bainton states regarding Hutten, a leader of German nationalism view on the church, the following, "The First enemy to be repulsed was the Church, responsible so often for the division and the mulcting of Germany." Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 101.

¹¹ "The entire study of home, school and the university was to instill fear of God and Reverence for the church. In all this there is nothing to set Luther off from his contemporaries [...]" Bainton, *Here I stand*, 20.

¹² Further examples of this earthiness, aside from the Hercules picture in Bainton include "The Pope as an Ass playing Bagpipes" and "The Cardinal Fool," both of which were inspired by Luther's vulgar invectives. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 74.

¹³ "This *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation for the Reform of the Christian Estate* was the clarion call of the Reformation. It was also the most revolutionary of Luther's writings until that time [...]" Jensen, *The Confrontation of Worms*, 29.

¹⁴ O'Malley offers an excellent summation of Luther's sentiments for rejecting the pope due to the rejection of the scriptures which Luther saw as the source of the doctrine of "faith alone for salvation," and therefore the necessary source of all doctrine and theology. As O'Malley states, "The problem of salvation was severe enough for Christians themselves. Luther was aware that, even after his discovery and proclamation of the Gospel, relatively few were accepting it. The number of the saved was small. [...] Pope, bishops, and theologians were in fact rejecting the Gospel. Even more scandalous, they were actually trying to suppress it, while they simultaneously attempted to bring Luther himself to trial." O'Malley. *Erasmus, Luther, Continuity and Discontinuity*. 60-61.

¹⁵ This doctrine included the elimination of all the sacraments except baptism and the Lord's Supper. Also, the doctrine of transubstantiation was rejected, along with the authority of the Pope and the validity of good works without faith. The reason for such a radical change is that, according to Luther, no explanation of the elaborations of the Church tradition and the additional sacraments can be found in Scripture. Thus Luther was necessarily divided from the Church. "Once again, it is Luther's sense of being set apart which is operative and which is indicated by the three great 'alone's' of his Reformation: grace alone, faith alone, and scripture alone." Grace alone eliminates papal authority over souls in purgatory, faith alone the validity

fast in the fact of his defiance of the Church, it is ultimately his concern with salvation that became the source of his religious doctrine, which in turn was ultimately responsible for his final split with Rome. Also, an important aspect which factors into his inclination toward separation is Luther's Scholastic tendencies.¹⁶ Indeed, Luther's scholastic tendencies coupled with his desire to have a definite answer regarding faith and thus resulted in a situation in which Luther would definitely have to split with Rome, with his own convictions as the basis for the split. Luther rejected the authority of the Pope, the validity of five of the sacraments, the monopoly of the church of the priesthood, and all idea of good works before faith. Therefore, Luther rejected Rome.

Erasmus, contrasting with Luther from the very beginning, was possessed of a very different sort of character, and different interests and different goals. Informed by his character, intellectualism, and the championing of humanism, Erasmus was also a critic of the Church but was not able to espouse the same sort of conviction that would require a split with the Church as well as the attitude to achieve such a split. An excellent summarization of Erasmus' character is offered by Huizinga, who states the following:

Erasmus' character: Need of Purity and cleanliness—delicacy—dislike of contention, need of concord and friendship—Aversion to disturbance of any kind—Too much concerned about other men's opinions—Need of self-justification—Himself never in the wrong—Correlation between inclinations and convictions—Ideal image of himself—Dissatisfaction with himself—self-centeredness—A solitary at heart—Fastidiousness—Suspiciousness—Morbid mistrust—Unhappiness—Restlessness—Unsolved contradictions of his being—Horror of lie—Reserve and insinuation¹⁷

Although Huizinga's estimations of Erasmus are broad-sweeping, the aspects of Erasmus with which to be concerned, namely those that focused his interests and determined his goals, are his so-called dislike of contention and need of concord, his concern for other men's opinions, the his brilliance, with produced his self-centeredness and a subsequent highfalutin attitude. Indeed, one could say that it was a coupling of his desire for peace and his concern with public opinion that caused him to refrain from the sort of stridency that is exemplified by Luther. As Huizinga reiterates, "If only Erasmus had been less concerned about public opinion! But that seemed impossible: he had fear of men, or we may call it, a fervent need of justification."¹⁸ Thus a summation of the aspects of Erasmus's character and interests that effected his goals include intellectual

of indulgences and hollow good works, scripture alone the intricate hierarchy of the church as well as the numerous sacraments and the doctrine of transubstantiation. O'Malley, *Erasmus and Luther, Continuity and Discontinuity*, 60.

