

A portrait of Desiderius Erasmus, a Dutch humanist, scholar, and theologian. He is depicted from the chest up, wearing a black cap and a dark, heavy robe. He is looking slightly to the left with a thoughtful expression. The background features a wooden cabinet with ornate carvings on the left and a shelf with books and a vase on the right. A green curtain hangs behind him. The overall style is characteristic of Northern Renaissance portraiture.

MANUAL OF A CHRISTIAN KNIGHT

DESIDERIUS ERASMUS

Manual of a Christian Knight

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THE BOOK SPEAKETH

To please all sorts of men I do not pass,
To please the good and learned is a fair thing,
Yea, and these both were more than covenant was
And more than I look for. Whoso the learning
Of Christ doth favour, if he like well all thing
I seek no further, Christ is mine Apollo,
Only strengthening me to speak this that I do.

THE PRINTER TO THE FAITHFUL READER

The mortal world a field is of battle
Which is the cause that strife doth never fail
Against man, by warring of the flesh
With the devil, that always fighteth fresh
The spirit to oppress by false envy;
The which conflict is continually
During his life, and like to lose the field.
But he be armed with weapon and shield
Such as behoveth to a christian knight,
Where God each one, by his Christ chooseth right
Sole captain, and his standard to bear.
Who knoweth it not, then this will teach him here
In his brevyer, poynarde, or manual
The love shewing of high Emanuell.
In giving us such harness of war
Erasmus is the only furbisher
Scouring the harness, cankered and adust
Which negligence had so sore fret with rust
Then champion receive as thine by right
The manual of the true christian knight.

ENCHIRIDION THE EPISTLE

Erasmus of Roterdame sendeth greeting to the reverend father in Christ (and lord) the lord Paul Wolzius, the most religious abbot of the monastery the which is commonly called Hughes court.

Albeit, most virtuous father, that the little book, to the which I have given this name or title *Enchiridion militis christiani*, which many a day ago I made for myself only, and for a certain friend of mine being utterly unlearned, hath begun to mislike and displease me the less, forasmuch as I do see that it is allowed of you and other virtuous and learned men such as you be, of whom (as ye are indeed endued with godly learning, and also with learned godliness) I know nothing to be approved, but that which is both holy and also clerkly: yet it hath begun well nigh also to please and like me now, when I see it (after that it hath been so oftentimes printed) yet still to be desired and greatly called for, as if it were a new work made of late: if so be the printers do not lie to flatter me withal. But again there is another thing which oftentimes grieveth me in my mind, that a certain well learned friend of mine long ago said, very properly and sharply checking me, that there was more holiness seen in the little book than in the whole author and maker thereof. Indeed he spake these words in his jesting bourdyngly, but would to God he had not spoken so truly as he bourded bitterly. And that grieveth me so much the more because the same thing hath chanced to come likewise to pass in him, for the changing of whose manners principally I took upon me this labour and travail, for he also not only hath not withdrawn himself from the

court, but is daily much deeper drowned therein than he was aforetime, for what good purpose I cannot tell, but as he confesseth himself with much great misery. And yet for all that I do not greatly pity my friend, because that peradventure adversity of fortune may teach him once to repent himself, and to amend, seeing that he would not follow and do after my counsel and admonitions. And verily though I, enforcing me to the same thing and purpose, have been turned and tossed with so many chances and tempests, that Ulixes a man living ever in trouble (which Homer speaketh of) might be counted in comparison to me even Polycrates, which ever lived in prosperity without any manner trouble. I do not utterly repent me of my labour, seeing it hath moved and provoked so many unto the study of godly virtue: nor I myself am not utterly to be blamed and rebuked although my living be not in all points agreeing to mine own precepts and counsels. It is some part of godliness when one with all his heart desireth and is willing to be made good and virtuous: nor such a mind so well intending I suppose is not to be cast away, although his purpose be not ever luckily performed. To this we ought to endeavour ourselves all our life long, and no doubt but by the reason that we so oftentimes shall attempt it, once at the last we shall attain it. Also he hath dispatched a good piece of a doubtful journey which hath learned well of the journey the way. Therefore am I nothing moved with the mocks of certain persons which despise this little book, as nothing erudite and clerkly, saying that it might have been made of a child that learned his A, B, C, because it entreateth nothing of Duns's questions: as though nothing without those could be done with learning. I do not care if it be not so quick, so it be godly: let it not make them instruct and ready to disputations in schools, so that it make them apt to keep Christ's peace. Let it not be profitable or helping for the disputation in divinity, so it make for a divine life. For what good should it do to entreat

