



Erasmus of Rotterdam

## A BIBLE STUDY ON ERASMUS OF ROTTERDAM

*Humanist/Greek New Testament Scholar*

### “All Christians Who Have Been Baptized”

(LSB 596)

(Rom. 6:1–10; Eph. 5:25b–26; Ezek. 36:25–27; Gal. 3:26–27)

**“Sed in primis ad fontes ipsos  
properandum, id est graecos et antiquos.”**  
(“Above all, one must hasten to the sources  
themselves, that is, to the Greeks and ancients.”)

— Erasmus of Rotterdam

**Ad fontes!** Back to the fountains — to the sources themselves! This was the watchword of the 16th-century Renaissance, a renaissance in all things ancient, including the earliest manuscripts of the Greek New Testament. Erasmus saw a return to the most ancient sources as a powerful corrective to the organized church’s preoccupation with later Latin translations of the New Testament. Erasmus’ work and publication of a new version of the Greek New Testament based on the oldest manuscripts available to him was — like the innovations of the printer Gutenberg — a major factor in God’s preparations for the rediscovery and proclamation of the Gospel through Martin Luther and the Reformation.

Martin Luther’s belief that church leaders and church councils (and Bible translators) after the death of the New Testament apostles could be wrong in their judgments and interpretations drove the Christian Church back to the original sources: to the earliest Hebrew and Greek manuscripts of the Scriptures and to the Sacraments that were actually founded by Christ Himself instead of later dreamed up by “authorities” in the organized Christian Church.

And so it was Erasmus’ edition of the Greek New Testament that Luther carried with him when he was “abducted” to the Wartburg, there to produce a more accurate German translation of the New Testament.

Although Erasmus was a major force in drawing philosophers and theologians back to the ancient sources, his view of the Wittenberg monk soured, especially with the publication of Luther’s attack on Erasmus in *Bondage of the Will*. Erasmus could see the importance of the earliest Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, but he did not see by faith the clear teaching of that text when it came to the complete helplessness of humanity after the

fall in positively contributing to its own redemption.

We also do well to run back to the source of our Christian faith: the Word of God through the prophets and apostles. And we do well to return daily to the font where we first became Christ’s own child in Holy Baptism.

#### STANZA ONE

*All Christians who have been baptized, / Who know the God of heaven, / And in whose daily life is prized / The name of Christ once given: / Consider now what God has done, / The gifts He gives to ev’ryone / Baptized into Christ Jesus!*

**In this introductory stanza, Paul Gerhardt sings of Baptism as revealed in the Holy Scriptures: In grace and mercy Christ gave Himself unto death for a sinful and unclean humanity, that at the font we would be washed clean and given new life through His saving Word (EPH. 5:25–26). The daily confession of those given the name of Christ is “I am baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection!”**

**1.** Review “What does such baptizing with water indicate?” in Luther’s Small Catechism. How is our life one of daily returning to the source — the fountain of our faith? What do we do in our daily lives to remind ourselves of our identity in Christ?

#### STANZA TWO

*You were before your day of birth, / Indeed, from your conception, / Condemned and lost with all the earth, / None good, without exception. / For like your parents’ flesh and blood, / Turned inward from the highest good, / You constantly denied Him.*

**What were we before we were brought to the saving waters of Holy Baptism? Erasmus believed sinful people had the willpower to do good or evil. Luther points to what the Bible actually reveals: We are dead in sin (EPH. 2:1); we are self-serving (ROM. 7:15, 18–19; ST. AUGUSTINE); as Martin Luther reminds us in his Explanation of the First Commandment, our fallen hearts and minds are idol factories (Luther’s Large Catechism).**

**2.** From what did Baptism cleanse us? What was drowned in the holy waters of Baptism? (SEE EZEK. 36:25–27.) Our answer directly impacts our understanding of the severity of our fallen condition and the Lord’s greater solution for it. Jesus fulfilled all righteousness when He was baptized into our sin by John the Baptist in the Jordan River (MATT. 3:15). Erasmus believed fallen human will needed God’s help to do the good and reject the evil; Luther believed sinful human beings outside of Christ were completely helpless to get salvation started, or even desire the good and perfect will of God. In what ways does our old nature continue to do nothing other than excuse and accuse when confronted with the revealed will of God? (See the words to the hymn “The Law of God Is Good and Wise.”)

### STANZA THREE

*But all of that was washed away— / Immersed and drowned forever. / The water of your Baptism day / Restored again whatever / Old Adam and his sin destroyed / And all our sinful selves employed / According to our nature.*

**Holy Baptism gives what it promises. Review 1 Cor. 6:11 and Titus 3:5–7. Does Jesus command how water is to be applied in Holy Baptism? Holy Baptism by immersion is allowed in Lutheran congregations but has been discouraged since some evangelical churches mistakenly teach that only immersion is efficacious. Regardless of how the water is applied (sprinkling, pouring, immersion), the essential elements continue to be: the words of Christ according to His command in, with and under simple water (MATT. 28:19).**

**3.** Do you know the day of your Baptism? Do you celebrate it and give thanks to Christ for it on a regular basis? How can we remind ourselves of the greatness of that day when our sin was washed away forever?

### STANZA FOUR

*In Baptism we now put on Christ— / Our shame is fully covered / With all that He once sacrificed / And freely for us suffered. / For here the flood of His own blood / Now makes us holy, right, and good / Before our heav’nly Father.*

**We dare not come before our heavenly Father without being properly clothed. By Christ’s shame and death on the cross, we are covered in His perfect life and sacrificial death. His becoming sin for us results in the atonement of all our transgressions. His fulfillment of the Law is accounted to all who believe. “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (REV. 7:14).**

**4.** St. Peter could not be more clear: Holy Baptism actually saves weak and helpless sinners. How does he see Holy Baptism foreshadowed in the saving of Noah and his family (1 PETER 3; LUTHER’S FLOOD PRAYER)?

### STANZA FIVE

*O Christian, firmly hold this gift / And give God thanks forever! / It gives the power to uplift / In all that you endeavor. / When nothing else revives your soul, / Your Baptism stands and makes you whole / And then in death completes you.*

**These last two stanzas form an exhortation that we would joyfully hold fast each day to what Christ in His Word announces concerning this ongoing gift of Christ (ROM. 6:5–10).**

**5.** The work first begun with our Baptism will be complete after we fall asleep in Christ to awake in His heavenly presence. How does our daily thanksgiving for the life-giving gift of Holy Baptism — even in the face of suffering and despair — prepare us for an eternity in heaven?

### STANZA SIX

*So use it well! You are made new— / In Christ a new creation! / As faithful Christians, live and do / Within your own vocation, / Until that day when you possess / His glorious robe of righteousness / Bestowed on you forever!*

**Martin Luther broke with Erasmus in confessing our complete inability to create, sustain or complete a human righteousness that brings us into the holy presence of the Lord Almighty. We are made new not by our sincere desires or great philosophical arguments, but by the gracious redemption given by our Triune God by His Word spoken over us at the baptismal font. Through water and the Word, we are new creatures who live out a life that gives glory to God by serving our neighbor in need.**

**6.** It is Christian tradition to cover the newly baptized in a white gown. What does St. Paul reveal in Gal. 3:26–27 about the gift of righteousness freely bestowed at the baptismal font? Why does the Christian run back to the saving font each and every day?