¹⁶ "Unlike Erasmus, Luther was trained as a scholastic and was habituated to scholasticism's emphasis on clear distinctions and specific differences." Thus, there is a clear distinction between salvation and damnation and the willingness to take a position and stand by it. O'Malley, *Erasmus and Luther, Continuity and Discontinuity*, 60.

¹⁷ J. Huizinga. *Erasmus of Rotterdam* (London: Phaidon Press 1962), 117.

¹⁸ Huizinga. *Erasmus of Rotterdam*. 117.

pompousness, cautiousness, a keen desire for peace among men, and subsequently a sort of optimism¹⁹ which defines his position toward Luther and his more optimistic theology.

Regarding Erasmus's optimism, it can be said that it is a result of his desire for peace amongst men and concord, rather than being the origin of his desire for peace. This overriding desire is intermingled with his commitment to humanism; in many ways they are one in the same. Bainton's and O'Malley's remarks are then based on Erasmus's commitment to peace and humanism which resulted in his optimistic stance toward much of which Luther looked at askance, especially human nature and the true nature of redemption. As Bainton states:

Erasmus was nostalgic of the vanishing unities of Europe. His dream was that Christian Humanism might serve as a check upon nationalism. In dedicating his commentary on the four Gospels to four sovereigns of the new national states—Henry of England, Francis of France, Charles of Spain, and Ferdinand of Austria—he voiced the hope that as their names were linked with the evangelists, so might their hearts be welded by the evangel. The threat of division and war implicit in the Reformation frightened him.²⁰

O'Malley goes on to reinforce the case in point of Erasmus commitment to peace and furthermore comments on the connection of this position with Erasmus's entrenchment in Renaissance Humanism:

To explore Erasmus' thought we best begin with a description of the literary and rhetorical tradition which he inherited from antiquity. This tradition had been transmitted to the Middle Ages by Augustine and notably revived by Petrarch and other Renaissance humanists. Erasmus was its most distinguished exponent in the 16th century. We thus begin by exposing what is perhaps the most persistent conviction to emerge from his writings: his dedication to the cause of "good letters." That dedication formed the basis for understanding his intellectual and religious positions.
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O'Malley comments further on how this humanist commitment to good letters translated into a desire for concord and peace:

¹⁹ Clear evidence of Erasmus' optimism as compared to Luther willingness to throw the Church in the trash heap is evidenced by Smith: "The ideals of Erasmus in the Spirit of Luther' [...] These moot points are said to concern: (1) the papacy, which Luther thought the work of antichrist, but which Erasmus regarded as salvageable; (2) the method of reforming the Church; (3) toleration of opinion; (4) attitude toward dogma; (5) freedom of the will." Further evidence of Smith's opinion on Erasmus optimism occurs when Smith states, "His main fault consisted in too great optimism in fancying that abuses would ever be removed by those whose interest it was to maintain them." Preserved Smith. *Erasmus: A Study of His Life, Ideals, and Place in History* (New York: Dover Publications 1962), 427, 430.

²⁰ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 98.

²¹ O'Malley, *Erasmus and Luther, Continuity and Discontinuity*, 48.