of that thing that every man intermeddleth with? Who hath not in handling questions of divinity, or what else do all our swarms of schoolmen? There be almost as many commentaries upon the Master of the Sentence as be names of divines. There is neither measure nor number of summaries, which after the manner of apothecaries mingle oftentimes sundry things together, and make of old things new, of new things old, of one thing many, of many things one. How can it be that these great volumes instruct us to live well and after a christian manner, which a man in all his life cannot have leisure once to look over. In like manner as if a physician should prescribe unto him that lieth sick in peril of death to read *Jacobus de partibus*, or such other huge volumes, saying that there he should find remedy for his disease: but in the meantime the patient dieth, wanting present remedy wherewith he might be holpen. In such a fugitive life it is necessary to have a ready medicine at the hand. How many volumes have they made of restitution, of confession, of slander, and other things innumerable? And though they boult and search out by piecemeal everything by itself, and so define every thing as if they mistrusted all other men's wits, yea as though they mistrusted the goodness and mercy of God, whiles they do prescribe how he ought to punish and reward every fact either good or bad: yet they agree not amongst themselves, nor yet sometimes do open the thing plainly, if a man would look near upon it, so much diversity both of wits and circumstances is there. Moreover although it were so that they had determined all things well and truly, yet besides this that they handle and treat of these things after a barbarous and unpleasant fashion, there is not one amongst a thousand that can have any leisure to read over these volumes: or who is able to bear about with him *Secundam secunde*, the work of St Thomas? And yet there is no man but he ought to use a good life, to the which Christ would that the way should be plain and open

for every man, and that not by inexplicable crooks of disputations, not able to be resolved, but by a true and sincere faith and charity not feigned, whom hope doth follow which is never ashamed. And finally let the great doctors, which must needs be but few in comparison to all other men, study and busy themselves in those great volumes. And yet nevertheless the unlearned and rude multitude which Christ died for ought to be provided for: and he hath taught a great portion of christian virtue which hath inflamed men unto the love thereof. The wise king, when he did teach his son true wisdom, took much more pain in exhorting him thereunto than in teaching him, as who should say that to love wisdom were in a manner to have attained it. It is a great shame and rebuke both for lawyers and physicians that they have of a set purpose, and for the nonce, made their art and science full of difficulty, and hard to be attained or come by, to the intent that both their gains and advantage might be the more plentiful, and their glory and praise among the unlearned people the greater: but it is a much more shameful thing to do the same in the philosophy of Christ: but rather contrariwise we ought to endeavour ourselves with all our strengths to make it so easy as can be, and plain to every man. Nor let not this be our study to appear learned ourselves, but to allure very many to a christian man's life. Preparation and ordinance is made now for war to be made against the Turks, which for whatsoever purpose it is begun, we ought to pray not that it may turn to the profit of a few certain persons, but that it may be to the common and general profit of all men. But what think you should come of it, if to such of them as shall be overcome (for I do not suppose that they shall all be killed with weapons) we shall lay the works of Occam, Durandus, Duns, Gabriell, Alvaros, or any such schoolmen, for the intent to bring them in mind to take Christ's profession upon them? What shall they imagine and think in their minds (for surely even they,

