# John Colet Biography

## John Colet

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# Biography

The English theologian and moral reformer John Colet (ca. 1446-1519) founded St. Paul's School and influenced the humanist Erasmus.

The father of John Colet was Sir Henry Colet, twice mayor of London. He was a wealthy man and the father of 22 children, none of whom survived to maturity except John. After early schooling in London, John went to Oxford, where he spent some 20 years as a scholar and lecturer, eventually receiving a doctorate in divinity about 1504.

After earning a master of arts degree, in 1493 Colet went to Italy and France for 3 years, visiting both Rome and Paris. On Colet's return to Oxford, Erasmus reports: "He publicly and gratuitously expounded all St. Paul's epistles. It was at Oxford that my acquaintance with him began." Moreover, wrote Erasmus, Colet's "opinions differed widely from those commonly received. When I was once praising Aquinas to him as a writer not to be despised among the moderns, since he appeared to me to have studied both the Scriptures and the early Fathers, and had also a certain unction in his writings, he checked himself more than once from replying and did not betray his dislike."

In contrast to the elaborate scriptural exegesis then prevalent, Colet preferred to pay careful attention to the context of St. Paul's letters. Although Colet stressed the importance of the literal meaning of the books of the Bible, he was not a fundamentalist.

Colet received priestly orders in 1498 and left Oxford 6 years later to become dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. In 1510 he founded St. Paul's School for boys. The essential moral earnestness that suffused all of Colet's teaching and writing was plainly evident in the great trouble he took over the founding of this establishment, which is still one of the great schools of England. As he said in the statutes he devised for it, "My intent is by this school specially to increase knowledge and worshiping of God and our Lord Jesus Christ and good Christian life and manners in the children."

At his death Colet left one published work, his convocation sermon of 1512. A fierce attack on the lives of the clergy, this sermon declared that there "is no need that new laws and constitutions be made, but that those that are made already be kept."