

The radical humility of Christ in the sixteenth century: Erasmus and Calvin on Philippians 2:6–7

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Abstract

The christological hymn in Philippians 2, rich as it is in theological potential, has always been a fruitful locus in the history of biblical interpretation for engaging in a number of doctrinal disputes which revolve around questions of the nature of Christ. Thus, an analysis of any chapter in the history of interpretation of the hymn (or at least parts of it) is necessary for understanding the ways in which Paul's text has informed christological discourse or, vice versa, how certain ways of thinking about Christology inform interpretations of the passage. In the sixteenth century, the hymn also serves as a jumping-off point for discussions of the authority of scripture in matters of doctrine, for whether Paul provides sufficient doctrinal fodder to ground an orthodox doctrine of the Trinity (particularly of the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son) will be brought into question, in particular, by Erasmus. Erasmus' understanding of the passage, as it appears in his *Annotations*, was criticised by numerous Catholics, and the ensuing debate (especially between Erasmus and Lefèvre) is fairly well known. The response Erasmus (and the surrounding debate) elicits from John Calvin, however, has scarcely been mentioned and, to my knowledge, never been examined in depth – this, despite the fact that Calvin's engagement with Erasmus on Philippians 2:6–7 departs from his usual method of *perspicua brevitatis* in commentary writing, and constitutes a significant digression on an array of christological and hermeneutical issues. These two verses, and their reception in the sixteenth century, provide a useful lens for analysing the christologies and the hermeneutical strategies of two biblical humanists who, perhaps, are not often enough considered alongside one another. A close reading of these two exegetes' interpretations of Philippians 2:6–7 will be followed by a consideration of the significance of their emphasis on the radical humility of Christ, which emphasis serves as a departure from the bulk of the antecedent exegetical and theological tradition.

Keywords: Calvin, Christology, Erasmus, history of interpretation, humility, Philippians 2.

There is a well-known painting by Hans Holbein the Younger called *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (c.1521), which depicts from a side view, in a

highly realistic and even grotesque manner, Jesus' body stretched out, his wounds visible, his mouth agape, his eyes rolled back into his head. Fyodor Dostoevsky was apparently fascinated by this painting, and had to be dragged away from viewing it in Basel by his wife – he had even pulled a chair up to the painting so as to get a better look – reportedly exclaiming, 'A man can even lose his faith from that painting!'¹ He reproduces this sentiment in his novel, *The Idiot*, which features a scene where the protagonist, Myshkin ('the prince'), comes across a print of the painting in Rogozhin's house (the original of which he, like the author, had already seen when abroad in Switzerland), and the following conversation occurs:

– 'But I've long wanted to ask you something, Lev Nikolaich: do you believe in God or not?' Rogozhin suddenly began speaking again, after going several steps.

– 'How strangely you ask and . . . stare!' the prince observed involuntarily.

– 'But I like looking at that painting,' Rogozhin muttered after a silence, as if again forgetting his question.

– 'At that painting!' the prince suddenly cried out, under the impression of an unexpected thought. 'At that painting! A man could even lose his faith from that painting!'

– 'Lose it he does,' Rogozhin suddenly agreed unexpectedly.²

Holbein's depiction of Christ in such a human fashion had a strong effect on Dostoevsky. How indeed could that dead body, almost translucent on its way towards putrefaction, have belonged to God? Bearing this image in mind, along with Dostoevsky's literary use of it, can help us, I think, to appreciate what is at stake in a christological and exegetical dispute which arose in the sixteenth century in response to comments made by Erasmus in his *Annotations on the New Testament*, and which was revisited by John Calvin in his commentary on Philippians. Erasmus' appreciation of, and focus on, the truly human nature of Christ in both his exegesis and in publicised controversies with, for example, fellow humanist Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, serves as an important informative role for Calvin's commentary on Philippians. And Calvin, even if he rejects Erasmus' contention that the christological hymn of Philippians 2 ought not to be used as supporting evidence for trinitarianism, is also criticised for his willingness to indulge

¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, tr. Pevear and Volokhonsky (London: Vintage, 2008), p. 624, n. 19.

² *Ibid.*, p. 218.

in the truly lowly aspects of Christ's human nature: in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, there is something scandalous about paying too much attention to the lowly human nature of Christ.³

The Philippians hymn, rich as it is in theological potential, has always been a fruitful locus in the history of biblical interpretation for engaging in a number of doctrinal disputes which revolve around questions of the nature of Christ. Thus, an analysis of any chapter in the history of interpretation of the hymn (or at least parts of it) is necessary for understanding the ways in which Paul's text has informed christological discourse or, vice versa, how certain ways of thinking about christology inform interpretations of the passage. In the sixteenth century, the hymn also serves as a jumping-off point for discussions of the authority of scripture in matters of doctrine, for whether Paul provides sufficient doctrinal fodder to ground an orthodox doctrine of the Trinity (particularly of the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son) will be brought into question, in particular, by Erasmus. Erasmus' understanding of the passage, as it appears in his *Annotations*, was criticised by numerous Catholics, and the ensuing debate (especially between Erasmus and Lefèvre) is fairly well known.⁴ The response Erasmus (and the surrounding debate) elicits from John Calvin, however, has scarcely been mentioned and, to my knowledge, never been examined in depth – this, despite the fact that Calvin's engagement with Erasmus on vv. 2:6–7 departs from his usual method of *perspicua brevitatis* in commentary writing, and constitutes a significant digression on an array of christological and hermeneutical issues.⁵ These two verses, and their reception in the sixteenth century, provide a

³ On the possible connection between Holbein's painting and the christological debates involving Erasmus in the early sixteenth century, see Jeanne Neuchterlein, *Translating Nature into Art: Holbein, the Reformation, and Renaissance Rhetoric* (University Park, PA: Penn State, 2011), esp. ch. 3.

⁴ For an overview of the debate and the ensuing fallout see Rummel, *Erasmus and his Catholic Critics*, vol. 2 (Nieuwkoop: DeGraaf, 1989), pp. 48–58. For a little bit more of a detailed overview of the christological stakes of the debate, see the introduction in *Collected Works of Erasmus (CWE)*, vol. 83 (pp. xviii ff.). Also two articles: John Payne, 'Erasmus and Lefèvre d'Étaples as Interpreters of Paul', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 65 (1974), pp. 54–83; James D. Tracy, 'Humanists among the Scholastics: Erasmus, More, and Lefèvre d'Étaples on the Humanity of Christ', *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook Five* (1985), pp. 30–51.

⁵ Indeed, while humanist influence on Calvin has long been recognised, his indebtedness to Erasmus in particular represents a vast lacuna in Calvin scholarship. Many Calvin scholars who do recognise the impact of humanist trends on Calvin's thought often point only to Protestants with humanist proclivities as vessels of influence. This sort of compartmentalising could be said to have been inaugurated by Calvin himself, who employed it in his discussion of his exegetical forebears (all Protestants – Melancthon, Bullinger, Bucer) in his oft-cited dedicatory letter appended to his *Commentary on Romans*

useful lens for analysing the christologies and the hermeneutical strategies of two biblical humanists who, perhaps, are not often enough considered alongside one another.⁶ A close reading of these two exegetes' interpretations of Philippians 2:6-7 will be followed by a consideration of the significance of their emphasis on the radical humility of Christ, an important theological topos in the late medieval and early modern period.