though they be naught else, are men and have wit and reason) when they shall hear those thorny and cumbrous inextricable subtle imaginations of instances, of formalities, of quiddities, of relation: namely when they shall see these great doctors and teachers of religion and holiness so far disagreeing , and of so sundry opinions among themselves that oftentimes they dispute and reason so long one with another, until they change colour and be pale, and revile one another, spitting each at other and finally dealing buffets and blows each to other. When they shall see the black friars fight and scold for their Thomas, and then the grey friars matched with them, defending one the other party their subtle and fervent hot doctors, which they call Seraphicos, some speaking as Reals, some as Nominals. When they shall also see the thing to be of so great difficulty that they can never discuss sufficiently with what words they may speak of Christ: as though one did deal or had to do with a wayward spirit which he had raised up unto his own destruction, if he did fail never so little in the prescribed words of conjuring, and not rather with our most merciful Saviour, which desireth nothing else of us but a pure life and a simple. I beseech thee for the love of God shew me what shall we bring about with all these reckonings, specially if our manners and our life be like to the proud doctrine and learning? And if they shall see and well perceive our ambition and desirousness of honour by our gorgeousness, more than ever any tyrant did use: our avarice and covetousness by our bribing and pollyng, our lecherousness by the defiling of maidens and wives, our cruelty by the oppressions done of us? With what face or how for shame shall we offer to them the doctrine of Christ which is far away contrary to all these things. The best way and most effectual to overcome and win the Turks, should be if they shall perceive that thing which Christ taught and expressed in his living to shine in us. If they shall perceive that we do not highly gape for their empires, do not desire

their gold and good, do not covet their possessions, but that we seek nothing else but only their souls' health and the glory of God. This is that right true and effectuous divinity, the which in time past subdued unto Christ arrogant and proud philosophers, and also the mighty and invincible princes: and if we thus do, then shall Christ ever be present and help us. For truly it is not meet nor convenient to declare ourselves christian men by this proof or token, if we kill very many, but rather if we save very many: not if we send thousands of heathen people to hell, but if we make many infidels faithful: not if we cruelly curse and excommunicate them, but if we with devout prayers and with all our hearts desire their health and pray unto God to send them better minds. If this be not our intent it shall sooner come to pass that we shall degenerate and turn into Turks ourselves, than that we shall cause them to become christian men. And although the chance of war, which is ever doubtful and uncertain, should fall so luckily to us that we had gotten the victory, so should it be brought to pass that the Pope's dominion and his Cardinals' might be enlarged, but not the kingdom of Christ, which finally flourisheth and is in prosperity if faith, love, peace and chastity be quick and strong, which thing I trust shall be brought to pass by the good governance and provision of the Pope Leo the Tenth, unless the great trouble and rage of worldly business pluck him from his very good purpose another way. Christ doth profess to be primate and head himself in the heavenly kingdom, which never doth flourish but when celestial things be advanced. Nor Christ did not die for this purpose that goods of the world, that riches, that armour, and the rest of ruffling fashion of the world, be now in the hands and rule of certain priests, which things were wont to be in the hands of the gentiles, or at least amongst lay princes, not much differing from gentiles. But in my mind it were the best, before we should try with them in battle to attempt them with epistles and some little

books: but with what manner of epistles? Not with threatening epistles, or with books full of tyranny, but with those which might shew fatherly charity, and resemble the very heart and mind of Peter and of Paul, and which should not only pretend and shew outwardly the title of the apostles, but which also should savour and taste of the efficacy and strength of the apostles. Not because I do not know that all the true fountain and vein of Christ's philosophy is hid in the gospel and the epistles of the apostles: but the strange manner of phrase, and oftentimes the troublous speaking of divers crooked figures and tropes be of so great difficulty, that oftentimes we ourselves also must labour right sore before we can perceive them. Therefore in mine opinion the best were that some both well learned men and good of living should have this office assigned and put unto them, to make a collection and to gather the sum of Christ's philosophy out of the pure fountain of the gospel and the epistles and most approved interpreters, and so plainly that yet it might be clerkly and erudite, and so briefly that it might also be plain. Those things which concern faith or belief, let them be contained in a few articles. Those also that appertain to the manner of living let them be shewed and taught in few words, and that after such fashion that they may perceive the yoke of Christ to be pleasant and easy, and not grievous and painful: so that they may perceive that they have gotten fathers and not tyrants, feeders and not robbers, pyllers nor pollers, and that they be called to their soul health and not compelled to servitude. Undoubted they also be men, neither their hearts be of so hard iron or adamant but that they may be mollified and won with benefits and kindness, wherewith even very wild beasts be waxen gentle and tame. And the most effectuous thing is the true verity of Christ. But let the Pope also command them whom he appointeth to this business, that they never swerve nor go from the true pattern and example of Christ, nor in any

