The Continental Reformation.

By the Rev. ALFRED PLUMMER, D.D.

IV.—The Merits and Shortcomings of Erasmus.

APPARENTLY Erasmus did not know, and did not wish to be convinced, that the evils of the time required stronger and sharper measures than those which he was able and willing to employ. There was a huge jungle, in which most of the vegetation was hopelessly corrupt and could bear no good fruit. But it had life enough in it to endure, and to continue to choke the one tree whose leaves might serve for the healing of the nations. Nothing less drastic than the axe would have been of any use; and Erasmus proposed to turn the wilderness into a garden by gradual and persistent pruning. What Luther said of the trifling reforms, which were every now and then proposed by a Pope, who at least wished to make a show of doing something, would apply here: "They piffled at curing warts, while they overlooked or confirmed ulcers." In short, the time for a serious battle had come, and Erasmus rather petulantly proposed, and continued to employ, a diverting policy of pin-pricks. It was not magnificent, and it certainly was not war.

Yet Erasmus did not spare himself. He did not look on and criticize, while he left others to do the work. His industry was extraordinary, and it reminds us of Origen and Jerome. It is all the more amazing when we remember that he suffered from chronic weak health, and was sometimes seriously ill. He was at times plagued with stone, and in his later days with gout. He had a capricious digestion, and he could not endure the smell or taste of fish. His heart, he said, was Catholic, but his stomach was Lutheran; not even on fast-days would it take fish. Yet, in addition to his numerous writings, he kept up a voluminous correspondence with all kinds of people, high and low; often with persons whom he had never seen, and of whom he knew nothing but what their letters told him. He sometimes wrote

forty letters in a day, and about three thousand still survive. He wrote fast, as did Luther, and he says of himself, "I precipitate rather than compose." And this heavy correspondence was a voluntary addition to the heavy amount of literary work, in editing Fathers, etc., which he undertook for the great printer, Froben, and for others. But he says, himself, that these demands upon his pen caused him more pleasure than fatigue. The more he wrote, the more he wished to write: *crescit scribendo scribendi studium.* Without literary work life, to him, was not worth living.

Erasmus lived for literature, and especially for literature devoted to a religious purpose. It was for this that he so carefully guarded one kind of independence, while he seems to us to have sacrificed another kind. He kept the command of his own time and of his own mode of employment. He freed himself, so far as was possible, from his obligations as a priest. He might, if he had liked, have become a Bishop or a Cardinal; but he knew that, if he accepted what so many clerics were scheming and sinning to obtain, his time would no longer be his own. Yet he needed money, and plenty of it, and he did not much care from whom he received it. He had not much feeling about independence with regard to that. He showed much deference to those who helped him, or might be induced to help him financially, and his enemies might say that he sometimes condescended to be a toady. But we must remember that in those days it was a recognized thing that an impecunious author was dependent upon the benevolence of the wealthy. Not until a century or two later was a writer paid by the public who bought his books; he had to rely upon the gifts of a few rich patrons: and Erasmus, whose expenses were heavy, took money from a number of benefactors in various countries. Travelling in those days was very costly, except to those who could travel on foot; and to Erasmus travel was often a necessity, because of the character which he soon established of being an international leader in the New Learning.

This intense devotion to literature in the one leader and not in the other was one of the causes of the rupture between

Erasmus and Luther. Erasmus was content to work on, ploddingly, towards something like the ideal sketched by Plato; not exactly that kings should be philosophers, and philosophers kings—Erasmus did not care much about philosophy; but that there might be a condition of things in which rulers should be scholars, and scholars rule. Luther had no patience with such methods. Ignorance was not the only enemy, and the souls in darkness needed something better than epigrams and editions of the Fathers. To Erasmus, Luther's indifference to literature was shocking. The Revival of Learning was the aim of Erasmus's life; the Revival of Christian Learning was the aim of the latter half of it. When he asks, What is life without letters? he gives us the clue to a good deal that is puzzling in his seeming inconsistencies. And when he declares that the Lutherans are the enemies of literature, he is placing them on the same level with the monks whom he treated with such scorn. No more severe condemnation could be given. To the Archbishop of Cologne he wrote: "I abhor the Evangelicals, as for other reasons, so because it is through them that literature is declining in every place, and is upon the point of perishing: and, without literature, what is life?" To the Chancellor of Mons he wrote: "I have an irreconcilable war with all Lutherans. I cannot love heresy and schism; I cannot hate literature." Yet on Gal. i. 6 Luther himself laments the decay of learning. There are very many people who *non solum sacras literas sed etiam omnes alias literas fastidiunt et contemnunt.*[1]