Erasmus on Philippians 2:6-7

The relevant Erasmus texts are his translation of and commentary on the New Testament itself, in particular the *Annotations* and *Paraphrases*, and also two polemical works that Erasmus wrote in response to critics of his New Testament notes: the *Apologia ad Fabrum*, which is a feisty treatise defending various comments Erasmus had made regarding the person of Christ against the humanist Faber Stapulensis (Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples), who attacked Erasmus for, among other things, allegedly denigrating the nature of the

– but it is an incomplete picture. While the extent of Calvin's humanism is not the purpose of this paper, the notion that Calvin engaged with Erasmus' *Annotations* very closely (and not always negatively) when writing his own commentaries informs our study. For specific studies, see Riemer Faber, 'The Influence of Erasmus' *Annotations* on Calvin's Commentary on Galatians', *Dutch Review of Church History* 84 (2004), pp. 268–83; Kirk Essary, 'Milk for Babes: Erasmus and Calvin on the Problem of Christian Eloquence', *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 16/3 (2014), pp. 246–65; idem, 'Calvin's Interpretation of Christ's Agony at Gethsemane: An Erasman Reading?', *Toronto Journal of Theology* 30/1 (Spring 2014), pp. 59–70; idem, *Pauline Folly in the Sixteenth Century: Erasmus, Calvin, and the Christian Philosophy* (in review). On the topic of Erasmus' influence on Calvin broadly speaking, see Olivier Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique de la parole: Etude de rhétorique réformée* (Bibliothèque littéraire de la Renaissance, Série 3; Paris: Champion, 1993); T. H. L. Parker, who has provided many examples (and compiled statistics) of Calvin's reception of Erasmus in *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993, pp. 164–84), although his analysis there is meant to be a broad overview, and primarily of Calvin's indebtedness (or lack thereof) to Erasmus' text-criticism. Also, for early influence, see Francois Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of his Religious Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), esp. p. 31; Ford Lewis Battles, *Calvin's Commentary on Seneca's De Clementia*, (Leiden: Brill, 1969), pp. 79–81. The strongest arguments come from William Bouwsma; see his 'Calvinism as Theologia Rhetorica?' in Wilhelm Wuellner (ed.), *Calvinism as Theologia Rhetorica* (Berkeley, CA: Center for Hermeneutical Studies, 1987), 1–21; 'Calvin and the Renaissance Crisis of Knowing', *Calvin Theological Journal* 17 (1982), pp. 190–211; and his biography, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York and Oxford: OUP, 1988).

⁶ See n. 5, and one recent exception: Debora Kuller Shuger's *The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice, and Subjectivity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010) has demonstrated, among other things, how much there is to be learned from a comparison of Erasman and Calvinist readings of the suffering of Christ.

Son;⁷ and the *Responsio ad annotationes Eduardi Lei* – Lee, a traditionalist Catholic critic, wrote a series of ‘Notes’ on the New Testament, many of which challenge Erasmus’ general humanist project, and his particular comments on the biblical text.⁸ The *Annotations on Philippians* is the most technical treatment Erasmus gives of the text in question, and it is to this text that Calvin responds directly.⁹ Christologically speaking, the heart of the matter lies for Erasmus (and eventually for his critics) in verse 6 (Erasmus’ annotation of this verse swells significantly through the various editions of his *Annotations*); Jerome’s Vulgate, the text which Erasmus comments on in the *Annotations*, reads: *qui cum in forma Dei esset, non rapinam arbitratus est esse se aequalem Deo* (who, being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be grasped).¹⁰ Ultimately, the difficulty (for everyone from Ambrosiaster to Calvin) is over what, precisely, *forma Dei* refers to. In his annotation on this verse, whose length dwarfs any other comment on any other verse in *Philippians*, Erasmus gives an especially controversial explanation. He tells us immediately that this is said of Christ *insofar as he was man* (*quatenus erat homo*). Moreover, the Latin *forma*, which translates the Greek *morphe*, is to be taken, according to Erasmus, as *species* or *figura* (‘image’ or ‘likeness’), as opposed, say, to Aristotelian *forma qua essence*.

Augustine and Hilary, however, Erasmus himself tells us, take *forma Dei* to refer not to Christ the man, but to Christ the eternal Word. The consequence of the patristic reading is that Christ did not think it robbery to be equal with God because he was, quite simply, already God. Erasmus eschews the tautology, however, and prefers the much less popular reading of ‘Ambrose’ (i.e. Ambrosiaster) who takes the phrase ‘form of God’ to mean that Christ had exhibited the figure of God through his miraculous deeds on earth

⁷ The christological dispute between Erasmus and Lefèvre started when Erasmus, in the *Novum Instrumentum* of 1516, criticised Lefèvre’s interpretation of Hebrews 2:7, which consists of a quotation of Ps 8:6 ‘For a little while you made him lower than the angels’. Phil 2:6 becomes, in Erasmus’ response, the crucial text on which his rebuttal to Lefèvre turns. Erasmus’ *Apologia ad Fabrum* was first printed in 1517. For details, see the introduction in *CWE* 83, and Rummel, *Erasmus and his Catholic Critics*.

⁸ The controversy with Lee took place over 1517–20, with Lee’s remarks culminating in the printing of his *Annotationum libri duo* against Erasmus in Paris in 1520; Erasmus replied in the same year. For details of the controversy and the printing history, see the introduction in *CWE* 72.

⁹ The *Annotations* were first published as an appendix, consisting primarily of philological commentary, to Erasmus’ *Novum Instrumentum* of 1516, and they grew through successive editions to include more historical and theological commentary; the *Paraphrase of Philippians* was first printed in 1521.

¹⁰ Erasmus’ 1535 *Novum Testamentum* reads: ‘qui cum esset in forma dei, non rapinam arbitratus est, ut esset aequalis deo’.

(which is to say that *forma Dei* refers, somehow, to Christ's human aspect). Erasmus quotes Ambrosiaster: 'What is the form of God if not an example that God has appeared, when he raises the dead, restores hearing to the deaf, and cleanses lepers?'¹¹ And then he explains: 'The divine Ambrose interprets *formam* as "specimen" or "exemplum," because, walking around in a human body, he brings forth evidence of his divinity.'¹² Furthermore, the parallel phrase *forma serui* ('form of a servant') in verse 2:7 does not refer to the human nature which Christ assumed, but to the example of suffering which he displayed for us: 'But insofar as [Christ] accepted the form of a servant, this does not seem to refer to his assumed human nature, but to the image (*species*) and likeness (*similitudinem*) of a sinner, which persona he had borne for us, when he was flogged, condemned, and crucified.'¹³

For Ambrosiaster, and for Erasmus, Paul's interest here is not ontological, but ethical: 'Paul has brought forth here as an example the voluntary humility of Christ, and his exaltation by the power of the Father.'¹⁴ 'Paul does not here tell us what Christ was', Erasmus writes, 'but of the sort of example which he bore clearly for us'.¹⁵ The whole hymn, according to Erasmus, is meant to instil humility, not to convey a doctrinal formula regarding the consubstantiality of the Son and Father. The *forma Dei* does not refer to the divine nature of Christ, as Augustine and Hilary have it, but refers to the form of God in a more mundane sense, as that exhibited by the miracles which Jesus worked on earth – and the *forma serui* does not refer to the human nature which Christ assumed, but to the example of suffering which he displayed for us. So, if one were to imagine a continuum in the history of Christian thought regarding christology, on one end of which is the *Christus sacramentum* model (wherein Christ is the justifying sacrifice for the sins of humanity), and on the other end is the *Christus exemplum* model (wherein the person of Christ serves primarily the function of the ethical example *par*

¹¹ *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi* (hereafter *ASD*) VI-9 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 290 (all translations of *Ann. Phil.* are my own): 'Forma enim, inquiens, Dei, quid est, nisi exemplum quod Deus apparet, dum mortuos excitat, surdis reddit auditum, leprosos mundat?'

