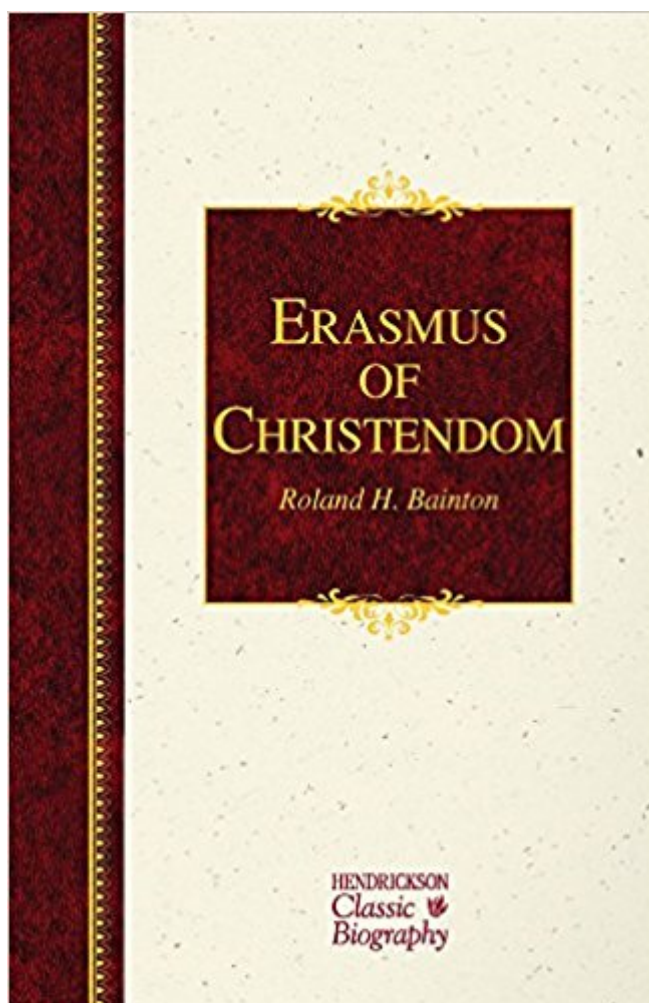


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# Erasmus Of Christendom (Hendrickson Classic Biographies)



## Synopsis

Born the illegitimate son of a priest, and plagued throughout life by illness and poverty, Erasmus of Rotterdam was sought everywhere for his wit and erudition. No man in Europe had so many friends in high places: a lifelong cosmopolitan, he moved from country to country, lodging in palaces and in the households of public printers, a friend of Thomas More and Henry VIII and a correspondent of Luther and the pope. A true man of letters, Erasmus wrote and translated tirelessly; arguing, teaching, campaigning for the purification of the church. He ridiculed worldly prelates, but deplored Reformers who broke from Rome. On all occasions he spoke for moderation in thought and action, for classical humanism and a Christianity of the inward spirit. Still, he lived to see many of his friends imprisoned, beheaded, or burned for their beliefs, and he himself was accused of heresy. Through charming and frequently humorous glimpses of the people and scenes of Erasmus's life, Professor Bainton suggests the amplitude of his hero's nature. "An affectionate appreciation..." Time Magazine calls Erasmus of Christendom. "In Bainton's view, the current revolution in the church makes the Erasman message even more pertinent--and perhaps more poignant--than ever before." Woodcut images and illustrations throughout. Hendrickson Classic Biographies feature enduring stories about real people whose lives have been touched and transformed by God, and who in turn have touched others with God's love. Each story has been carefully selected, gently edited if necessary, and freshly typeset, making every account--be it ancient or contemporary--a compelling read. Great lives reaching across the ages to touch lives today, encouraging, challenging, and inspiring.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A specialist in Reformation history, Roland H. Bainton was for forty-two years Titus Street Professor of ecclesiastical history at Yale, and he continued his writing well into his twenty years of retirement. Bainton wore his scholarship lightly and had a lively, readable style. His most popular book was *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (1950) which sold more than a million copies.

Roland Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969) Reprinted as an American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) Humanities Print-on-Demand (POD) volume. I'm really happy I gave Prof. Huizinga's biography only four stars, as Bainton's work is both more readable and more scholarly, with the small exception that the index seems incomplete. Professor Bainton should be recognizable to many as the author of the best known biography of Martin Luther (1483 - 1546), *Here I Stand*. It is totally appropriate that he should do a similar biography of Desiderius Erasmus (1466/1469 - 1536), as the careers of these two giants were intertwined, just as the Renaissance and Reformation are joined at the hip in our history. The title of this work is eminently appropriate, far more appropriate than the label often given to 'Erasmus of Rotterdam'. While part of Erasmus' heart was with his Dutch homeland, he was a true citizen of Europe, living most of his life outside of Holland, in France, England, Italy, Switzerland, and Germany. In Holland, he spent most of his time in Louvain and Deventer and not in Rotterdam. If we give any uninformed thought to Erasmus today, we may be hard pressed to appreciate the source of his great fame in his own lifetime. The sole work for which he is read today is his short satire, *The Praise of Folly*, (*Encomium Moriae* in Latin, a pun on the name of his good friend, Thomas More) which may literally have been composed while en route, on horseback, from Rome to England, in a very short time, in 1509, and first printed in 1512. But in his lifetime, and in his biographies, this little book has a very small role in his story. Part of our difficulty is that Erasmus' profession as a major scholar is simply does not make as big an impression today, when literacy is near 100% and global communication is virtually instantaneous. Erasmus was a translator of classics (from the Greek), an editor of Greek and Latin works, a commentator on the classics (at a time when Europe was rediscovering the works of the Greco-Roman world) and an essayist in Latin, when virtually all educated people could read and speak Latin, but that was only 20 - 30% of the people. It was also the time when Gutenberg's printing press was barely 50 years old when Erasmus began writing. Newspapers were

