

Appendix 4—Erasmus’ worship of Mary

KJV-onlyism has, as one of its pillars, the vilification of Westcott and Hort. Insofar as Westcott goes, some of it is warranted, but most of it is not (see Appendix 3).

Yet some KJV-onlyists recognize that this opens the door to criticism of King James himself and Erasmus. In response, 7 pages defending Erasmus.¹ He concludes, “He was a Catholic at the beginning of the Reformation. However, as he continued to search the Scriptures, he increasingly became less and less Catholic in his position. By the time he died in 1536, he had virtually become an Anabaptist in his theology.”² There are multiple points at which this theory can be critiqued—for example, that Erasmus had a high view of Scripture and Jesus Christ is somehow taken as evidence that Erasmus was “Evangelical.”³⁴

Here, in response to Sorenson and others, I offer a series of direct quotes from two of Erasmus’ poems, and then offer evidence that this perception continued until the end.

Example 1:

Collected Works of Erasmus, vol. 69 (“Spiritualia and Pastoralia” section), eds. John W. O’Malley and Louis A. Perraud (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. Apparently both pieces on Mary were written in 1499, but the second was published in 1503.

Erasmus, “**Paean in Honour of the Virgin Mother**” (*Paean Virgini Matri dicendus*), pages 17-38, trans. by Stephen Ryle. On page 19, Ryle notes that “In later life he [Erasmus] was able to cite the *Paean* in answer to conservative critics who accused him of paying insufficient honour to the Mother of God.” Emphasis added.

Page 20—how it starts out: “**Singular glory of heaven, earth’s surest safeguard, virgin mother Mary.** See, this poor soul of mine longs to propitiate your godlike majesty as if with the burning incense of its praise. Not relying on its

¹ David H. Sorenson, *Touch Not the Unclean Thing: The Text Issue and Separation*, 4th ed. (Duluth, MN: Northstar Baptist Ministries, 2003), 187-193.

² Sorenson, *Touch Not the Unclean Thing*, 192-3.

³ Sorenson, *Touch Not the Unclean Thing*, 190-1.

⁴ Sorenson, *Touch Not the Unclean Thing*, 190-1. On page 192, Sorenson argues that Erasmus “advocated re-baptism for those already sprinkled as infants.” He has no footnote, only the number 45 in parenthesis. It is not clear what his source is, but my guess would be either Friesen’s or Spinka’s books mentioned on the previous page (footnotes 6 and 8), or perhaps Walter Koehler, who is never footnoted. I could not find Koehler in the bibliography. It would appear, though, that Sorenson never cites directly from Erasmus as this brief study is going to do.

own merits, **but strengthened by your graciousness**, it dares to encompass the vast ocean of your praises with the limitations of human language.”

Snippets:

Page 20—“You are the mightily powerful mistress of the world, . . .”

Page 21—“You are the exalted queen of heaven and earth: . . .”

Page 22—“If, then, the highest ranks of the heavenly court look up to her as raised so far above them, with what confidence can I, poor worm that I am, turn my face upwards? What sound can I utter in my stammering attempts to express your praises, to which not even the voices of angels are able to prove themselves equal?”

Page 23—“You are the Mother of God, but you are also called the mother of mercy, . . .” Also, “**You are placed next to the Godhead so that we should not lack an advocate in that quarter.**” Also, “Indeed, who else is there for suffering humanity to call upon with hymns and prayers than you, Mary, who alone among the heavenly host, by virtue of your merits, favour, and dignity, possess the power to appease the anger of the judge?” Also, “In the same way you are so ready to listen and so kindly disposed **that there is no one whose prayers you turn away.**”

Page 24—“The Creator himself, at the very outset when the world was still newly fashioned, uttered his first prophecy about you, saying that a woman would come who would crush the head of the deadly serpent with her heel.”

Page 35—“**Who else but Mary does the rash sailor pray to** with hands uplifted, . . .”

Example 2:

Collected Works of Erasmus, vol. 69, “Prayer of Supplication to Mary, the Virgin Mother, in Time of Trouble” (*Obsecratio ad Virginem Matrem Mariam in rebus adversis*), trans. John N. Grant. Pages 39-54. Emphasis added.

Page 41, how it starts out: “Mary, Virgin and Mother, **sole hope to us in our afflictions**, you see, yes, you see the frightening storms by which we are tossed on this mortal voyage.” . . . “O holy Mary, you who have always pitied the hard toils of the human race, surely you do not abandon us on our journey?”

Page 45—“**Help me, I beg you, my saviour, my salvation, my sole and certain refuge; shine forth, Mary, as star of salvation to me in darkness**, guide me when I err, assist me in my suffering, . . .”

Page 49—“I invoke the torments of your son (you shared and endured the with him through a mother’s bond, **so that we might owe our renewed salvation to your son, but also to you, his mother**); . . .”

Page 53—“I invoke this devotion of mine with which, such as it is, I venerate your divine power as best I can.”

Pages 53-54—“And since I sail a dangerous sea in a fragile little boat into which he too deigned to descend, **I pray, O Mary**, that with him as ruler of the winds and the sea, and with you ever shining brightly, it may befall me to reach the haven of the heavenly Jerusalem, where you will enjoy the blessed company of your son for ever. Amen.”

Now, did Erasmus hold to this perspective until the end of his life? First of all, I am aware of no evidence that he repudiated it. If anybody wishes to argue that “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence,” then why should we not apply the same rational to the heresies (real and imagined) of Westcott and Hort? Perhaps on his deathbed Westcott became an Anabaptist? “Sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.”

Secondly, Consider Erasmus’ own words (**written 5 years before his death**): “Apology Against the Patchworks of Alberto Pio,” pages 105-360, regarding “Veneration of the Virgin Mother of God” (written 1531), trans. Daniel Sheerin, in volume 84 of *Collected Works of Erasmus: Controversies*, ed. Nelson H. Minnich (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), pages 243-4—

“My *Paeon* and *Prayer*, now so often printed, **show how highly I regard the most holy Virgin**, as does the *Liturgy* and the sermon that I published against the Virgin’s detractors. I have always supported the opinion that she is free of all sin, even original sin, though this is not properly called a sin except in the case of the first parents.”

Now, lest I be confused of withholding evidence, it is noteworthy that Erasmus venerates Christ within the same letter: —“If this world is a sea in which we sail while we live in the body, if there is a star, a *Cynosura* or *Helice*, from which one should not turn one’s eyes, if eternal life is the harbour, then it is, rather, Christ who is the Star of the Sea, . . .” (p. 244). In addition, even more confusingly, Erasmus declares, —“Our salvation depends on Christ, **to whom even the Virgin herself owes here salvation**. We are bidden to boast in Christ, not in the Blessed Virgin” (253-4).

This shows how complex it can be to analyze Roman Catholic theologians, at least when we focus on sentences taken in isolation.

One more point about Erasmus’ theology (approx. **10 years** before he died): “Manifest Lies,” pages 116-131 in the above volume (71), trans. and annotated by Erika Rummel, written in 1526 to respond to accusations by some

Dominicans led by Vincentius Theoderici, but not published until later (apparently not until after Erasmus' death).

Page 119—regarding sacraments, “Yet I profess that confession, as practised today, is necessary for salvation,” though later admits to critiquing confession that is “encumbered by human constitutions and human faults.”

On page 120, further discussion of confession makes it clear that this is in reference to confessing to a priest—“I consider it a very weighty matter when a person reveals his sins to a priest once and in good faith, . . . If he happens to relapse, let him relate to the priest only the sins he committed since the last confession.”