¹² *ASD* VI-9, 289–90: 'Diuus Ambrosius *formam* interpretatur "specimen" seu "exemplum", quod in corpore humano obambulans aederet tamen argumenta diuinitatis'.

¹³ *ASD* VI-9, 290: 'Iam quod accepit *formam serui*, non proprie referri videtur ad humanam naturam assumptam, sed ad speciem et similitudinem hominis nocentis, cuius personam pro nobis gessit, dum flagellatur, damnatur, crucifigitur.'

¹⁴ *ASD* VI-9, 290: 'Siquidem ad exemplum Paulus huc produxit Christum sponte humilitatum et Patris autoritate exaltatum.'

¹⁵ *ASD* VI-9, 290: 'Non hic agit Paulus quid esset Christus, sed qualem se gereret videlicet nobis aedens exemplum.' This line in particular will come into play when we turn to Calvin's commentary on Philippians.

excellence), Erasmus, when reading Philippians, clearly prefers the latter – he simply doesn't think the Philippians hymn is *about* all that stuff they argued over in the early ecumenical councils. This is also manifest in the *Paraphrase* of this section in Philippians:

Do not be ashamed to follow the example of Jesus Christ . . . If he claimed primacy for himself, if he grasped at his own advantage, then among you, too, it would be proper to struggle for these things. But Christ, although he was by nature God, and, moreover, by his very deeds demonstrated that he was God – restoring the dead to life at will, changing natural elements, commanding the demons, with a word driving out all sorts of illnesses – still, in order to provide for us an example of perfect modesty, he did not demand for himself through vainglory that he be considered equal to God, but he humbled himself and lowered himself in the eyes of men, etc.¹⁶

Erasmus' somewhat peculiar reading of the Philippians hymn also has the result that he refuses to employ it as a proof text against the Arians, which had been a favourite pastime of Christian exegetes. In the *Annotations* we find Erasmus rejecting a long-standing tradition of the church fathers, who interpreted that passage to mean that 'Christ did not think it unlawful to claim equality with God, because he was of the same form or essence.'¹⁷ Erasmus writes:

And here they have held forth this passage especially as a club, with which the Arians are destroyed, for these want the Father alone truly to be God. However, if it is holy to proceed from truth, [we might ask] what great thing [on this reading] had Paul attributed to Christ – if when he was by nature God, he had known that this is not something to be grasped – that he knew himself? It is evident that there is no greater violence done to Holy Scripture than when, fighting against heretics, we twist everything we can to victory. And I do not see what this locus would accomplish specifically against the Arians, who do not deny of the Son of God that he is God; rather they acknowledge him to be a 'great God'¹⁸ and he is

¹⁶ CWE 43: 371.

¹⁷ This is the wording of James D. Tracy; see his essay, 'Erasmus and the Arians: Remarks on the "Consensus Ecclesiae"', *Catholic Historical Review* 61/1 (1981), p. 3.

¹⁸ *Magnus Deus* is contrasted with *verus Deus* by the Arians (the latter of which is reserved for the Father alone) (see Tracy, 'Erasmus and the Arians', p. 5). Tracy notes that elsewhere Erasmus cites the creed of Rimini in support of his defence of the Arians that they weren't quite as orthodox as everyone thought they were, but that he attributes a more orthodox theology to the creed that isn't in fact there.

praised as the God over all [created] things, but they judge that the Father is in some manner in particular to be called God, which manner the Son and the Holy Spirit are not said to be God.¹⁹

This is an important section for a number of reasons, not least of which is the polemical situation Erasmus becomes embroiled in over his position here. I will consider his polemical writings shortly; but it is worth pointing out Erasmus' position on the authority of scripture and the legitimacy of its uses. In short, in his *Apology against Lefèvre*, Erasmus is perfectly content to follow the party line on dogma, especially when the dogma flows forth from the authority of the church (so e.g. he rejects Arianism and Pelagianism on the grounds that the church rejects them). What he will not permit, however (at least in principle), is a *distorting* of scriptural texts to combat heresy. If the Bible cannot be clearly shown to overthrow Arianism (e.g.), then it should not be employed in the task (or, at the very least, we ought not to pretend that there is good, unambiguous evidence there one way or another – Erasmus does, though, think that *ratiocination* might be used to arrive at various orthodox theological positions, regarding, say, the Trinity, but he also insinuates that the Arians could arrive at their position legitimately as well, and even in some cases that they were smarter than the orthodox!).²⁰ And yet in this case, Erasmus tells us, it seems to him that 'the entire locus has been violently twisted to speak of the nature of Christ, while Paul speaks only of the image displayed to us'.²¹ And just before, he writes, 'He had concealed his divinity, and he had exhibited his humanity all the way to the grave . . . And even if occasionally a spark of his divine nature shone through, he always gave credit to the Father and never arrogated anything to himself.'²² The emphasis here is on the lowliness of Christ *qua* man: note here that even though Erasmus previously suggested (following Ambrose) that *forma Dei* referred to Christ's revealing his divinity on earth through miracles, etc., here he tempers that

¹⁹ ASD VI-9, 290: 'Atque hanc praecipuam habent clauam, qua conficiantur Ariani qui solum Patrem vere volunt esse Deum. Atqui si veris agere fas est, quid magni tribuit Paulus Christo, si cum Deus esset natura, intellexit id non esse rapinae, hoc est nouit seipsum? Illud autem compertum est nusquam maiorem vim fieri scripturis sacris quam ubi cum hareticis agentes nihil non detorquemus ad victoriam. Tametsi non video quid hic locus proprie faciat aduersus Arianos, qui non negabant Dei Filium esse Deum, imo et magnum Deum fatebantur et benedictum super omnia Deum, sed arbitrabantur Patrem aliquo modo peculiari dici Deum, quo Filius aut Spiritus sanctus non diceretur.'

²⁰ Tracy, 'Erasmus and the Arians', pp. 3ff.

²¹ ASD VI-9, 292: 'Proinde totus hic locus mihi videtur violentius detorqueri ad Christi naturam, cum Paulus agat de specie exhibita nobis.'

²² ASD VI-9, 291–2.

reading with the suggestion that this was very rare indeed, and in those cases where Christ's divine nature could have been discerned, he always credited the Father in order to maintain his humility.

To summarise, then, in the first place, Erasmus doesn't understand, on Augustine's reading, the significance of saying that Christ knew he was equal to God when he was equal to God. What exactly would it mean for Paul to say that Christ, *insofar as he was essentially divine*, knew this to be something not to be grasped? Is Paul simply saying that Christ knew himself? And, if so, what's so great about that? In the second place, even if Paul were speaking about Christ's nature, Erasmus doesn't think the passage quite specific enough to preclude an Arian reading: after all the Arians didn't deny the divinity of Christ, but only his absolute equality with the Father, which absolute equality is not adduced in the hymn. Finally (and this is perhaps most important in the broader context of Erasmus' hermeneutics), the real interest of Paul here, according to Erasmus, is to demonstrate Christ's humility so as to set forth a model for the actions of his followers. In other words, we ought to read the passage *tropologically*, and from the perspective of the *Christus exemplum* model. If Erasmus' reading of Paul here isn't quite radical, it was at least unusual enough to draw ire from Catholic quarters, and especially from Edward Lee and Jacques Lefèvre, against whose criticisms Erasmus had to defend himself. In his *Response to the New Testament Annotations of Edward Lee*, specifically the note on the phrase *Esse se aequalem Deo* of Philippians 2:6, Erasmus writes the following:

