

THE RENAISSANCE AND REFORMATION

Biography

Desiderius Erasmus was the leading humanist scholar in northern Europe during the sixteenth century. From England to Italy, he spread his views on education, championed the study of the masterpieces of the classical world, and presented his liberal approach to the study of Christianity. ♦ *As you read, think about the role that Erasmus played in his society. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Desiderius Erasmus (1469–1536)

Desiderius Erasmus was born in the Dutch city of Rotterdam on October 27, 1469. After both of his parents died, Erasmus and his brother were sent to live at a school that groomed boys for the religious life. In 1485, with very few other options available to him, Erasmus entered a monastery. He stayed for seven years, and was ordained to the priesthood in 1492.

Life in a monastery, however, did not suit the young Erasmus, and he was glad to gain a position as the secretary to an important bishop. In an early work of this time, he criticized what he saw as the dry study of medieval theology. He wrote that “all sound [solid] learning is secular learning.”

Erasmus soon tired of life at the bishop’s court and went to study theology at the University of Paris in 1495. He became bored and longed for more freedom to pursue his own interests and growing humanist values. He went to England in 1499, where he became friends with Thomas More, the great English scholar.

Erasmus became a sharp critic of many aspects of society. He proposed that people study the Bible on their own and adopt its

teachings as their own guiding values. By recommending this, he went against the ideas of the Catholic Church, which taught that the Church itself was the only resource for learning about Christianity. In his work *Praise of Folly* (1509), Erasmus used humor to expose the immoral behavior of many of his time, including the clergy.

Erasmus may be best known for his ideas on education. He believed that a sound education in classical literature and Christian writings would create better people and a better society.

Erasmus shared many ideas, such as the importance of free will and the need for reform in the

Church, with the emerging Protestant leaders such as Martin Luther. However, unlike later reformers, Erasmus did not want to break away from the Church.

Perhaps Erasmus’s greatest role was as a mediator between Catholics and Lutherans. Almost alone in his time, he held moderate views, while others on the two sides engaged in fierce debates over theology. Erasmus died in 1536 in Basel, Switzerland.



Engraving of Erasmus,
by Albrecht Dürer

Questions to Think About

1. Why did Erasmus enter a monastery?
2. What did Erasmus think about people reading the Bible on their own?
3. **Summarize** How was Erasmus critical of the Church?
4. **Make Comparisons** Compare Erasmus’s role in the sixteenth century to the role of a specific social critic, reformer, or educator of today. How are they similar in their beliefs, methods, or effects on society?