What about Erasmus' ideas of reform? They are simply an application and further articulation of all we have been discussing. For Erasmus, reform was directed towards establishing a bond of peace and concord among men. This task, which is sometimes seen as simply moral in its foundation and orientation, was in actual fact based on Erasmus' understanding of the doctrine of the Redemption.²²

Thus it was that Erasmus's humanist dedication to good letters resulted in his optimistic interpretation of scripture in terms of the redemption, the idea of peace that was possible for men of good will, and his commitment to bringing about said peace as the fulfillment of Christ's mission in earth. Erasmus's reformist ideas, although critical of the moral bankruptcy of the Church, could not countenance a complete disregard of church history and tradition, because Erasmus identified the march of such tradition down though history since the coming of Christ as the necessary result of Christ's redemptive power.²³ Quite simply put, Erasmus's ideas regarding redemption were so different from Luther's as to directly contravene them, especially when considering Luther's de-emphasis of human worth and the availability of grace. A good illustration of the difference in emphasis between the doctrine of Erasmus and Luther can be seen in Steinmetz, who explains that the humanists read the message of the gospel as, "give me your virtue and I will crown it with Grace," whereas Luther's reading was more along the lines of, "despise your sin and I will shower you with mercy."²⁴ Therefore, Erasmus's humanist reading of the scripture separated him from Luther's doctrine of salvation as much as his commitment to peace and concord separated him from the violent tenor of Luther and Luther's Reformation.

Aside from Erasmus's humanist commitments and his doctrinal differences, there is also the issue of his highfalutin tendencies which precluded him from being able to appeal to the common people, unlike Luther. Evidence for the origin of this intellectual pride can be seen in the very early stages of Erasmus's life. While a boy at his studies, Erasmus's teacher Sintheim is reported as having said to him, "Well done, Erasmus, the day will come when thou wilt reach the highest summit of erudition."²⁵ Furthermore, later on but still in the early stages of his academic career, Erasmus is seen to show considerable annoyance toward people that he viewed as wanting in intelligence.²⁶

²² O'Malley, *Erasmus and Luther, Continuity and Discontinuity*, 55.

²³ "The Emphasis which Erasmus placed on consensus and 'tradition' in his theological hermeneutics is not unrelated to the above considerations. If the great truths are known to all genuine seekers, the authenticity of any interpretation of a text which pretends to expose a vital religious truth can be tested against the testimony of the ages." Thus, one can see how since Erasmus placed such a high stock on unity and peace among men that he would be very hesitant to fully endorse the reformation, which Erasmus came to see as a harbinger of war and destruction, and thus contrary to the primary message of "good letters," and Christ's salvation. O'Malley, *Erasmus and Luther, Continuity and Discontinuity*, 51.

²⁴ Steinmetz, *Religious Ecstasy in Staupitz and the Young Luther*, 34.

²⁵ Albert Hymna, *The Life of Desiderius Erasmus* (The Netherlands, Assen: Koninklijke Van Gorcum & Comp. 1972), 14.

²⁶ "He stated in *The Praise of Folly* that the people of Brabant, where he had spent much time between 1492 and 1495, were extremely stupid. But in his native Holland the situation of course was even worse: 'To these are nearly related, as well by affinity of customs as of neighborhood, my friends, the Hollanders. Mine, I may well call them, for they stick so close and lovingly to me that they are styled fools to a proverb.'" Hymna, *The Life of Desiderius Erasmus*, 23.

Moving on from instances of this intellectual stuffiness occurring in his later years, there is also the issue of his body of correspondence which was published around the time of his initial responses to Luther and the Reformation. According to Beitenholz, this correspondence was limited primarily to the reading public of Germany²⁷, with no mention of accompanying aids or likewise illustrations for the common people of Europe as with the cartoons created of Luther. Additionally, for even those having the ability to read Erasmus's words, had they not achieved a certain level of education they were then most likely not able to clearly understand his message. The primary cause of this inability is the intentionally ambiguous and complicated style which Erasmus often adopted as the standard for his humanist discourse.²⁸ Perhaps the most telling account concerning Erasmus's elitism and thus his disdain for associating himself with the uneducated is articulated by O'Malley regarding Erasmus's position on who can be a theologian. As O'Malley puts it:

