

Between the confessions

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The Reformation confronted Erasmus with a choice that he tried to avoid. Many of the early reformers had been his admirers and considered him a precursor. His critique of the abuses of the Church, his edition of the Greek New Testament and his call for a return to the sources of Christianity had prepared the ground for the reform movement. It was said that Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched. But Erasmus refused to join Luther. Remaining attached to the unity of the Church, he rejected Luther's violence of language and his doctrine of the bondage of the will. He also feared that the Reformation would lead to disorder and war.¹

In 1524, under pressure from the Catholic side, Erasmus published his treatise *On Free Will*, which attacked Luther's doctrine of grace. Luther replied with *On the Bondage of the Will*. The controversy ended their relationship. At the same time, Erasmus was attacked by Catholic theologians who accused him of having caused the Reformation. He found himself between the camps, criticised by both sides and trusted by neither.

In Basel, the tension between the old faith and the new grew in the 1520s. When the council adopted the Reformation in 1529, after the iconoclasm of February of that year, Erasmus decided to leave. He did not want to live in a city that had broken with the Church and feared for his safety and his independence. He moved to Freiburg im Breisgau, where he lived for six years. His departure was a blow to the prestige of Basel, but he maintained his relations with the city and with his friends there. His works continued to be printed by the Froben house.

Erasmus's position between the confessions has been interpreted in various ways: as cowardice, as prudence, as fidelity to a vision of Christian unity, as the independence of the intellectual who refuses to be enlisted by any party. It has a certain resemblance to the neutrality that Switzerland would adopt in the conflicts of Europe. The neutral refuses to take sides, maintains relations with all parties and offers his services to all. Criticised

Between the confessions

by all sides and protected by none, he occupies a position that depends on his usefulness to the parties and on his own credibility. The history of Swiss neutrality, from the Thirty Years' War to the Second World War and the sanctions regimes of today, shows the benefits and the costs of this position. Erasmus experienced both.

1 Notes

1. On Erasmus's relationship with the Reformation, his controversy with Luther (De libero arbitrio, 1524; Luther's De servo arbitrio, 1525), and the saying that Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched, see the literature on Erasmus and the Reformation. To be verified. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/basel-between-the-confessions