For many years Erasmus was in a strange position in Europe. If he had many friends and admirers in almost every country, he had everywhere made foes. A writer who used ridicule and sarcasm so frequently and with such skill was sure to do that. And he spared no one. It is a mistake to suppose that he reserved these weapons for ignorant monks and clergy, or even for ecclesiastical abuses in general. Kings and princes

[1] On Luther's break with Humanism see A. C. McGiffert, "Martin Luther, the Man and his Work," ch. xviii.; B. J. Kidd, "Documents illustrative of the Continental Reformation," p. 170.

come under his lash. In the "Adagia," attacks upon them are common. This famous book was published first in 1500, when Erasmus had not yet mastered Greek, and it consisted of some hundreds of proverbs and other utterances, with observations upon them. By 1508 the hundreds had grown to thousands, and the book was republished with the title, "Chiliades Adagiorum." It was so pungent in attacking abuses that the Council of Trent wished to suppress it; but it was so popular that all that they ventured to do was to publish an expurgated edition.

Surprise is sometimes expressed that Erasmus was never prosecuted for so ceaselessly holding up to ridicule the powers that be, both in Church and State. The Dominicans did their utmost to get him condemned at Rome, but they never could succeed, and he was never seriously molested anywhere. It seems a strange thing to say of a single scholar, who was so poor as to live on the bounty of wealthy patrons, but he was really too powerful to be prosecuted. He had already made himself the darling, not only of the increasing army of scholars, but of everyone who could enjoy polished witticisms, *before* the controversies which set Western Christendom in a blaze had begun. Camerarius wrote of him: "The man who can draw a letter from Erasmus at once acquires immense fame and celebrates a lordly triumph." Hardly anyone had any idea of the revolution for which these witticisms were preparing the way; and not a few, even of those who were hit by them, were quite content to laugh with the rest. Such exquisite raillery was worth an occasional smart. Moreover, the jests of Erasmus are full of common sense and sound advice. If he had not Luther's power of touching men's hearts, he could rouse and convince their minds. He was no apostle; but, in an age in which scholarship was regarded as almost divine, Erasmus was a king among scholars, with no one anywhere near him in the same field; and he was allowed the privilege embodied in the principle that "the king can do no wrong."

There was another thing which helped to preserve him from prosecution: both sides hoped to have this powerful contro-

versialist as an ally. He had said so much in condemnation of Popes, prelates, monkery, and the medieval system generally, that the Lutherans claimed him and hoped to gain him. In August, 1523, Erasmus himself wrote to Zwingli: "It seems to me that I have taught nearly all the things which Luther teaches. The only difference is that I have taught them less fiercely (*atrociter*), and that I have kept clear of certain riddles and paradoxes." But this fierceness of Luther and Hutten and others made Erasmus more and more determined not to join them, but to go on dealing with the controversy in his own way. The next year, 1524, Erasmus published his "Spongia," in which he takes a mediating position. If only each side would state its case with moderation, no fundamental difference would be found to exist between the two. It is the exaggerations of the extremists that make an understanding impossible. Let a number of learned persons meet and discuss the points of difference; then a great deal might be done to heal the strife. This neutral position was very distasteful to the Lutherans, and very disappointing to the Romanists. Adrian VI.[1] twice wrote to him, imploring him, out of regard to his reputation, to take up his pen against these novel heresies. His successor, Clement VII., with Charles V. and Henry VIII., all of them expected him to come out of the trenches and attack Luther in the open field; but, excepting a few shots in letters and pamphlets, he did nothing. He wrote to Clement and apologized for the rudeness of his earlier writings; if he had foreseen the sectarians of that day, he would have suppressed a good deal. Clement sent him a donation of 200 florins, and told the monks who had been abusing Erasmus to keep their tongues quiet. Erasmus continued to criticize the old scholasticism, and to point out the contrast between the primitive and the medieval Church; but, in the end, his disgust at Luther's methods was almost as great as his disgust at those of the monks.