place have any respect to the carnal affections and desires of men. And such a thing my mind was about to bring to pass as well as I could, when I made this book of *Enchiridion*. I did see the common people of Christendom, not only in effect, but also in opinions to be corrupted. I considered the most part of those which profess themselves to be pastors and doctors to abuse the titles of Christ to their proper advantage. And yet will I make no mention of those men after whose will and pleasure the world is ruled and turned up and down, whose vices though they be never so manifest, a man may scarcely once wince. And in such great darkness, in such great troublous ruffling of the world, in so great diversity of men's opinions, whither should we rather fly for succour than to the very great and sure anchor of Christ's doctrine, which is the gospel. Who being a good man in deed, doth not see and lament this marvellous corrupt world? When was there ever more tyranny? When did avarice reign more largely and less punished? When were ceremonies at any time more in estimation? When did our iniquity so largely flow with more liberty? When was ever charity so cold? What is brought, what is read, what is decreed or determined but it tasteth and savoureth of ambition and lucre? Oh how unfortunate were we if Christ had not left some sparks of his doctrine unto us, and as it were lively and everlasting veins of his godly mind. Hereto therefore we must enforce ourselves to know these sparks, leaving the coals of men's phantasies: let us seek these veins until we find fresh water which springeth into everlasting life. We delve and dig the ground marvellously deep for to pluck out riches, which nourisheth vice: and shall we not labour then the rich earth of Christ to get out that thing which is our souls' health? There was never no storm of vices that did so overcome and quench the heat of charity, but it might be restored again at this flint stone. Christ is a stone, but this stone hath sparks of celestial fire, and veins of

lively water. In time past Abraham in every land did dig pits and holes, fetching in every place the veins of lively water: but those same being stopped up again by the Philistynes with earth, Isaac and his servants did delve again, and not being only content to restore the old, did also make new. But then the Philistynes did scold and chide, yet he did not cease from digging. And in this our time we have Philistynes which do prefer the naughty earth to the lively fountains, even those which be worldly-wise, and have their respect to earthly things, and wring and wrest God's doctrine and his gospel to their carnal affections, making it serve to their ambition, bolstering up therewith their filthy lucre and tyranny. And if now any Isaac or any of his family should dig and find some true and pure vein, by and by they brabble and cry against him, perceiving right well that that vein should hurt their advantage, should hurt their ambition, although it make never so much for the glory of Christ: straightway they cast in naughty earth, and with a corrupt interpretation they stop up the vein, and drive away the digger: or at the least they make it so muddy with clay and filthiness, that whosoever drinketh thereof shall draw unto him more slime and naughtiness than he shall good liquor. They will not that those that thirst and desire righteousness do drink of the pure liquor, but they bring them unto their old worn and all too trodden cisterns, which have broken stones and mortar, but water they have none. But yet for all this the very true children of Isaac that be the true worshippers of Christ, must not be wearied and driven away from this labour: for verily even they which thrust naughty earth into the fountain of the gospel, would be counted the very worshippers of Christ. So that indeed nowadays is more perilous than to teach truly Christ's learning, so greatly have the Philistynes prevailed fighting for their earth, preaching earthly things for celestial, and men's inventions for God's commandments: that is to say, not teaching those things

which make for the glory of Christ, but those things which be for their own advantage, which be pardons, compositions, and suchlike pilferings. And these they do so much more perilously because they cloke their covetousness with the titles and names of great princes, of the Pope of Rome, yea of Christ also Himself. But there is no man that doth more for the Pope's profit or business, than he that teacheth Christ's learning purely and truly, whereof he is the chief teacher. There is no man that doth more good to princes or deserveth more of them, than he which endeavoureth himself that the people may be wealthy and in prosperity. But some of the flock of schoolmen will here speak against me, saying it is easy to any man to give general precepts what is to be desired and what is to be eschewed: but what shall be answered then to those that ask counsel for so many fortunes and chances? First I answer that there be more divers kinds of such worldly business than that any living person can give direct and sure answer to each one of them. Secondly there is such diversity of circumstances, which if a man do not know, it is not well possible to make an answer. In conclusion, I doubt greatly whether they themselves have any sure answer that they may make, seeing they differ in so many things amongst themselves. And those also which amongst them be more wise than other do not thus answer: This ye shall do, this ye shall not do; but of this manner: This in mine opinion were the better, this I suppose to be tolerable. But if we have that simple and bright eye which the gospel speaketh of, if the house of our mind have in it the candle of pure faith set upon a candlestick, all these trifles shall easily be put away and avoided as it were clouds or mists. If we have the rule and pattern of Christ's charity, to it we may apply and make meet all other things right easily. But what will ye do when this rule doth not agree with those things which hath been commonly used so many hundred years, and which be ordained and stablished