In order to mine these truths properly, language skills were absolutely necessary. Though these were technical skills hard to come by, they were relevant and meaningful ones, for they led to an exposition of the texts which gave meaning to life. Erasmus was under no illusion that everybody could be a theologian in the sense such technical skills required. However, since the test of a true theology was its ability to move others to the good, and since lived religion and good example were the most powerful persuasion, Erasmus could *on occasion* [my italics] speak of the 'common laborer or weaver' as 'truly a theologian.'²⁹

The fact that Erasmus adopted such an elitist view regarding those who can be theologian in the truest sense goes to show that he had no appeal and indeed no desire to appeal to the common people. Therefore, not only was it Erasmus's commitment to humanism and his desire to promote a sort of general peace amongst all men, but it was also Erasmus's intellectualism, which got in the way of his playing a more pivotal role in supporting or partnering with Luther throughout the Reformation.

Perhaps the final and most telling difference between Erasmus and Luther comes down to the level of conviction and the tenacity with which each of them approached their ends. Luther was resoundingly a man of religion who felt a certain spiritual urgency in terms of his own salvation and the salvation of his fellow man. Thus it was that Renaissance humanism and Reformation theology both stood as examples of the application of religion to the sixteenth century.³⁰ However, since the whole bent of Luther's theology was the frantic promulgation of the truth of scripture, and Erasmus's

²⁷ "Rather we shall address ourselves exclusively to the impact which his correspondence had upon the reading public in Germany. Moreover we shall limit this study to a mere three years from 1518 to 1520." Peter G. Bietenholz, "Erasmus and the German Public, 1518-1520; The Authorized and Unauthorized Circulation of his correspondence." *Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Humanism in the Early Sixteenth Century. (Jul, 1977), 64.

²⁸ "They made scholasticism the mortal enemy of the ambiguity characteristic of 'good letters.'" O'Malley, *Erasmus and Luther, Continuity and Discontinuity*, 31.

²⁹ O'Malley, *Erasmus and Luther, Continuity and Discontinuity*, 31.

³⁰ Robert G. Kleinhaus, "Luther and Erasmus, Another Perspective." *Church History*, Vol. 39, No. 4. (Dec., 1970), 460. <http://www.jstor.org/>

was rather the facilitation of the transformation of individuals for improved peace, there was a definite difference in terms of how urgent Luther was as compared to how unwilling Erasmus was to push for immediate action. Thus it was that Erasmus at various times missed and rejected the centrality of Luther's doctrine on justification by faith alone, which was communicated by Kleinhans as the following:

The only difference between the Roman Catholics and the theologians at Wittenberg rested in the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This doctrine, Erasmus maintained, could be clarified and defined by a general council. What Erasmus failed to perceive, however, was that this was the heart of Luther's theology, the basic doctrine from which would influence and condition the discussion of all other doctrines in Luther's theological writings.³¹

In light of this idea of the absolute centrality of Luther's doctrine on the absolute necessity of faith, it is possible to see Luther in a true sense as a man who felt himself on a mission from God. That mission as Luther saw it was to revitalize the true Church and oppose the antichrist of the Pope so that the true message of salvation could be delivered to all. Erasmus, on the other hand, was not a religious man who used a strong intellect to his advantage like Luther, but was rather an intellectual and academic who clothed his ideas in the religious tones that were present as a result of his day. At the very most the balance of religion for Erasmus was equal to the importance of intellectual prowess, and thus Erasmus lacked the fervent, pitched character of Luther which allowed Luther to propel to Reformation along its course.

Any understanding of the driving forces of the reformation and the actions taken by two of its most prominent figures, Luther and Erasmus, should begin with an investigation of their character. It is thus that who Luther and Erasmus were has a profound effect on the course of history in their day. Indeed, although Erasmus is the often regarded as the greatest humanist of them all, it is for Luther that is reserved the status of great man and hero of history. It was Luther who had the moxie to doggedly pursue the truth as he saw it, regardless of the adversity with which he was confronted.

³¹ Kleinhans, *Luther and Erasmus, Another Perspective*, 480.

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