Greta Grace Kroeker

In many histories of the Reformation, Erasmus is credited with three contributions to the theological storehouse of the period. First, Erasmus is attributed with popularizing his idea of Christianity, summed up by the term *philosophia Christi*. This is seen as a moralizing model of reform, closely aligned with humanist principles. Second, Erasmus took on Luther in his debate over the freedom of the will. Though Erasmus is widely seen to have lost the debate to Luther because of Luther’s ferocity of attack and greater adherence to Augustine and a radical Augustinian anti-pelagianism, he is credited with the last laugh, heard in the modern period, since very few outside the theological academy would ever entertain the notion of the bound will today. Finally, Erasmus opened the Scripture, providing through the *Novum Testamentum* and his other philological work the tools for scholarship to turn toward the modern. This is frequently credited as a half contribution to the history of theology because some scholars wish to argue that deciding on the most likely text for the Bible is not a task that involves theology.

Greta Grace Kroeker’s new book, a revision of her doctoral dissertation, takes on all of these conceptions. Kroeker argues that Erasmus’s theology did not remain in a static position, frozen in time at the controversy with Luther over the freedom of the will. Instead, motivated by his continuing study of and struggle with Paul, and his continued investigations into the fathers, Erasmus’s mature theology became far more ‘Lutheran.’ To demonstrate this point, Kroeker analyzes the changes that Erasmus introduced into his later editions of the *Annotations* to Romans and his *Paraphrases*. The textual changes demonstrate a movement from the certainty of the freedom of the will which Erasmus argued in *De Libero Arbitrio* in 1524 and his *Hyperaspistes I* and *II*, published in 1526 and 1527. In doing so, Kroeker also implicitly attacks the notion that Erasmus was not a theologian, or that serious biblical scholarship could be done without a significant theological framework.

The structure of the book is clear and direct. The first chapter, ‘Justification, Grace, and the Will,’ sets out this constellation of issues in its patristic and medieval contexts, and sets out the outlines of the early modern debate on these issues. The second chapter, ‘Erasmus on Romans: Texts and Authorities,’ traces Erasmus’s engagement with Paul’s longest book, and demonstrates that Erasmus was not a novice in considering Romans when he took up his pen against Luther, and more importantly that his encounter with the apostle did not end with the diatribe, but continued to the end of his life. His
“ongoing, iterative, and evolutionary” (p. 40) engagement was shaped by the fathers, especially Chrysostom. The third (‘Reconsideration’), and fourth chapters (‘Reassessment’), examine those verses that Erasmus altered in the 1532 Paraphrases and the 1527 and 1532 Annotations. The fifth chapter, ‘Controversy,’ might have been entitled ‘Erasmus against himself’; it explores how Erasmus considered Romans very differently in De Libero Arbitrio than in the later versions of the Paraphrases and Annotations. The final chapter, ‘Conclusion,’ determines that Erasmus developed his own Pauline theology—one that included ideas of grace, free will, and salvation that were remarkably different from those he held in the mid 1520s.

Kroeker directly takes on the issue of whether Erasmus was a theologian. Many have suggested that he could not be a theologian—that he was a humanist, not a true theologian. This argument has been suggested both by modern analysts, and by his early modern critics. In modern scholarship, Erasmus has been both derided and lauded for the same characteristic of avoiding being a professional theologian—McSorley suggested that Erasmus did not fully grasp the doctrinal issues at stake (1969), while Bentley praised Erasmus and other humanists for approaching the Bible without the preconceptions of doctrine coloring their choices (1983). Kroeker denies both models. Her treatment of Erasmus sees him continuing to deepen his appreciation of the Pauline literature, especially Romans, through his expanding command of the patristic literature. Thus Erasmus’s theological role comes to look much like that of John Calvin: they were self-taught theologians whose continuing engagement with the traditional sources extended their own theological development.

The volume raises several issues that scholars will debate for some time. The first is Kroeker’s thesis that Erasmus was moved to a position more like Luther’s through his study of the patristic testimony, especially Chrysostom. While the patristic testimony makes sense, as Luther argued to Karlstadt that the fathers and Augustine agreed with him, Chrysostom is a curious choice. Many sixteenth-century theologians loved Chrysostom, and recognized him as perhaps the premier exegete of the New Testament—that was certainly Calvin’s response that he held as early as 1539. Calvin wrote that he preferred Chrysostom as an interpreter of the New Testament even to Augustine, who was more solid on doctrinal points. But Calvin pointed out that this admiration for Chrysostom had to be tempered at one point—that Chrysostom gave too much credit to the freedom of the human will. Others saw exactly that point—Chrysostom does not construe Romans in the same way as did the mature Augustine. But it was Augustine’s position on grace and the bondage of the will that influenced Luther. How could it be that Erasmus’s study of Chrysostom