I stated that I was not unaware how this passage was interpreted by many of the old writers, namely that Christ was by nature divine, that he was equal to the Father, and that he assumed the form of a servant in assuming his humanity. Lee refutes this at length and explains to me what I proved that I know already, for I clearly stated in a lengthy argument that I was following Ambrose's interpretation, which interprets the form as the image and example of one who manifests himself as God in miracles. Ambrose says that the 'form of the servant' did not refer to the assumed human nature, but to the image of the sinner in which he was scourged and crucified. He explains that 'thought it not robbery' means that he did not claim divine nature for himself but everywhere professed his humanity, and as if he were concealing his divinity, embraced the other image to show us the true path to glory.²³

Here Erasmus shows his independence, for Lee had enumerated the authoritative tradition of the fathers against Erasmus' interpretation, but he continues to reject their reading in favour of Ambrosiaster's. Erasmus then

²³ CWE 72: 393. See ASD IX-4 for Latin.

reminds Lee of what he had already written in the *Annotations on Philippians*: ‘Consequently this whole passage [i.e. the Philippians hymn], it seems to me, is violently twisted to refer to Christ’s nature, whereas Paul is here speaking of the image (*de specie*) displayed to us.’ Erasmus will not abide misreadings for the sake of overthrowing heresies.

The most extensive treatment of this question in Erasmus’ corpus, however, is the *Apology against Lefèvre*, the entirety of which is a defence of his various statements about the lowly nature of Christ. I will offer only a few examples from the text which help to clarify Erasmus’ way of thinking when it comes to christology. Responding to Lefèvre’s charge of heresy regarding Erasmus’ claim that Christ was made lower than the lowliest of men, Erasmus writes, ‘I thought that it would redound to the glory of Christ if I stressed as much as possible the lowliness which he assumed of his own accord for our sakes. Paul, after all, went so far as to say that Christ “made himself desolate” (*exinanivit semetipsum*).’²⁴ Then, giving a gloss consonant with the *philosophia Christi*, and also making a distinction between the exalted Christ or the eternal Word, which is relevant primarily for the future life, and the humiliated Christ, which is relevant for us while on earth, he writes:

You prefer to extol the sublimity of Christ; someone else may prefer to contemplate the lowliness which he assumed; and though it would be difficult to say whose zeal is more pious, it is the latter perhaps from which more profit is to be gained for the present. Moreover I am inclined to think that Christ himself would prefer that we concentrate upon that aspect of himself which he exhibited for us most, waiting to display the glory of his majesty for the time to come. St Paul, certainly, takes pride in knowing only Jesus Christ the crucified, that is, not the Christ who was raised on high, but Christ in his humble state.²⁵

Erasmus wishes to emphasise the cross as the beginning point of christology. The whole of the gospel, for Erasmus, is about the humility of Christ. And finally, lest we forget that Paul is on Erasmus’ side, he then gives the clearest

²⁴ CWE 83: 33–4. See ASD IX-3 for Latin of the *Apologia ad Fabrum*.

²⁵ CWE 83: 35. Passages like these make me hesitant in following John Payne and James Tracy in their estimation of Erasmus as a subordinationist. There is no question that he emphasises the humanity of Christ, and this as much as any thinker in the history of the tradition who remains christologically orthodox, but I don’t see the evidence for suggesting that the divine aspect of Christ is subordinate to the Father. For a recent treatment of Erasmus’ position on the Trinity and its orthodoxy, mostly through an evaluation of his *Paraphrase of John*, see Christine Christ-von Wedel, *Erasmus of Rotterdam: Advocate of a New Christianity* (Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 2013), pp. 111ff.

theological explanation in his corpus of his understanding of *kenosis* – it is worth quoting at length:

I have explained with so many witnesses and so many arguments that Christ was diminished not just a little but a great deal. But imagine that I am stripped of all my support troops, that I am facing you with one weapon only, which Paul himself supplies when he says, ‘He desolated himself’ – where will you turn? What stratagem will you use to escape? Will you interpret ‘desolated’ to mean that he humiliated himself to a small extent? Who would not burst into hissing and hooting at that interpretation, and judge it worthy, if anything is, of all the hellebore in Anticyra? It is like someone interpreting the saying ‘Pleasure destroys the mind’s faculties’ to mean that pleasure has a slight weakening effect upon the mind’s faculties, or someone announcing the annihilation of the army as the loss of a few soldiers. What the verb *exinanire* means to Latin writers is clear enough: Quintus Curtius used it to mean ‘exhaust.’ Paul’s Greek reads *ekenosen*, that is, ‘He emptied,’ or alternatively, ‘He reduced himself to nothing,’ so that he could not have found a stronger verb to emphasize the utter humiliation of Christ and to express the extreme degree of his diminution.²⁶

So if Faber Stapulensis or any of Erasmus’ readers are not convinced by the innumerable biblical and extra-biblical sources he has cited in his rather long rebuttal, the one text which cannot be understood in any way other than to say that Christ was made absolutely desolate, utterly humiliated, is Philippians 2:7. *Kenosis*, for Erasmus, means the utter desolation of Christ, and does not only refer to the divine Christ assuming human nature.²⁷ He explains further in his *Annotation* that Paul’s *ekenosen* means *fecit humillimum et nihili*, i.e. he made himself superlatively low and nothing. And he even claims that Paul could have found no stronger word to describe a humiliation more dire.

So, Erasmus has argued, not only in his *Annotations*, but also in his polemical works, that he does not think Paul is trying to convey anything *metaphysical* or *ontological* about the person of Christ, but is positing Christ as an example of humility for humanity. However, and even though Erasmus denounces those

²⁶ CWE 83: 60–1 (Lefèvre had suggested that Erasmus was in need of Anticyran hellebore for his insane interpretations, and Erasmus repeats the adage a number of times in the *Apologia*).

²⁷ It is worth mentioning, perhaps, that here he actually quotes the Vulgate *exinanire*, while his own Latin edition beginning in 1519 provides the verb *inanire* – meaning, presumably, that he didn’t think the difference to be all that significant. He also offers *submitis* and *deiecit* as possible translations of *ekenose* (see ASD VI-9, 294).

who twist Holy Scripture to serve their purposes, it is perhaps no accident that his reading of the text is in strong conformity with his own general theological programme, namely, the *philosophia Christi*.²⁸ *Kenosis*, for Erasmus, denotes the radical self-emptying of the Son of God to the point that he is *even lower than humans*. Jesus doesn't, as a man, think equality with God something to be grasped, and so he humbles himself – and he doesn't only humble himself, he subjects himself to the worst lowliness; and, furthermore, this is *pro nobis* – for us! The Philippians hymn for Erasmus is a moral text, not a metaphysical text. On this reading, any attempt to employ this text against heretics like the Arians is misguided, for in such an attempt (and many have been made in the history of the church) the exegete is forced to do violence to the text so that it has some bearing on unrelated doctrinal controversies.

A broader theme emerges from the above considerations: at least as far as Philippians goes, you cannot separate Erasmus' theology from his exegesis, no matter how often he himself tried to do so rhetorically – his moral or practical theology (which is to say, his *theology*) arises out of his strong interest in the moral sense of scripture.²⁹ While Erasmus of course never did have, and perhaps was never interested in having, the ears of a congregation, perhaps his pastoral proclivities have been too often neglected, and probably we can better understand him if we read his theological and exegetical writings while keeping these concerns in mind. But at the very least, Erasmus' interpretation and use of Philippians 2:6–7 substantiates the move away from understanding Erasmus purely (or even mostly) as a text-critic in his exegesis, and towards casting him as a theologian and exegete interested in promoting the *philosophia Christi*.

