Clarence H. Miller (ed. and transl.)


It is a truism of human speech and relationships that if someone wants to find fault with another, fault will be found. The lucidity of rhetoric cannot reach such diamond clarity that books cannot be misconstrued or read harshly, either through a hermeneutic of suspicion, or the outright desire to find fault. This was the case in the exchange between the Faculty of Theology of the University of Paris and Desiderius Erasmus in 1531–1532. In 1531, after an increasingly hostile set of exchanges between the leader of the Parisian theologians, Noël Béda, and Erasmus, the faculty published a small book entitled *Determinatio facultatis theologiae* that formally censured Erasmus for 175 propositions taken from his writings. Faced with such an affront, and having always answered such charges before, Erasmus answered in his *Declarationes ad censuras Lutetiae vulgatas sub nomine facultatis theologiae Parisiensis*. Since Erasmus’ text presents the text of the earlier book, this makes a fascinating locus for consideration of the practice of theology in the early modern period, as well as polemical rhetoric and religious controversy.

A number of items that this text presents offer intriguing material to analysts of the early modern period. One of the most significant is the ongoing argument between the faculty of theology and Erasmus about the practice and task of theology. It is instructive to note the vehemence with which the Paris theologians wished to protect the realm of theology from those who had been trained in Greek and Hebrew, who should be seen as grammarians (255). On the one hand, this is completely in keeping with the aspersions that they threw at Erasmus, because they sought both implicitly and explicitly to define Erasmus as having failed because he was not trained as a theologian. On the other hand, it is absolutely clear throughout the entirety of the text that the faculty of theology was either aware or afraid that Erasmus had a significant influence among the unlearned. In a way, this was comical—Erasmus was the prince of the humanists, whose Latin presented a model for others to follow, and whose Greek was sufficient to present editions of the New Testament. Erasmus was not himself a popularizer, writing vulgar language broadsheets. However, in another way, the Paris theology faculty’s concern demonstrates to the modern analyst how the task of theology was changing in both the venues in which it was discussed, and among the figures who were acting as theologians.

A second item of great interest is the discussion of paraphrasing. Obviously, Erasmus was one of the foremost paraphrasts of the age, and his paraphrases
sold widely. But the Paris faculty of theology found them wanting. This could be for such a small reason as to be an exercise in nitpicking—they attacked Erasmus for calling Cleopas “Cleophas” (149). But it could also be for a far greater reason, such as in the case of Erasmus’ paraphrase of *Matthew* 19.9. Erasmus had supplied: “whoever puts away his wife for any reason whatever and takes another wife, such a man commits adultery himself and likewise gives to his wife an occasion for adultery—unless, perchance, the woman he is divorcing deserves the divorce on the grounds of adultery” (cwe 45:271). The faculty took Erasmus to task for not following the doctrine of the church, stating that all bonds of matrimony among the faithful were indissoluble, except when a religious vow intervened (162). This locus brings an important issue to the forefront. What is the task of a paraphrase of scripture? Is it to explain what Catholic doctrine makes of the passage, or to explain the passage according to its original context?

The volume is a treasure trove for discussion of the history of doctrine in the early modern period. The Paris faculty made no bones about being a defender of tradition and orthodoxy. Many of their attacks on Erasmus are instructive. For instance, there has been a significant modern critical effort to see the importance of Roman Catholic biblical scholarship in the various reform movements, and to demonstrate that Rome was not against placing the scriptures in the hands of the laity. Among those who argue this are François and Hollander in *Infant Milk Or Hardy Nourishment? The Bible for Lay People and Theologians in the Early Modern Period* (Leuven: Peeters, 2009). That scholarship is important in helping to reflect the breadth of Catholic responses to lay reading of the scriptures, but it should not blind modern readers to the ways in which some Catholic authorities attacked this phenomenon. The bluntness of the faculty’s condemnation of providing vulgar language translations of the scriptures is stark: “For in a matter not necessary for salvation we should rather protect the welfare of the many by forbidding the translation than permit what is useful to a few, to the grave detriment of the many. Hence such a translation is justly condemned” (134). A similar example occurs when Erasmus noted that “Augustine can hardly find a place for merit” (165). The Paris doctors attacked Erasmus by using the words of Christ, of Paul, and of the wisdom books. Only then did they give a seeming quotation from Augustine, one so scholastic in its verbiage that Miller denies it was something Augustine wrote. Erasmus had already attacked Luther on merit and the related doctrine of the free choice of the will. What the faculty of theology at Paris seemed to want was that even when presenting the thought of a fifth-century African theologian, Erasmus must put it into the context of the entirety of orthodox theology as it stood in the sixteenth century.