Book Reviews

James M. Estes (ed.) and Alexander Dalzell (transl.)


With the publication of CWE 16, the translation of Erasmus’ correspondence has reached a milestone of sorts: roughly 85% of the letters are now available in English and provided with annotations that update the monumental work of P.S. and Helen Mary Allen published during the first half of the twentieth century. Like the preceding two volumes of the translated correspondence, CWE 16 has been admirably edited by James M. Estes; Alexander Dalzell, who translated the letters in CWE 15, has again put Erasmus’ complicated Latin into readable English prose.

The preface to CWE 16 provides a helpful overview of the 156 letters included in the volume, highlighting major themes, publications, and developments discussed in Erasmus’ correspondence. It is well worth reading for insight into Erasmus’ biography and his response to current events. As with the previous volume, roughly two-thirds of the letters were written by Erasmus himself, and he published many of them in his _Epistolae Floridæ_ of 1531. CWE 16 contains only four letters that are not included in the Allen edition, and a few more have been re-dated.

Erasmus entered a new stage of his life in the spring of 1529, when he moved from Basel to Freiburg im Breisgau. The correspondence contained in CWE 16 gives a view of his life in the year after his move, as he settled into his new home. While sending letters off to correspondents in Poland, England, the Low Countries, and Spain, Erasmus did not neglect friends closer at hand, especially Bonifacius Amerbach in Basel. After the tumult of events in Basel, Freiburg seemed like a haven of calm—perhaps even too calm. Erasmus noted that the city was small, life there was expensive, and the people were “not very hospitable”, although “thus far no one has troubled me much” (no. 2353A). Nev-
Nevertheless, Freiburg was preferable to Basel, and when Amerbach complained about the new religious regime in that city, Erasmus urged him to move his family to Freiburg (nos. 2223–2224). Even after a year in Freiburg he told his friends that he had not yet decided whether to remain there or settle elsewhere, but all of the alternatives had problems of their own, whether the climate, the distance to be traveled, or the dangers due to the unsettled religious situation in the Holy Roman Empire.

The letters of this period demonstrate that Erasmus was concerned with protecting himself from charges of heresy. A year after his move he still felt it necessary to cite his departure from Basel as evidence that he wanted nothing to do with that city’s adoption of Protestantism (no. 2328). He was not above citing offers of hospitality from secular and ecclesiastical princes, along with their letters and gifts, as testimony to his orthodoxy (no. 2299). After being attacked by the Franciscans Luis de Carvajal in Spain and Frans Titelmans in Louvain, Erasmus published an *Epistola ad quosdam impudentissimos gracculos*, which took the Franciscan Order to task for not restraining those whose writings made the order “an object of hatred to all good and learned men”. With heavy sarcasm, he pointed out that these “brazen and ignorant young men” who had “no shame [and] no brains” were attacking “a feeble old man” who had given to the world editions and translations of the church fathers and whose work had illuminated the text of the New Testament (no. 2275). Erasmus took another tack in a letter to an unnamed theologian by emphasizing his willingness to accept correction. Although his writings might contain errors, they could not be considered heretical because he was willing to alter the erring passages that were brought to his attention (no. 2264).

Erasmus’ careful efforts to demonstrate his orthodoxy were undermined, however, when Gerard Geldenhouwer included lengthy citations from the Dutch humanist in his pamphlets opposing the death penalty for heretics. Erasmus’ response was his *Epistola contra Pseudevangelicos*, published in December 1529. In that work he once again made clear his rejection of the south German and Swiss reformers who tried to associate him with their cause. Amerbach sent Erasmus a Strasbourg reprint of the work that had been provided with scurrilous marginalia, which caused the latter to protest to Strasbourg’s Council (nos. 2289, 2293). Martin Bucer responded to Erasmus’ *Epistola* with a work the latter dismissed as “a load of prosy trash” (no. 2321). Erasmus would have the last word with his *Epistola ad Fratres Inferioris Germaniae*, which would be published in August 1530. His edition of Alger of Liège’s *De veritate corporis et sanguinis Dominici in Eucharistia*, published in the spring of 1530 (no. 2284), must be seen as part of this campaign to defend his orthodoxy and dissociate himself from the South German and Swiss reformers. Similarly, Erasmus’ trea-