

Buchbesprechungen

Christine Christ-von Wedel, Erasmus of Rotterdam: Advocate of a New Christianity, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013, 374 p. – ISBN 978-1-4426-4508-0.

Erasmus of Rotterdam: Advocate of a New Christianity is a translated and revised edition of *Erasmus von Rotterdam: Anwalt eines neuzeitlichen Christentums* originally published in 2003 in German. Christine Christ-von Wedel is a fellow of the Institute for Swiss Reformation Studies at the University of Zurich. In this edition, she sets forth her previous intellectual biography of Erasmus (1466–1536), the humanist scholar of the classics. The translation is reader-friendly English. Christ-von Wedel's manifest goal is to locate and illuminate Erasmus as an intellectual figure precisely at the center of sixteenth-century European thought. She argues that his exegetical method was the springboard for the great Reformers to reinterpret Scripture – unfortunately, not as profoundly as Erasmus would have liked. Christ-von Wedel explores her question as to, “How it was possible that Erasmus's rather ‘innocent’ theology could divide hearts and minds so strongly in his own time” (6).

The book has four parts: “Erasmus's Early Development,” “The Exegetical Theologian,” “In Conflict with the Church Reformers,” and “Erasmus's Reform Ideas.” The chapter names of each part also include the titles of Erasmus's works that Christ-von Wedel takes under the loop.

Section one describes Erasmus's early efforts at poetry in the dialectic method of Scholasticism; whereby, in 1494, “Erasmus had not yet found a true combination of faith and knowledge”

(25). Studying the classics, in this period (1495) the humanist began writing *Antibarbari* (1520), some poetry, and started defining his theological stance in *Precatio ad Virginis Filium Jesum* (1503), and *Encomium Matrimonii* (1518). In this early stage, Erasmus introduced the notion of openness and disdain while developing an eye for the time and temporality of human values. Already in *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* (1503) his thought went beyond the common perception of grace and the ladder of good works that stretched to heaven in the medieval mind. The chapter examines Erasmus's grasp of the imagery of the steps of piety and Neo-Platonism in light of the Church Fathers. Christ-von Wedel demonstrates that Erasmus's thought tested the limitations of allegorical and literal Scriptural exegesis.

Early in his career, Erasmus was also able to collect classical proverbs and publish his *Adagia* (1500), which helped finance his writing. By revising Lorenzo Valla's *Collatio Novi*, Erasmus realized the philological principle that set him up to begin his actual life's work of translating the New Testament; he embraced and enlarged on Valla's method of critical examination of small philological details. Near the end of his early development, Erasmus wrote *The Praise of Folly* (1511), which presents an allegorical figure that embarks on social and theological criticism. *Folly* situates Erasmus in the field of public religion as a contested theological linguist and pacifist, where he spent the rest of his life.

The most significant section of the present volume is Christ-von Wedel's thoughtful discussion of Erasmus's *Novum Instrumentum* (1516), after 1519, *Novum Testamentum*. The "prince of the humanist's" bold transition to historical biblical translation may be his longest lasting contribution to intellectual history. Erasmus set aside scholastic exegetical hierarchical tools, and true to his philological education, placed linguistic skills and contextualization above systematic categorization – treading on centuries of theological traditions. The point Christ-von Wedel makes is that Erasmus designed an environment of open interpretation that soon returned to a dogmatic systematic approach shortly after the early Reformation. Erasmus's translation of the New Testament from its original language underlies most all of the other sixteenth-century translations into the vernacular. For the rest of this section, Christ-

von Wedel organizes the exegete's explorations of various systematic theological commentaries, "Paraphrases" theological doctrines such as the Trinity, doctrine of creation, doctrine of God, justification and the Apostle's Creed alongside the notions of the Church Fathers and Erasmus's contemporaries. She demonstrates that rhetorically and historically, Erasmus did not hesitate to change historical traditions, for instance, rejecting Augustine, among others, who "connected original sin with sexual reproduction" (152).

Whereas the first two sections of Christ-von Wedel's volume display her astute knowledge of the classics and medieval theology, the third and fourth sections enter the realm of Luther's reforms and the Zurich and Basel Reformations. Our author leaves no doubt that at least Erasmus's scriptural work served as the basis for all three. The struggle between Erasmus and the other biblical exegetes was according to Erasmus – "over meaning" (182). Christ-von Wedel argues that Erasmus naïvely conceived himself engaged in a scholarly quarrel. Her tendency is to portray Erasmus as an innocent – albeit brilliant – intellectual, who in no way wanted the Roman Church to be divided. "Such is my hatred of dissension and my love of concord that I fear, if it came to the point, I should abandon some portion of the truth sooner than disturb the peace" (193). Erasmus wrote these words in 1522, and by 1527 had lost many of his close friends. By then, his fellows were busy writing their own commentaries on the meaning of Scripture and applying them in praxis to the Reformed and Lutheran Churches.

The final section of the book describes Erasmus's annotations and "The Question of Law," "The Question of Peace," and "Erasmus's Views on Women." The *Ratio Temporum* is key to Erasmus's understanding of the question of law. His notions are more attuned to contemporary biblical exegesis; the window of freedom to redefine biblical meaning was quickly closed by the confession-alization and other conflicts of interest. In the chapter on Erasmus's pacifistic view of war, his ambiguity and the delicate political situation that Erasmus inflamed come to the fore; the compromises he made on his convictions too.

The chapter on women and Erasmus is revealing and relevant. Therein, Erasmus takes his rightful position as the lead figure in the theological turn toward mutuality and hierarchy in gender re-

lations. Handbooks on marriage, such as that of Heinrich Bullinger, were most all shaped thereafter according to the Erasmus prototype. Particularly Erasmus's book *On the Christian Widow* (1529), which challenged Vives, and the theological opinion to date, encouraged widowed women to participate in public social space rather than cowering behind the closed doors of their sorrow.

Christ-von Wedel is surely at home in her theme and an adamant Erasmus proponent. She is able to integrate classical literature and scholarship contemporaneous to Erasmus at the highest level. Certainly her emphasis on the futuristic nature of Erasmus's thought on education and exegesis are justified. Although Christ does address the fact that Erasmus did not study theology at university, the ambiguity of Erasmus's participation in the intellectual culture of his time and his vacillations in light of public opinion were less present in her presentation than I would have expected. Particularly, the conflict concerning *Iulius Exclusus* so adamantly argued by Silvana Seidel Menchi is left unattended.

Nit-picking aside, *Erasmus of Rotterdam: Advocate of a New Christianity* is a terrific achievement that establishes Erasmus of Rotterdam as an intellectual influence, who challenged the scholarship of his contemporaries and offered alternatives to it. Christ-von Wedel does an exceptional job engaging the sources and literature of Erasmus's own era in context. I recommend the book to students of humanism and historical theology as an intellectual biography of one, Erasmus, a man who changed how we read Scripture.

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Heinrich Bullinger: Kommentare zu den neutestamentlichen Briefen. Röm – 1Kor – 2Kor, ed. Luca Baschera, Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2012 (Heinrich Bullinger Werke III/6), LXXXIV & 640 p. – ISBN 978-3-290-17665-5.

Heinrich Bullinger: Kommentare zu den neutestamentlichen Briefen. Gal – Eph – Phil – Kol, ed. Luca Baschera, Zurich: Theolo-