by the laws of princes, for this thing chanceth very oft? Ye must not condemn that thing which princes do in executing their office, but again do not corrupt and defile the heavenly philosophy with men's deeds. Let Christ continue and abide, as he is indeed, a very centre or middle point unmoved, having certain circles going round about him: move not the mark out of his own place. Those which be in the first circle next to the centre (that is to say next to Christ) as priests, bishops, cardinals, popes, and such to whom it belongeth to follow the Lamb whithersoever he shall go, let them embrace and hold fast that most pure part, and so far forth as they may let them communicate and plenteously give the same unto their next neighbours. In the second circle all temporal and lay princes be, which in keeping war and making laws, after a certain manner do service to Christ, either when with rightful battle they drive away their enemies and defend and maintain the public peace and tranquillity of the commonwealth: or else when with punishment according to the laws, they punish malefactors and evil-doers. And yet because they cannot choose but of necessity be occupied and busied in such things as be joined with the most vile dregs and filth of the earth, and with the business of the world, it is jeopardous lest they do fall further from the centre and mark, as lest they should make sometimes war for their own pleasure, and not for the commonwealth: lest under the pretext of justice they should use cruelty upon those whom they might reform with mercy: lest under the title of lordship they should pyll and polle those people whose goods they ought to defend. And moreover as Christ like the fountain of everlasting fire, doth draw next unto him the order of priests, and maketh them of like nature, that is to say pure and clean from all corruption of worldly dregs and filthiness: so in like case it is the office of priests, and specially of the highest, so much as they can to call and draw unto them those that be princes and have power and

authority. And if it fortune at any time that war do rise suddenly in any place, let the bishops endeavour themselves so much as in them is, either to end the strifes and variances without shedding of blood: or if that cannot be brought to pass, by reason of the great storms of worldly business, yet let them so do that as little blood as may be be shed, and that the war may shortly be brought to an end. In times past the bishops' authority had place even in just punishments, and hath gotten divers times (as Saint Augustyne plainly in his epistle doth testify) the malefactor from the hands of temporal judges. For some things there be so necessary unto the order of the commonwealth, that partly yet Christ did dissemble at them, and partly he put them from him, and partly neither approving nor disallowing them did in a manner wink and look beside them. He would not know the money of Cesar, nor the scripture upon it. The tribute he commanded to be paid if it were due and debt, as though it little pertained to him, so that God had his duty. The woman taken and found in adultery he neither condemned neither openly absolved, but only did bid her that she should no more do so. Of those which were condemned of Pylate, whose blood he intermingled amongst their sacrifices, he neither said it was well done nor evil, but only threatened every man that they should be punished with a like destruction if they did not amend. Moreover, when he was desired to divide the inheritance between the two brethren, he plainly refused it as an unworthy thing for him to give judgment of such gross matters, which did teach things heavenly. And also of the other part there be certain things which he openly abhorred, as the covetous Phariseys, the hypocrites, the proud rich folks, saying unto them Woe be unto you. He never rebuked the apostles more sharply than when they would have been avenged, or when they were ambitious. When they asked him whether they should command fire to be sent down from heaven to have burned up the city from