John Calvin on Philippians 2:6–7

Calvin's commentary on Philippians was first published in 1548, and printed by Jean Girard in Geneva alongside commentaries on Galatians, Ephesians

²⁸ The relationship between the *philosophia Christi* and Erasmus' preference for moral, or tropological, interpretation is long recognised; see Albert Rabil, *Erasmus and the New Testament* (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 1972), p. 101; John Payne, 'Toward the Hermeneutics of Erasmus', in Joseph Coppens (ed.), *Scrinium Erasmusianum*, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1969), p. 47; Riemer A. Faber, 'Desiderius Erasmus' Representation of Paul', in R. Ward Holder (ed.), *A Companion to Paul in the Reformation* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), p. 49.

²⁹ The idea of Erasmus as a theologian took on full force in North American scholarship in the 1970s. An exceptional overview of these trends with bibliography up to the turn of the century can be found in Bruce Mansfield, *Erasmus in the Twentieth Century* (Buffalo, NY: Toronto University Press, 2003). See more recently, Christine Christ-von Wedel, *Erasmus of Rotterdam: Advocate of a New Christianity* (Buffalo, NY: Toronto University Press, 2013).

and Colossians; these were then revised for a collection of commentaries on all the Pauline epistles in 1551 and one final time in 1556, printed by Robert Estienne.³⁰ Calvin, in his comments on our verses, takes the opportunity to clarify his own position against everyone from Marcion to Erasmus, with the Paris theologians (or, the ‘Sorbonnist Sophists’, as he likes to call them) drawing special ire. Calvin twice explicitly disagrees with Erasmus’ theological reading of the hymn, and these instances are worth considering in some detail. Calvin, as an explicitly stated methodological principle, rarely spends much time in his commentaries developing theological loci or entering into lengthy *disputationes* with other exegetes, but here he violates his own principle of *perspicua brevitatis* to engage with Erasmus at length on the theological implications of this passage.³¹ The commentaries were not written for the express purpose of debating various dogmatic issues revolving around theological loci – this is what Calvin wrote the *Institutes* for. Thus, it is even more significant when we find a page-and-a-half digression on a specific dogmatic issue in the commentaries. Where Calvin disagrees with Erasmus is, as one might expect, in regard to the hymn’s usefulness in combating Arianism. Calvin follows Augustine and Hilary, and just about everyone else, in his reading of the crucial phrase in *forma Dei esset* (being in the form of God). It refers to Christ insofar as he is divine. He writes:

The form of God here means his majesty. For as a man is known by the appearance of his form, so the majesty which shines forth in God is his figure. Or if you prefer a more apt simile, the form of a king is the equipage and magnificence which shows him to be a king, his scepter, his crown, his attendants, etc. Christ then, before the creation of the world, was in the form of God, because from the beginning He had His glory with the Father, as He says in John 17:5 (‘So now Father glorify me in your presence with the glory we shared before the world’). For in the wisdom of God, before He assumed our flesh, there was nothing mean or contemptible, but a magnificence worthy of God. Being such as He was,

³⁰ For the Latin provided in the notes, I provide Feld’s critical edition, *COR II/2* (Geneva: Librarie Droz, 1992). I’ve consulted the original 1548 Geneva printing (by Jean Girard), and the final 1556 printing (by Robert Estienne) for variants.

³¹ The best treatments of Calvin’s method in this regard are Parker, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, and Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), esp. ch. 2. As Muller shows, in many places Calvin sets out an exegetical method which purports to avoid Bucer’s burdensome style (in favour of ‘lucid brevity’) while retaining his method of providing a running commentary, which latter is opposed to Melancthon’s method of gathering together loci at the expense of commenting on every single verse (the latter Calvin sought to accomplish in his *Institutes*). His digression on Phil 2:6 is uncharacteristic, and thus all the more worth a closer look.

He could with perfect right show Himself equal with God; but He did not manifest Himself to be what He was, nor did He openly assume in the view of men what was His of right.³²

In the first place, we notice that whereas Erasmus thinks that Christ did show himself to be in the form of God by working miracles, but never took the credit and much more often displayed his abject humanity, Calvin thinks that while Christ could have shown himself to be in the form of God while on earth, he didn't – instead he concealed his majesty throughout. This reading demands that verse 2:6 refer to the pre-incarnate Word, the *Logos asarkos*. Calvin writes, 'He is utterly blind who does not perceive that His eternal divinity is clearly set forth in these words.'³³ That is, while Calvin doesn't think that Christ himself exhibited his divine nature to any meaningful extent while on earth, he nevertheless thinks that Paul describes it in Philippians 2:6. Furthermore, the voluntary nature of Christ's abasement demands, according to Calvin, a modified Latin translation. Where Erasmus, following the Vulgate, has *non rapinam arbitratus est* – he didn't think it robbery (to be equal with God) – in the indicative, Calvin claims that we must use the subjunctive, for the context demands it; and so he translates *non rapinam arbitratus esset* – he would not have thought it robbery (to be equal with God).³⁴ He could have appeared as God, but he freely humbled himself in the form of a servant.

Calvin goes on, 'Nor is Erasmus modest enough in attempting, by his quibbles, to explain away this passage, as well as others like it. He acknowledges everywhere that Christ is God; but how does his orthodox confession help me if my faith is not supported by any scriptural authority?'³⁵ The implicit criticism here consists of a negative evaluation of Erasmus' understanding of scriptural authority. And then the crux: 'I acknowledge,

³² *Comm. Phil.* (tr. Parker), p. 247. 'Forma Dei hic maiestatem significat. Quaemadmodum enim homo ex formae aspectu cognoscitur: ita maiestas, quae in Deo relucet, ipsius est figura. Aut si aptiorem similitudinem malis, forma regis est apparatus et splendor, qui regem indicat: ut sceptrum, diadema, chlamys, apparitores, tribunal, et caetera regni insignia . . . Christus ergo ante mundum conditum in forma Dei erat: quia apud patrem, gloriam suam obtinebat ab initio, ut dicit Ioan. 17, 5. Nam in Dei sapientia, priusquam carnem nostram indueret, nihil humile erat vel abiectum, sed magnificentia Deo digna. Talis quum esset, absque iniuria poterat aequalem Deo gerere: sed non prae se tulit quod erat, neque palam sumpsit in oculis hominum quod iure suum erat' (COR II/2, 320).

³³ *Philippians* (tr. Parker), p. 247.

³⁴ 'Verum contextus requirit modum subiunctivum' (COR II/2, 321).

³⁵ COR II/2, 321: 'Nec satis verecunde Erasmus, qui tam hunc locum quam alios similes eludere suis cavillis conatur. Fatetur quidem ubique Christum esse Deum. Sed quid me iuvat orthodoxa eius confessio, si nulla Scripturae autoritate fulciatur mea fides?'

certainly, that Paul does not mention here Christ's divine essence; but it does not follow from this that the passage is not sufficient to overthrow the impiety of the Arians . . . For where is there "equality with God" without "robbery", unless only with respect to the essence of God?³⁶ So even though Paul does not mention Christ's divine essence, he does clearly set forth his eternal divinity. The heart of the matter for Calvin is Paul's claim that Christ wouldn't have considered it robbery to be equal with God, and he thinks that we can establish Christ's divine essence indirectly by beginning there – for what else could Paul be talking about when he says that there was no robbery of equality with God, unless he is talking about robbery of equality with respect to *God's essence*? If Christ refused to seize equality with God while on earth, this implies that he could have done so, and it must follow that he is in every manner equal with the Father.

