Christine Christ-von Wedel


This volume is based on an earlier version, which was originally published in German in 2003. The new text includes updated scholarship as well as an English translation. The author divides her study into four sections: the early Erasmus, the exegetical theologian, the loyal Catholic in conflict with the Protestant reformers, and finally, Erasmus as a reformer himself. The work is thus both chronological and topical, with each chapter following a pattern that includes a discussion of key texts of Erasmus on a particular matter or approach, along with selections on that same issue from the works of his contemporaries. Indeed, what is most noteworthy about this book is the extent to which the author examines Erasmus's thinking within the context of his time, by comparing him directly to relevant contemporaries and predecessors. She provides at the beginning of each chapter a list of those works of Erasmus with which she will engage, and in the endnotes carries out an extensive dialogue with contemporary scholarship.

Her introduction includes a summary of what she sees as a consensus among Erasmus scholars: that his theology was thoroughly Christocentric, that the key point of studying scripture is inner transformation, that ceremonies are of no use. (One could point out that the later Erasmus would soften his position on ceremonies somewhat, in response to the reformed Swiss theologians, taking issue in particular with their referring to the mass as an abomination.) Establishing this consensus as her foundation, the author carefully works her way through Erasmus's life, his writings, and his positions.

While the book is roughly chronological, it is not a biography, choosing to mention biographical details only insofar as they establish the context for the main topic of each chapter. For example, the third chapter is entitled 'Historical Awareness,' featuring such early works as the Antibarbari, a letter to Erasmus's pupil Thomas Grey, three poems from 1499, the Precatio ad Virginis Filium Jesum, and the Encomium Matrimonii. The author examines each with a sensitivity to genre, with her main focus being the theological implications of each work, particularly pertaining to her theme of Erasmus's historical awareness. Comparisons with similar works during the same period tease out what is distinctive about Erasmus. She also points ahead to features of Erasmus's thought that will change as he matures. For example, in her examination of his 1497 letter to Thomas Grey she describes Erasmus's satirical portrait of the Scotists as Epimenides, who according to legend slept for 50 years. The sleepy Scotists are likewise out of touch with their time, Erasmus says, still making the same,
stale points that seemed new long ago. This, Christ-Von Wedel argues, is the first appearance of what would develop into a strong historical consciousness. She uses this piece as an opportunity to comment on Erasmus's attitude toward the Scholastics throughout his life, which she claims was not the total rejection that they would find with Luther, but rather a simple acknowledgement that they and their method were no longer suitable. In Luther’s case, the Scholastics were serious adversaries, deserving not the mocking dismissal with which Erasmus treated them, but rather wholehearted condemnation. Indeed, Erasmus himself did not entirely dismiss them, for in response to Luther he pointed out that the appropriate response was correction, not destruction, and replacement of their outdated method with a better approach.

In her section on Erasmus’s exegetical theology, chapter nine, ‘How the Trinity is Known,’ the author examines the Paraphrases and Annotations. Here she shows Erasmus’s approach to Scripture as God’s ongoing revealed Word, and his rejection of theological insights projected onto the text. Readers must be willing to allow God to reveal whatever He chooses as He chooses, and not alter or distort the text according to later understanding of doctrine. Thus, in his Paraphrase of the prologue of John’s Gospel, Erasmus articulates the relationship of Father to Son, claiming that it is only here that this doctrine is revealed for the first time, because Christological heresies had made such elaboration necessary. The implication is that, to Erasmus, God’s revelation took place according to a temporal sequence, allowing humans to see what they needed at each stage of the process. Both Luther and conservative Catholic theologians, however, were alarmed, accusing him of making antitrinitarian arguments, and of making God’s revelation vulnerable to alteration over time. In her discussion in the same chapter of the limits that Erasmus set on what humans could understand through contemplating creation, the author compares him to Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Thomas Aquinas and his camp, and especially Cornelius Agrippa, as well as to his earlier self in the Enchiridion. Erasmus did not carry skepticism to the level of Agrippa’s, but he did claim that the greatness of God was such that humans could fathom it only through parallels or analogies. He likewise eschewed the classical and medieval proofs of God, stressing instead to his readers the need to cultivate a simple faith and to love God for His goodness.

In her section on Erasmus’s relationship with the Protestant reformers, the author agrees with Luther that Erasmus loses cogency as he attempts to work beyond exegetical arguments; Erasmus remained within the consensus of the church, not as it appeared in any given papal or conciliar pronouncement, but as it evolved over centuries. It was this approach that caused him to regard the discussion of free will as a matter of interpretation, rather than to perceive its resolution as the foundation for Christian faith. The author