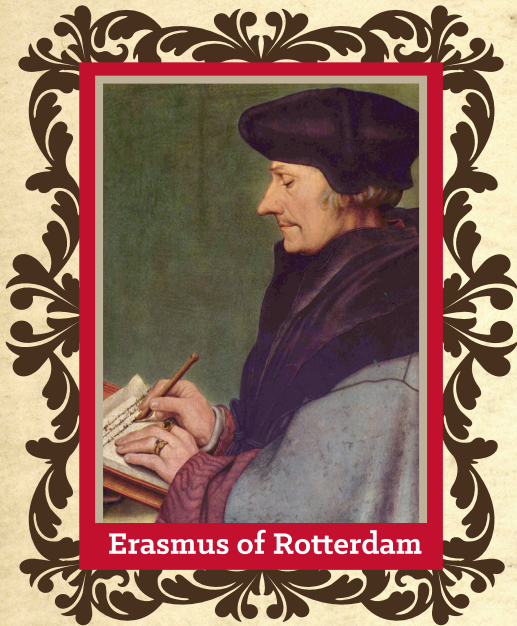


FACES OF THE REFORMATION

ERASMUS OF ROTTERDAM

Born: Oct. 28, 1466

Died: July 12, 1536



Erasmus, Scholar of the Enlightenment eclipsed by Luther and the Reformation

“AS CHANGEABLE AS A CHAMELEON” APPEARS IN A BOOK OF ADAGES BY THE HUMANIST DESIDERIUS ERASMUS. Here Erasmus explains that the adage was used by the ancients to describe someone who is inconstant and changes to suit his audience. Surprisingly, then, in his introduction to the New Testament, he used the word “chameleon” to describe the apostle Paul, who was “all things to all men.” Here Erasmus introduces versatility as a virtue to be imitated, and imitate it he did.

In his opening volley against Martin Luther, his *Diatribes on Free Will*, Erasmus elevated versatility to a theological virtue. In his rejoinder, *Bondage of the Will*, Luther regarded theological inconstancy as a damnable vice. Even in his old age, Luther would consider this work one of his greatest achievements. For Erasmus, true Christianity consisted of an ethical philosophy of Christ — following Christ by conforming to His behavior, exhibiting love and maintaining peace. As such, Erasmus presents free will as something unimportant and uncertain. For Luther, Erasmus’ theological waffling was nothing less than sacrilege. Where Scripture has spoken clearly, the theologian must make assertions. The theologian must assert, along with the Holy Spirit, that man’s will is bound to sin and there is nothing he can contribute to his salvation, that he is saved by God’s grace alone in the person and work of Christ Jesus.

Early in the course of the Reformation, a number of young humanists such as Martin Bucer were attracted to the Reformation and saw in Luther another Erasmus. Both had even expressed admiration of each other. Like Erasmus, Luther had criticized indulgences, monasticism and other abuses in the church and advocated for a return to original sources. For Luther, this meant a return to the Bible. In fact, Luther based his German translation of the New Testament on Erasmus’ critical version of the Greek New Testament. But whereas Luther was a man of vocation, bound to his call to serve as a doctor of the church and who took seriously his duty to teach the Word of God, Erasmus, released from his monastic vows by a dispensation from the pope, lived a transient life that reflected his values of academic freedom and independence.

Illegitimately born, Erasmus of Rotterdam was educated at various parochial schools in the Netherlands and forced by poverty into monasticism. An appointment as secretary to the archbishop of Cambrai enabled him to study at the University of Paris. Thereafter, he taught in Cambridge, England, among other places; took a doctorate in Turin; and worked for a publisher in Basel. To preserve this freedom, Erasmus — pressured by the pope to do so — attacked Luther.

Erasmus’ influence during his own lifetime began to wane as Luther became more popular. Today he is most known for his humorous satire, especially his *In Praise of Folly*. Yet, he was a hero for many philosophers during the Enlightenment, and his version of an ethically oriented, tolerant and doctrinally ambiguous Christianity has gained traction. Erasmus’ legacy continues to present an alternative that is attractive to our sinful nature, a legacy that elevates human freedom and robs Christ of His glory.



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