not yet common, and the primary medium of communication, the 'blog' of the day, was the pamphlet or tract. It was by this means that Luther's 95 Theses was circulated throughout Europe quickly (in the span of a few months). The best approximation in the 20th century to Erasmus' role may be if the careers of H. L. Mencken (editor, newspaperman, essayist, and linguist), Bruce Metzger (Biblical scholar and translator), and C. S. Lewis (fiction writer and Christian apologist) could be wrapped up into a single person. At the height of his career, he was sought after by the major universities in Europe and as a councilor to the Holy Roman Emperor and the Pope. One symptom of his fame is that his portrait was done by three of the leading artists in Europe at the time, Albrecht Dürer, Hans Holbein, and Quentin Matsys (the elder). Oddly, both Holbein and Dürer's works have Erasmus seated at work, while Erasmus (like Ernest Hemingway) commonly wrote while standing up. Unlike Erasmus and the Age of Reformation written by Johan Huizinga, Bainton's work spends far more time discussing Erasmus' theological works, especially going into the details of his exchanges with Martin Luther. Thus, for those interested in Erasmus' influence on the Reformation, Bainton's book is superior, especially as the endnotes to source documents are more thorough and more efficient at getting you to the material. The only drawback is that much of Erasmus' work is not easily available. Even college libraries don't have some of his more important works in English, such as *Hyperaspistes*. Erasmus' first major work was the first edition of his *Adages (Adagia)*, in Latin, a collection of quotations from Latin classics. The first edition had 800 entries, published in Paris, in 1500. Many of the entries had short essays on related political and moral topics (not unlike H. L. Mencken's *Prejudices* series). The final edition, published near his death, had close to 4600 entries. One of his more famous works came in 1503, the *Enchiridion militis Christiani*, or *Handbook of a Christian Soldier*. It reflects Erasmus' interest in education and it reads more like a sermon than a 'handbook'. It stresses engaging Christian teachings with the heart or 'spirit' rather than through 'formalism'. It has some similarities to the very early Christian works on education by Clement of Alexandria, and it is a strong contrast to Machiavelli's *The Prince*, written in 1513. Erasmus' greatest achievement in his own time was his Greek edition of the New Testament, published in 1522, accompanied by a new Latin translation, with some improvements over the Vulgate, translated by his intellectual hero, St. Jerome. In a sense, this was the birth of modern Biblical scholarship, which was simply not possible until the advent of the printing press. This invention allowed inexpensive editions to be transported around Europe, Asia, and Africa to be compared to valuable and fragile original documents such as those in the Vatican and in Alexandria. It was Erasmus' Greek text which Luther used in order to translate the New Testament into German. And it is here where the interests of the Renaissance and the Reformation join hands. Both movements stressed a renewal

of ancient learning to recover something which seemed lost. Both Erasmus and Luther were influenced by the *Devotio Moderna*, a late medieval German combination of Christian mysticism and humanism. Erasmus' editorial output seems superhumanly large. His edition of Jerome's letters alone filled twelve volumes and the catalogue of his editions of Ambrose, Aristotle, Augustine, Basil, John Chrysostom, Cicero, and Jerome fill ten columns of text in the British Museum. And that doesn't include the translations and editions of many works of Greek and Latin literature. He was a constant letter writer, and his list of correspondents covered Europe, including emperors, kings, and two Popes. He was also famous in his time for numerous pamphlets and his *Colloquies*, or dialogues, generally satirical, on subjects of the day. Among theologians, his most famous exchange was with Martin Luther, when he wrote a tract entitled *De Libero Arbitrio*, 1524 (Concerning the Freedom of the Will) in response to statements Luther made in his Heidelberg Disputation of 1518 and in his tract, *The Freedom of the Christian Man*. His Catholic friends wanted him to engage Luther for several years, as Luther had several enemies in common with Erasmus, such as the papal legate, Jerome Aleander (1480 - 1542), who accused Erasmus of being complicit in Luther's heresies. Luther responded with what he believed to be his most important theological work, *De Servo Arbitrio*, 1525 (The Bondage of the Will). In these two works, each author seems to have missed the point of the other, as Erasmus concentrated on human freedom in practical matters while Luther emphasized the ability of humans to have any effect whatsoever on the grace offered by God. Erasmus replied to Luther in a 1526 work, *Hyperaspistes*, but Luther made no further published response to Erasmus. Erasmus also engaged Luther's doctrines in his 1533 catechism, in which he supports the validity of an unwritten sacred tradition and of the value of the deuterocanonical books of the scripture. As a result of their mutual misunderstanding, 'Luther had a difficult time to explain the passages on reward. Erasmus had quite as much trouble in trying to dispose of predestination.' Near the end of his life, Erasmus saw his fame fading, although he was still in demand as an eminence who may be able to revive interest university attendance. Oddly, all over Europe, university attendance was dropping in the 1530s, even at the greatest and most popular centers at Paris, Bologna, and Wittenberg. One of the most intriguing 'what if's' of intellectual history is how things would have turned out with Luther if Erasmus had been in Rome, as he had planned to be, when Pope Leo X was asking for advice in how to deal with the issues over Martin Luther's 95 Theses.