He also provides a somewhat intractable argument:

Form means figure or appearance, as they commonly say; but where will there be found, apart from God, such a form, that is neither false nor forged? As, then, God is known by His powers, and His works are witnesses of His eternal divinity, as Rom 1:20 says, so Christ's divine essence is rightly proved from Christ's majesty, which He possessed equally with the Father before He humbled Himself. As for myself, not all the devils would wrest this passage from me, inasmuch as there is in God a most solid argument from His glory to His essence, which two things are inseparable.³⁷

Here he concedes (again) that *form* means *figure*, and not something like Aristotelian form qua essence, but then suggests that the true *form of God*, even if this be a *figure*, must legitimately point to, or *signify*, the divine essence – else it's a mere idol. To tease this out a bit, remember Calvin's previous claim: 'I acknowledge, certainly, that Paul does not mention here Christ's divine essence; but it does not follow from this, that the passage is not sufficient to

³⁶ *Philippians*, pp. 247–8; modified. COR II/2, 321: 'Fateor sane Paulum de divina Christi essentia non facere mentionem. Sed non sequitur propterea, quin locus ad profligandam Arrianorum impietatem sufficiat, qui fingeant Christum Deum creatum et Patre minorem, consubstantialem negabant.'

³⁷ *Philippians* (tr. Parker), p. 248; COR II/2, 322: 'Forma figuram significat, vel apparentiam, ut vulgo loquuntur. id quoque fateor: sed an extra Deum reperietur talis forma non fallax, neque ementita? Sicut ergo a suis virtutibus cognoscitur Deus, et opera eius testimonia sunt aeternae eius divinitatis, Rom. 1, 20: ita rite divina Christi essentia probatur ex Christi maiestate, quam aequalem cum patre habebat, antequam se ipsum humiliaret. Mihi certe ne omnes quidem diaboli hunc locum extorqueant: quia in Deo firmissimum est argumentum a gloria ad essentiam: quae duo inseparabilia sunt.'

overthrow the impiety of the Arians.’ Erasmus, one can imagine, would have responded, *Of course it does!* – if the passage doesn’t mention Christ’s divine essence, then it follows quite clearly that it is insufficient to overthrow the Arians; otherwise, we are forced to provide what Erasmus calls a ratiocination, which is precisely what Calvin does. Calvin claims there to be a ‘most solid argument’ from God’s glory, which is found in Christ if we take *being in the form of God* to refer to the pre-incarnate Word, even if he concealed his majesty when he humbled himself. That is, if form is equivalent to majesty, and we can get from majesty to glory, and from glory to essence then, Christ having been in the form of God before humbling himself, must also have had the same essence. If the details are somewhat difficult to comprehend,³⁸ we get some way towards understanding Calvin’s interpretation by looking more closely at his hermeneutical programme – it is imperative for Calvin that orthodox doctrine be discoverable in the biblical text itself, even if it isn’t explicit there.

Calvin’s dispute with Michael Servetus, the anti-trinitarian who was infamously burned at the stake in Calvin’s Geneva in 1553, no doubt provided impetus for Calvin’s energised position here. Correspondence between the two had begun in 1546, and it would have been ongoing as Calvin wrote his commentary, which appeared in 1548, but he had probably read Servetus much earlier, for his *De Trinitatis Erroribus* was published first in 1531. The conflict with the Arians was not a nostalgic historical event of little consequence for Calvin, but an ongoing battle, and one given new life in the wake of humanist textual criticism of the New Testament. And as Calvin himself reminds us (‘How does Erasmus’ orthodox confession help me if I can’t substantiate it with biblical evidence?’), he needs the dogmatic decisions made at the early councils to be verified in the text of scripture, for he cannot fall back so easily, as Erasmus can, on the *consensus Ecclesiae*.³⁹ Several years later, in his treatise against Servetus, which was also a defence of Servetus’ execution,⁴⁰ Calvin invokes Philippians 2:6, insisting that, even in his desolation, none of the divinity of Christ had been diminished, but that it had been concealed beneath the obscure and contemptible weakness

³⁸ Randall Zachman deals with this line of reasoning briefly in *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), pp. 260–1.

³⁹ Indeed, as Peter Bietenholz has noted, Servetus was well aware of Erasmus’ *Annotations* when crafting his own *De Trinitatis erroribus*, and he repeats Erasmus’ assertion that Paul did not have Christ’s two natures in mind when composing his letter to the Philippians: *Encounters with a Radical Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), p. 36.

⁴⁰ *Defensio orthodoxae fidei de sacra trinitate contra prodigiosos errores Michaelis Serveti Hispani*, written somewhat hastily, and printed in 1554.

of the flesh.⁴¹ Calvin possessed a strong animosity towards Neo-Arianism, and Erasmus' position is clearly troubling to him. For Calvin, Paul, even if he doesn't mention Christ's divine essence, does give us enough to work with in order to arrive at an orthodox understanding of the relationship of the Son to the Father.

Thus, Calvin clearly and vehemently rejects Erasmus' interpretation of Philippians 2:6, but the way he uses Erasmus when commenting on 2:7 ('he emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of man') is remarkable. First, we find Calvin attempting a final blow against Erasmus: 'It is asked whether he [emptied himself] insofar as he was a man. Erasmus affirmat.' 'But where', Calvin asks, 'was the *forma Dei* before he was man? We must respond that it is of the whole person of Christ which Paul speaks, as it is God manifest in the flesh: The emptying, nevertheless, refers only to his humanity.'⁴² Calvin here wants verse 2:7 also to say something about the nature of Christ, making it so that the hymn in general refers to the whole person of Christ, divine and human. But the *kenosis*, the self-emptying, refers only to Christ's humanity. Christ is only degraded, and abased, insofar as he is man. He elaborates on this: 'This emptying is the same as abasement . . . The expression, however, is used more emphatically for *being brought to nothing*. Christ, indeed, could not renounce his divinity, but he kept it concealed for a time, that under the weakness of the flesh it might not be seen. Hence he laid aside his glory in the view of men, not by lessening, but by suppressing it.'⁴³ So Christ, being in the form of God before the incarnation was equal to God, but once he has taken on the flesh, his divinity is undetectable. Calvin suggests that the *kenosis*, the humiliation, does refer to all those terrible things which happened to Jesus while he was on earth, but that it refers only to his human aspect.

To this extent, then, he agrees with Erasmus (rejecting only Erasmus' contention that the *forma Dei* does not refer to Christ's divine nature), and he

⁴¹ 'Nego aliquid de gloria divinitatis fuisse imminutum: sed quia in carnis infirmitate obscura et contempta delituit, Christus ipse, qui unus est homo et Deus, dicitur exinanitus fuisse.' Ioannis Calvini, *Scripta Didactica et Polemica*, vol. 5, ed. Kleinstuber (Geneva: Droz, 2009), p. 32.

⁴² COR II/2, 322. My translation; 'Quaeritur an id fecerit quatenus homo. Erasmus affirmat. Sed ubi erat forma Dei antequam homo esset? Itaque respondendum est, de toto Christo Paulum loqui, ut est Deus manifestatus in carne: hanc tamen inanitionem non convenire nisi soli humanitati.'