His refusal to receive the vagabond Hutten, when the latter

[1] Kidd, "Documents," p. 105.

fled to Basle in his hour of need, increased the estrangement between Erasmus and Luther. Then came the controversy about freewill, which placed them before the world as opponents. Luther, like Zwingli and Calvin, denied freewill; and Erasmus, urged on by Henry VIII., attacked him for doing so. Perhaps the controversy was not unwelcome to Erasmus. It enabled him definitely to take up a position of direct opposition to Luther, without retracting anything which he had said on the Lutheran side. Harnack regards the "De libero arbitrio" as the crown of all the writings of Erasmus, but a very worldly treatise, and deeply irreligious.[1] Near the end of 1525, Luther replied in his famous "De servo arbitrio," perhaps the most carefully written of all his works, and one of the most dignified in tone. Erasmus soon answered it with his "Hyperaspistes," in which he says: "Luther promises himself a wonderful reputation with posterity; but I am inclined to predict that no name under the sun will be held in greater execration." He was very angry; and this rupture between the two leaders may be said to mark the final break between Humanism and Lutheranism. No disciple of the Renaissance, which had insisted so clearly upon the value, and power, and independence of the individual, could assent to the doctrine that there is no such thing as freewill.

Critics are not agreed as to which is the best of the writings of Erasmus, but there is not much doubt as to which was the most important, and the most fruitful of results. Quite in the first rank, and in a class by itself, must be placed his Greek Testament. It was produced in a hurry, in order to be in the field before the more carefully prepared edition of Cardinal Ximenes. Erasmus published his in February, 1516, and in April he writes to Nicolas Ellenbogen: "The New Testament has been hurried out headlong rather than edited." It was made from a few manuscripts of poor authority. Erasmus had not got the materials for constructing a critical text, and he would not have known how to use them if he had possessed them.

[1] "Dogmengeschichte," iii., p. 714.

Yet it is by means of this hastily produced work that he did most to further the best interests of the Reformation. Not all his wit and learning effected so much real and permanent enlightenment as this imperfect reproduction of the words of Apostles and Evangelists in the original language. According to modern standards of what a critical text ought to be, its imperfections are glaring; but it was the first Greek Testament issued from the printing press, the first that was made accessible to all who could read Greek. Students now saw plainly that what for centuries had been the Bible of Western Christendom was only a translation, and not always a trustworthy translation, of what the inspired writers had penned. Erasmus gave a Latin translation of his own, which differs considerably from the Vulgate. Readers could judge for themselves whether Erasmus or the Vulgate was the better representative of the Greek. He also published "Paraphrases," which became so famous, that in 1548 it was ordered that a translation of these "Paraphrases" should be placed in every parish church in England, side by side with the English Version of the Bible, which had been placed there by order of Henry VIII. Even without these helps, the publication of the Greek text showed that there were many places in which, although the Vulgate rendering was right, yet the traditional interpretations were quite wrong. The Vulgate might possibly bear the proposed interpretation, but it was impossible to make the Greek do so.

It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that in publishing Greek Testaments Erasmus did more to free men's minds from the thraldom of the clergy than all the tumultuous pamphlets of Luther. He had no sympathy with those who thought it dangerous to allow the laity free access to the Bible. In an Exhortation to the Study of the Christian Philosophy, which forms the Preface to his New Testament (first edition, 1516), Erasmus says: "I utterly dissent from those who are unwilling that the sacred Scriptures should be read by the unlearned, translated into their vulgar tongue; as though Christ had taught such subtleties that they can scarcely be understood by

a few theologians, or as though the strength of the Christian religion consisted in men's ignorance of it. The mysteries of kings it may be safer to conceal, but Christ wished His mysteries to be published as openly as possible. I wish that even the weakest woman should read the Gospels, should read the Epistles of Paul; and I wish that they were translated into all languages, so that they might be read and understood, not only by Scots and Irishmen, but also by Turks and Saracens. I long that the husbandman should sing portions of them to himself as he follows the plough, that the weaver should hum them to the tune of his shuttle, that the traveller should beguile with their stories the tedium of his journey." Again and again Erasmus writes of the hearty reception which his New Testament received, even in quarters where opposition might have been expected. Four months after its publication he writes to Bishop Fisher: "This book was feared before its appearance, but, now that it is published, it is marvellous how it commends itself to all theologians who are either learned or honest." A year later Fisher writes to him from Rochester: "The New Testament can now be read and understood by everyone with much more satisfaction than it could before."

It may seem strange that a man with such deeply religious aims, who lived on a literary treadmill during the latter portion of his life in order to give his contemporaries and their successors a better idea of the essentials of Christianity, should have been compared with Voltaire. Erasmus has been called "the Voltaire of the Renaissance." We need not wonder, for the resemblances between the two writers are too obvious to escape notice. And yet a careful comparison leads us rather to a contrast. Each of them was the greatest literary power in his own age, and acquired, especially among men of letters, a European reputation. Both of them were courted by kings and princes, and had friends and correspondents in many countries. Both had lived in England and admired English ways and English character. Most obviously of all, both were wits, who

used irony and ridicule for the destruction of what they believed to be superstition and folly.