Remember what your history teachers told you about Martin Luther's break with the Catholic church? This will give you a totally different perspective. Erasmus was a member of the clergy that

traveled around and wrote opinions and letters. If we were to compare him with someone now, in our times, he would be a nationally published opinion columnist. He was so well known and respected that the Pope tried to get him to write criticizing Martin Luther, but he agreed with many of the things Luther was saying. The book also gives you a really good feel for the times. Traveling between towns, where people lived, how a member of the clergy could survive as a guest just about anywhere. Not what our high school books taught us at all.

Bainton has a clear understanding of the forces that shaped the Reformation and the roles played by both Erasmus and Luther.

Given the immense popularity and prestige Erasmus attained during his lifetime, in an age dominated by such giants as Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, etc., it is incredible to me that so little has been written about him. Bainton's biography is one of only a handful of books about Erasmus in the English language, and from what I have seen it is by far the best. Bainton's writing is as easy to read as ever, and I think that this book tops even his monumental *Here I Stand*. If Erasmus were as popular as Luther today, I imagine that this book, rather than his biography of Luther, would be the book Bainton was remembered for. *Erasmus of Christendom* has the rare combination of both high scholarship and ease of reading. Bainton moves smoothly from one aspect of Erasmus' life to another in a way that makes it a joy to read, yet at the same time the abundance of footnotes and the reluctance to provide an all-encompassing interpretation of Erasmus reveal Bainton's dedication to accurate scholarship. He readily points out anomalies in Erasmus' actions or writings, and admits freely that Erasmus at times defies classification. As far as Erasmus is concerned, it is a shame that he is so neglected. His peaceful approach to life and his tolerant attitude toward those of opposing beliefs stands in stark contrast to the intolerance (by which I mean tolerance in the classical, not postmodern, sense) rampant among both the Reformers and the Catholics. Erasmus makes an insightful distinction between doctrines essential to Christianity (namely the Incarnation, Atonement, and Resurrection) and those of secondary importance (the function of the Pope, the exact nature of communion, the interaction of human free will and divine sovereignty, etc.) and proposed that tolerance and freedom of belief should be extended in the case of non-essential doctrines. For this he was condemned by both the Reformers and the Catholics, for each wished to persecute the other and Erasmus wished to persecute no one. Erasmus' sophisticated and peaceful letters and books were responded to with vulgarity and insults by Luther and other Reformers, and were judged to be too lenient and sympathetic to the Reformers by the

Catholics. Erasmus' desire to reform the Catholic church led him to initially support many of Luther's ideas, but when it became clear that Luther preferred to break from the church rather than reform it he distanced himself from the ironically named Reformers. Erasmus' acknowledgement that the Catholic church was in dire need of reform alienated the Catholics holding power, and his refusal to break from the Catholic church alienated the Reformers, leaving Erasmus to be censored by both sides. It has been said by many, both in his own day and in ours, that Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched. Erasmus not only pointed out the failures and corruption in the Catholic church which Luther would pick up on, but his emphasis on Greek and printing of a Greek edition of the New Testament led directly to Luther's translation (from Erasmus' Bible) of the New Testament into German, which played a key role in his break from Rome. Erasmus is clearly a key player in the whole Reformation movement, and even if he were not, his own ideas are worth studying for their own merit. In short, I highly recommend this book. Erasmus is well worth studying, and Bainton's writing is well worth reading. The only defect with this book is the unfortunate brevity of Bainton's comments on several of Erasmus' books, which I would have liked to have a more detailed summary of. This is completely overshadowed by the greatness of the rest of the book, however, and only serves to make me desire even more to read Erasmus' writings for myself. It is unfortunate that English translations of all but his Praise of Folly and The Freedom of the Will are somewhat difficult to find.

Erasmus of Christendom is a great read. Anyone who periodically wades through history texts (willingly and for scholastic credit) will enjoy this one. This book was not very bland; I've read worse. I feel like I know Erasmus as a person now. I've witnessed his entire life, and I can model my own fistfights with conservative Christians after him. His Christian theology is on par with modern versions, but he stresses literal imitation of Christ's life. I trust Erasmus' vision of the gospels and other works more than I trust almost any modern theologian.

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