Did Erasmus influence Anabaptism? This question is not new; it has elicited a variety of responses ever since the sixteenth century when some of Erasmus’ own contemporaries linked him with Anabaptism. Protestant opponents such as Luther could describe Erasmus as—among other things—an Anabaptist, and Catholic opponents like Noël Béda claimed that elements of his writings encouraged Anabaptism. Modern scholars renewed the question in the early twentieth century when some prominent historians strongly hinted that a spiritual kinship existed between Erasmus and the Anabaptists. One, Johan Huizinga, even went so far as to say, “There was a group among the reformed to whom Erasmus in his heart of hearts was more nearly akin than to the Lutherans or Zwinglians with their rigid dogmatism: the Anabaptists.” The renewal of the question of Erasmus and Anabaptism coincided with the flourishing of North American research in Anabaptist history, especially among Mennonite scholars. Most of the early studies on the topic derived from historians of Anabaptism in search of keys to understanding the origins of that movement. Harold Bender considered the question of Erasmus’ influence in his seminal study of Conrad Grebel and ultimately arrived at a negative conclusion, but the trend in subsequent Anabaptist scholarship pointed away from his assessment and increasingly granted at least some small place for Erasmus in the intellectual origins of Anabaptism.

For Luther’s association of Erasmus with Anabaptism, see Ep. 2936, line 388 Allen. For Béda’s critique of the preface to the Paraphrase on Matthew, see LB 9:445B–F; 459A–F; 483D–484C; 557D–560C.


Harold Bender, Conrad Grebel, c. 1498–1526, the Founder of the Swiss Brethren Sometimes Called Anabaptists (Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 1950), 65, 200.

Two studies are worthy of particular note in that development. Hans Hillerbrand’s seminal work on Anabaptist origins identified Erasmus as a significant contributor, alongside Luther and Zwingli, to the early development of the movement. He argued that “the parallels between Erasmus and Anabaptism are striking and cannot be overlooked” and that “evidence concerning the connection between Erasmus and the Anabaptists can be marshalled without difficulty.” Owing to perceived parallels between Erasmus and Anabaptists on pacifism, ethics, the Sermon on the Mount, baptism, communion, and freedom of the will, Hillerbrand proceeded to rank Erasmus as one of the influences on early Anabaptism. His study, which focused on theological similarities as evidence of Anabaptist dependence upon Erasmus, became the point of departure for most subsequent research into the question. It also highlighted the importance of the Paraphrase on Matthew (1522) as a potential source of Erasmian influence upon Anabaptism.5

Kenneth R. Davis’ research on Anabaptist asceticism also allotted Erasmus an important place in early Anabaptist theology. Davis elaborated on Hillerbrand's claims by providing an “organized assessment of the nature, extent and significance of Erasmus' theological contribution to Anabaptism” and arguing that “the basic seeds for most of the distinctive Anabaptist positions—even the pattern of ideas—are contained in pre-1525 Erasmian thought and through him were available to the Anabaptists.” Following an extensive examination of over fifteen parallels, including lay asceticism, progressive revelation, ethical dualism, and the doctrine of the believers’ church, Davis concluded that, “the probability is heightened that the Anabaptists are best understood, apart from their own creativity, as a radicalization and Protestantization not of the Magisterial Reformation but of an earlier lay-oriented, ascetic vision of reformation—and that Erasmus is the principal mediator of these views to Anabaptism.” Davis’ research constitutes the most comprehensive attempt at addressing the question of Erasmus’ influence upon Anabaptism.6

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