

LutherFacts #18

Two paths diverged in the woods, which one to choose? Such was the situation that faced Martin Luther and the famous humanist scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam as they confronted early sixteenth-century Christianity. At first, they appeared to be on the same path. In 1510, Luther returned from a visit to Rome to begin a life of teaching and scholarship that called for major institutional changes. Erasmus spent time in Rome while living in Italy. Upon his return to England, he published *In Praise of Folly* (1511), which mocked many church practices. The book deeply impressed Luther. So much so, that as he prepared to challenge the selling of indulgences in 1517, Luther turned to Erasmus' translation of the New Testament for his own biblical studies. In turn, Erasmus praised Luther's 95 theses. Then, dramatically, they parted ways. Luther went on to a five-year period of protest that resulted in his break with the established church. Silent at first, Erasmus soon rejected Luther's efforts. While Luther could no longer accept the abuses in church practice and belief, Erasmus sought accommodation through limited institutional changes. He also remained faithful to the Pope, concluding that Luther was too extreme in his actions. For his part, Luther saw Erasmus as lacking the strength of conviction to confront the thorny issues of institutional reform. In the end, Erasmus opted for the stability of the established church. Choosing a different path, Luther made the decision to embrace the turbulence that often accompanies reform.