⁴³ COR II/2, 322: 'Inanitio haec eadem est cum humiliatione, de qua postea videbimus. Sed *emphatikoteros* hoc dictum, pro in nihilum redigi. Non potuit quidem Christus abdicare se divinitate: sed eam ad tempus occultam tenuit, ne appareret sub carnis infirmitate. Itaque gloriam suam non minuendo, sed supprimendo in conspectu hominum deposuit.'

proceeds to emphasise the radical nature of Christ's humiliation especially the really human aspects of the incarnation, which is to say that his exegesis here focuses on the question of the nature of Christ. But Calvin then changes his exegetical strategy: the Marcionites, he tells us, interpret the next clause of 2:7, 'and he was made in the likeness of men', in conformity with their docetist views (which is to say, they interpret it literally – Christ only looked like a man); but they can easily be refuted if we realise the obvious: Paul, Calvin tells us, isn't here talking about the nature of Christ, but about the condition in which he lived in the world. This should sound familiar – it is precisely Erasmus' strategy against those who use the passage to combat Arianism. Again, at *Institutes*, II.13.2 (beginning in 1539), Calvin, here also asserting Marcion's misuse of Philippians 2:7, responds with an almost verbatim Erasmian reading:

[Paul's] object is not to show what kind of body Christ assumed, but that, when he might have justly asserted his divinity, he was pleased to exhibit nothing but the attributes of a mean and despised man. For, in order to exhort us to submission by his example . . . he voluntarily emptied himself; he assumed the form of a servant, and, contented with that humble condition, suffered his divinity to be concealed under a veil of flesh. Here, unquestionably, [Paul] explains not what Christ was, but in what way he carried himself.⁴⁴

Calvin's Latin, of the italicised sentence, is: *Hic certe non docet quid fuerit Christus, sed qualiter se gesserit*. Erasmus had written, in refuting those who employ this verse against the Arians: *Non hic agit Paulus quid esset Christus, sed qualem se gereret videlicet nobis aedens exemplum*. To summarise, then, for Erasmus it is inappropriate to use the Philippians hymn against the Arians, because the passage is not about Christ's nature, but about how he carried himself as an example for us. For Calvin, Philippians 2:6 should be used to fight against the Arians, because we can deduce the divine nature of Christ thence (it is about Christ's nature); but when the Marcionites use the next verse (2:7) to talk about

⁴⁴ Modified Battles' translation (my emphasis). 'Nam, ut eius exemplo nos hortetur ad submissionem ostendit, quum Deus esset, potuisse mundo gloriam suam conspicuam statim proponere; cecidisse tamen iure suo, et sponte se ipsum exinanisse; quia scilicet imaginem servi induit, et ea humilitate contentus, carnis velamine suam divinitatem abscondi passus est. Hic certe non docet quid fuerit Christus, sed qualiter se gesserit.' Erasmus, against the anti-Arians: 'Non hic agit Paulus quid esset Christus, sed qualem se gereret videlicet nobis aedens exemplum.' Erasmus, summarising Ambrosiaster: 'Iam quod accepit formam servi, non proprie referri videtur ad humanam naturam assumptam, sed ad speciem et similitudinem hominis nocentis, cuius personam pro nobis gessit, dum flagellatur, damnatur, crucifigitur' (*ASD* VI-9, 290).

Christ's nature, it is easy for Calvin to refute them because Paul is not there talking about Christ's nature, but about how he carried himself! Calvin here transposes (both in his commentary and in his *Institutes*), with little more than a modification of the mood of the verbs, Erasmus' argument about the ways in which the hymn can legitimately be used, but in order to employ it against an entirely different ancient heresy. He has officially milked these two verses for all they're worth. Calvin not only uses Philippians 2 to refute Arianism, but he also criticises Erasmus' refusal to refute Arianism; and then he takes Erasmus' exegetical argument which he has just refuted in that context and, a half a page later, uses it *himself* to refute the Marcionites. There are a number of directions one could take from here: one could assess the different understandings of scriptural authority which become clearer in this comparison, or one could consider the implications of Calvin following Erasmus on reading Philippians 2:7 more or less tropologically to see how this might lead to reformulations of traditional understandings of Calvin's christology. Here, however, for the sake of brevity, I will confine myself to a few comments on the 'realism' of the christologies of Erasmus and Calvin, which arises from their interpretations of passages like the one I have considered here. For both Erasmus and Calvin focus closely on the radical lowliness of Christ as a model of humility, and both are criticised for their positions on this matter.

'A man could even lose his faith from that painting!'

Focusing on the radical lowliness of Christ in the thought of Erasmus and Calvin results in the need for some revision of previous understandings of their christologies in the scholarly literature. John Payne begins his chapter on Erasmus' christology with a reference to the *Sileni Alcibiadis* of 1515, and explains Erasmus' dualistic position there:

Like Silenus, Christ has the appearance of weakness, poverty, and ignominy, but when seen by those whose eyes have been opened, he is observed to possess power, riches, and glory. In the case of both Scripture and Christ the divine purpose is at work to cause us to look with spiritual eyes beyond the outward to the inward, beyond the physical to the spiritual . . . There is undeniably a certain tendency of Erasmus toward a spiritualistic understanding of Christ.⁴⁵

If this is true of Erasmus in the *Sileni*, it would certainly be a strange way of understanding his *Annotations on Philippians*, and all of the polemical material

⁴⁵ John Payne, *Erasmus: His Theology of the Sacraments* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1970), p. 54.

adduced above, all of which was initially composed around the same time. What we have seen in these later works is explicit attention to the physical Christ (and even an argument that Christ himself would have wanted us to focus on his human nature!) – thus, even if by ‘spiritualistic understanding’ Payne means something like ‘an understanding that transforms the individual morally’, his claim that Erasmus is interested in peering beyond the physical aspects of Christ is problematised by our texts, for in these it is precisely the literal and physical that Erasmus finds important, so as to induce Christians to humility.⁴⁶ Erasmus, as we have seen, argues that Christ, much more often than not, displayed his humanity and that there was a reason for this: he wished to present himself as an example of humility.

Regarding the relationship of the Son to the Father, moreover, Payne describes Erasmus’ christology as Origenistic, and says that there is a ‘definite strand of subordinationism’ in his thought.⁴⁷ As proof he points out that Erasmus continually refers to the Father as the absolute *principium*. This, however, is not tantamount to subordinationism.⁴⁸ In such cases it is all the more important to keep in mind that Erasmus makes a distinction between correct biblical exegesis in a particular case and correct doctrine, even if the lines are blurry at times, and especially when he’s engaged in tropological exegesis. More precisely, Erasmus’ persistent focus on the lowliness of Christ in his exegetical and moral-theological works does not entail subordinationism. Erasmus’ position both on the ‘spiritualistic understanding’ and on the relationship of the Son to the Father can be clarified if we keep in mind what Payne himself argues, namely that Erasmus quite consistently speaks of the two natures of Christ ‘along Antiochian lines’, which is to say that he is *more* interested in their distinctiveness than in their union (although it is a matter of emphasis, and again, really, a matter of exegesis: Erasmus is no Nestorian, despite Lefèvre’s accusations). While it may be true that Erasmus’ depiction of the lowly human Christ is somewhat more realistic and, therefore, provocative, than his predecessors’, unless clear evidence is offered of either subordinationism or of Nestorian tendencies, or proof that his appeals to the *consensus Ecclesiae* (which denies both

⁴⁶ Indeed, Payne himself will go on to point out Erasmus’ ‘Antiochian’ proclivities in his discussions of the two natures of Christ.

⁴⁷ Payne, *Erasmus: His Theology of the Sacraments*, p. 58.