But there was this enormous difference between them—Erasmus never attacked the foundations of Christianity. On the contrary, he tried to strengthen them by freeing both them and the superstructure from worthless or even dangerous additions and corruptions. Still less did he ever suggest any other system as a possible substitute for Christianity. Voltaire did both. He flouted the Christian faith, and is reported to have said that he was tired of hearing that twelve men had planted the Gospel; he would show that one man could uproot it. And he advocated a creed that was to be not merely a substitute but an improvement. He was no agnostic. Belief in a just and beneficent God is his creed, and the duty of general benevolence is his decalogue; and this religion he teaches to others in words which always have lucidity and sometimes beauty: "Adorons Dieu sans vouloir percer ses mystères. Il y a un Être nécessaire, éternel, source de tous les êtres; existera-t-il moins parce que nous souffrons? existera-t-il moins parce que je suis incapable d'expliquer pourquoi nous souffrons? Un Dieu adoré de cœur et de bouche et tous les devoirs remplis, font de l'univers un temple et des frères de tous les hommes. Pardonnons aux hommes et qu'on nous pardonne. Je finis par ce souhait unique que Dieu veuille exaucer."

Nevertheless, in spite of this fundamental difference between Erasmus and Voltaire as regards their attitude to Christianity, in that Erasmus defended it and was patient with it even in its medieval form, while Voltaire tried to destroy it and would have substituted Deism for it, yet there is a large amount of real resemblance between the two. Would not this be true of Erasmus? "In the sympathies which appeal to the deepest feelings in human nature he was very deficient. But never, perhaps, was there an intellect at once so luminous, versatile, and flexible; which produced so much; which could deal with such a vast range of difficult subjects, without being ever

obscure, tangled, or dull." It is what Lecky says of Voltaire.[1] And would not this also be true of him? He knew "how to abide, with an all but purely critical reserve, leaving reconstruction, its form, its modes, its epoch, for the fulness of time to disclose." It is what Morley says of Voltaire.[2]

Erasmus would have effected even more than he did accomplish if he had not underrated the solidity and permanent power of the evils which he assailed, and which he hoped would in time be banished from the Church and the world. The jealous conservatism of corporations is proverbial, as is also the conservatism of ecclesiastics and of lawyers. A corporation, therefore, which consisted largely of ecclesiastical lawyers, and of ecclesiastics who knew more about canon law than about the Bible, and whose interpretations of the Bible were those of long established tradition, was certain to be conservative in the very highest degree. And to all this we must add the fact that the most influential members of the corporation with which the Reformers had to deal were men whose pecuniary interests strongly supported their prejudices in favour of keeping things as they were. The ecclesiastics of the Roman Church stood rigidly on their defence against the first mention of innovations, and denounced those who hinted at opposition to the existing system as rank rebels against the voice of God, who spoke now, they said, as of old, from Rome. The Roman Church was the source and guardian of all Christian truth, and to dissent from its decisions must be heresy. They were never weary of insisting upon the duty of "avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called." In such a corporation, the power of resistance to all attempts at reform was almost boundless. Erasmus seems never to have appreciated the real force of this.

He continued working almost to his death, which took place in the night on July 12, 1536. No priest attended him; but he died saying frequent prayers for mercy and deliverance. In the Protestant city of Basle it might have been difficult to find

[1] "History of the Eighteenth Century," iv., pp. 315 *f.*
[2] "Essay on Voltaire."

a priest, even if Erasmus had desired to have one. His monkish enemies, with characteristic ignorance of grammar as of the man whom they abused, said that he died *sine crux, sine lux, sine Deus.*

Erasmus was one of those teachers who "outrun their generation in thought, but lag behind it in action." He was a Reformer, until (as a severe critic might say) reform became a thing of deadly earnest. It would, perhaps, be more just to say that he was a Reformer until it was evident that the leaders of reform were hurrying on towards extreme measures which Erasmus could not see his way to adopt, and were insisting upon theological distinctions with which he had no sympathy. And we may add that he seems to have been a little too sensitive about his own intellectual supremacy to be quite whole-hearted in working for the good of mankind. But he did work hard, and he has benefited mankind by his hard work. He had a zeal for truth according to the best knowledge of the day, and he laboured strenuously to make the truth more widely known. Yet he always insisted that the truths which are necessary to salvation are few; and that, although we have a right to make additional beliefs for ourselves, we have no right to enforce them upon others. No man in that generation did more to prepare the way for the movement, which he lacked the moral fibre to lead or to control.