⁴⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus (*de facto* Bishop of Constantinople during, and co-convenor of, the Second Ecumenical Council of 381, whence comes the final version of the only truly authoritative document regarding orthodox trinitarianism in the entire Christian tradition) uses this language (in Greek, *arche*), as does Calvin. On Gregory, see Christopher Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), esp. ch. 4; For Calvin, see *Institutes* 1.13.6, 1.13.25.

subordinationism and Nestorianism) for dogma are somehow disingenuous, I see no good reason to question Erasmus' orthodox trinitarianism.⁴⁹

And yet, the fact that Erasmus never explicitly departed from traditionally 'orthodox' christological formulations doesn't mean that he added nothing new to the scene. As Payne writes, 'In his close attention to the facts of revelation, as Bouyer suggests, Erasmus may have made an important contribution to theology.'⁵⁰ While christological realism is not theologically novel in the sixteenth century – his humanity is the focus of much late medieval art – Erasmus' 'close attention to the facts of revelation', and his repeated descriptions of the true humanity of Christ may constitute something original in their emphasis. The strong reaction he got from both friends and enemies is itself a testament to this originality. Debora Kuller Shuger, commenting on Erasmus' debate with Colet over the humanity of Christ (the *De Tædio Iesu*, first printed in 1503), contrasts Colet's Stoic Christ with Erasmus' Christ who subjects himself to psychological weakness, while acknowledging its debt to late medieval piety: 'The Erasmian Christ, unlike Colet's spiritual athlete, resembles the terrible and piteous figure of late medieval art: "deformed, destitute, and abject".'⁵¹ Shuger, furthermore, suggests that Erasmus' attention to the facts of revelation is more properly anthropological than christological, which is to say, presumably, that Erasmus works from his understanding of what it is to be human towards a formulation of what it means that God became man. It is important for Erasmus that Christ experienced the anguish which often attends a submission to the will of the Father, and this means more than suffering merely bodily with Stoic psychological fortitude.⁵² In any case, the final judgement on Erasmus' christology as far as his exegesis of Philippians 2:6–7 is concerned, must lay emphasis on the fact that he more or less refuses to engage in the traditional form of debate on this question, which latter employed speculative-theological categories which could only serve to detract from the example of humility set forth for Christians in the person of Jesus Christ. The mode of exegesis conforms to the subject matter. Instead

⁴⁹ Tracy concurs with Payne's estimation of Erasmus' subordinationism, but provides no argument (see his 'Erasmus and the Arians').

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁵¹ Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible*, p. 102.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 102–3, for a discussion of Christ as a model of the riven self, with a divided will. If Shuger is correct in her interpretation of Erasmus, we might suggest that his concept of the fragmented self, articulated so clearly by Augustine in his *Confessions*, is not, as it is in Augustine, a result of sin, but is an innate fact of what it is to be human. Even more intriguingly, Shuger connects Erasmus' divided self to the self-as-audience of the later Calvinist passion narratives (see pp. 104–5).

of pondering the philosophical subtleties of the paradox of the incarnation, Erasmus is content in *Ann. Phil.* to assert the hiddenness of Christ's divinity beneath his humanity – the *kenosis* consists of Christ concealing his divine nature when he assumed the human nature, and all as an example of humility.

Calvin, by contrast, even if he isn't too keen on speculative flights (ultimately the idea that God assumes human nature is, according to Calvin, an *ineffabile arcanum*)⁵³, is happy to think about Philippians 2:6–7 in terms of its usefulness in combating ancient christological heresies (some of which were being revived in the sixteenth century). From this perspective, Calvin makes it clear that this text is sufficient not only for demonstrating Christ's consubstantiality with the Father (against the Arians), but also of the reality of the humanity of Christ (against the Marcionites). As David Willis points out, Calvin's favourite expression for describing the mystery of Christ is from 1 Timothy 3:16: *Deus manifestus in carne*, and we have seen him use this phrase in his *Commentary on Philippians*.⁵⁴ And yet, Calvin too is capable of composing striking formulations of the truly human nature of Christ. Indeed, Calvin seems to be taking up the Erasmian line in his meditations on Christ's humanity elsewhere in his writings. Apart from what we've seen above, Calvin's exegesis of the Garden of Gethsemane scene, both in his commentary on the Gospel harmony, and in his first sermon on Christ's passion argues for Christ's fear of death as a true testament to his full humanity.⁵⁵ In the *Institutes*, Calvin waxes realist without hesitation, focusing specifically on Christ's psychological despair: for example, in explaining Christ's *descensus ad infernum*, described in the Apostle's Creed, instead of understanding this literally, Calvin gives a psychological explanation of which Erasmus surely would have approved: the idea that Christ descended into hell to free imprisoned souls Calvin chides as childish, and nothing but a story – instead, Christ's descent represents the psychological torment he underwent on his way to death on the cross. Christ certainly did suffer bodily, but 'he paid a greater and more excellent price in suffering in his soul the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken man'.⁵⁶

Interestingly, Calvin himself mentions in the next section (II.16.12) that he is slandered by those who accuse him of attributing to the Son of God 'a despair contrary to faith'. Indeed, the spirit of this section, which is a veritable treatise on the absolutely human nature exhibited in Christ's psychological state leading up to his death, is highly reminiscent of Erasmus'

⁵³ See e.g. *Comm. John* 1:14.

⁵⁴ Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), p. 62.

⁵⁵ See Essary, 'Calvin's Interpretation of Christ's Agony', pp. 59–70, for a brief discussion.

⁵⁶ *Inst.* II.16.10–11 (McNeill/Battles), 516.

Apologia ad Fabrum. Calvin fervently defends himself against accusations of emphasising too strongly the truly human nature of Christ, and even presses the point that Christ was in certain ways *lesser* than common men in his radical humility (and, paradoxically, that this itself is further proof of his dignity and divinity)⁵⁷: ‘Does not that prayer, coming from unbelievable bitterness of heart and repeated three times – “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me” – show that Christ had a harsher and more difficult struggle than with common death?’⁵⁸ According to Calvin, if Christ had not suffered to such a great extent psychologically, he would have been a redeemer merely of bodies.⁵⁹ Shuger has noted the commonalities between Erasmus and Calvin in their understanding of Christ’s psychological suffering, even referring to ‘Calvin’s Erasmian Christology’. Both Erasmus and Calvin describe the psychological ‘*automachia*’ of Christ before his crucifixion as a christological fact and as an anthropological account.⁶⁰ Following the commandments of God with fear and trembling takes on a new and more forceful meaning on this understanding. In one sense, both Erasmus and Calvin invert the Augustinian understanding of the divided self as a consequence of fallen human nature when they apply it both to Christ and the saints whose lives are modelled after Christ’s: for these, fear and trembling are not merely by-products of fallenness (although no doubt fallenness doesn’t exactly help), but are built-in aspects of humble obedience to God. As Shuger notes, importantly the ‘struggling, suffering Christ’ replaces the hagiographic Christ (read: Stoic-Christian martyr) as the Christian ethical model for Erasmus and Calvin.⁶¹ Here ‘weakness is not shameful; it is the badge of the saints’.⁶² Dostoevsky’s reaction to Holbein’s painting has a firm precedent in similar such reactions to vivid descriptions of the lowly human nature of Christ in the sixteenth century, but for Erasmus and Calvin, even if they diverge on the value of Philippians 2 for adjudicating disputes over the divine nature of the Son, such descriptions are not only christologically sound, but necessary for a full appreciation of the humility of Christ which serves as an ethical paradigm for his disciples.

⁵⁷ For Erasmus on a similar point, see *CWE* 83: 36–7.

⁵⁸ *Inst.* II.16.12 (McNeill/Battles), 519.

⁵⁹ For a very helpful article on Erasmus taking seriously Christ’s psychological suffering at Gethsemane, see Tracy, ‘Humanists among the Scholastics’, pp. 30–51.

⁶⁰ Shuger, *Renaissance Bible*, pp. 104–5. Shuger argues that the anxiety of the Calvinist saint is modelled after Erasmus’ Christ.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 97.