whence they were shut forth, he answered and said to them, Ye know not of what spirit ye are. When Peter was about to have called him unto the world from his passion suffering, he called him an adversary. When they contended about preeminence which of them should be the best, how often and how many ways doth he call them back to a contrary mind? And other things there be which he teacheth and commandeth openly to be observed, as not to resist evil, to do good to thine enemies, to use meekness of mind, and other like. These must be departed in sunder, and every of them set in order in his own place. Let us not therefore straightway make Christ an author of all things which be done by princes and temporal officers, nor defend it (as we call it) to be done by God's law. They deal and meddle with many things which be low and gross, not altogether of the very pureness of a christian man: yet they be not to be rebuked inasmuch as they be necessary to the maintenance of order to be observed. Nor we be not by the ministering of their office made good, albeit that by them it is caused that we be less evil, and that they which be evil do less hurt and annoyance to the commonwealth. And therefore they also ought to have their honour because they do somewhat serve the justice of God and the public and common tranquillity, without the which sometime those things be troubled and vexed which belong to godly holiness. They must be honoured when they do their office: and if sometimes they use their power for their own pleasure or profit, yet peradventure it were the best to suffer them, lest more hurt should spring thereof: for there appeareth an image or rather a shadow of the divine justice in them, which justice yet ought to shine more evidently and more purely in the living and laws of priests. An image doth of another manner shew in a mirror of glass, than it doth in iron. And in the third circle must all the common people be, as the most gross part of all this world, but not yet so gross but that they pertain unto the mystical body of

Christ: for the eyes be not only members of the body, but also the legs, the feet, and the privy parts. And those which be in the third circle we ought so to suffer in their infirmity, that as much as is possible we do call them unto those things which be more approved of Christ. For in the mystical body he that but late was the foot may be the eye. And like as the princes if they be not all the best, must not with chiding be exasperate, lest (as Saint Augustyne saith) when they be moved they stir up more perilous tragedies, so the weak people like as Christ suffered his apostles and nourished them, must be suffered, and after a fatherly manner cherished until they wax more aged and strong in Christ. For godliness also hath his infancy, it hath mean age, it hath full strength and perfect age. Yet all men after their degree must endeavour themselves to attain and come unto Christ. The elements have every one his proper place, but the fire which hath the highest place by little and little draweth all the other unto him, and so much as he can turneth them into his nature. The clear water he turneth into the air, and the air clarified he transformeth into his own nature. Saint Paul doth in many things suffer and pardon the Corynthyans, but in the mean season putting difference between those things which he did proffer in the name of his Lord unto them that were perfect, and those things which he did pardon that were written in his own name to them that were yet weak and young in Christ: but ever on this trust that they should profit and go forward to more strength and perfection. And also he travaileth again to bring forth the Galathians, until Christ be fashioned in them. Now if any man will think this circle to be more convenient for princes, I will not strive greatly with him. But whatsoever is without the third circle is at all times and in all points to be hated and refused, as ambition and desire of money, lechery, ire, vengeance, envy, backbiting, and such other pestilences, which then only be made incurable, when they disguised with the visor and cloak of

holiness and virtue do creep into the circle afore spoken: that is when under the pretext of executing the law and justice we use our tyranny. When by the occasion of religion we provide for great lucre. When under the title of defending the church we hunt for worldly power and authority: and whensoever those things be commanded as things pertaining unto Christ which be disagreeing much from his learning. Therefore the mark must be set before every man which they ought to shoot at: and there is but one mark, which is Christ and his most pure learning. If thou set forth a worldly mark in the stead of a celestial mark, then shall there be nothing whereunto a man ought justly enforce himself, which laboureth to profit and go forward. Every man ought to enforce himself to that which is best and most perfect, that at the least we may attain and come to the mean things. And there is no cause why we should put away any kind or manner of living from this mark. The perfection of Christ consisteth only in the affections, and not in the manner or kind of living: it consisteth in the minds and not in the garments or in meats and drinks. There be among the monks which be scarce able to be put in the third circle, and yet I speak of those which be good, but yet weak and not perfect. There be amongst these that have had two wives which Christ thinketh worthy for the first circle. Nor yet in the mean time I do no wrong to any manner of living or profession, though I propound and set forth afore every man that thing which is best and most perfect: unless ye would think Plato to have done injury against all cities because in his book of the governing of a city or a commonwealth, he feigned such example of a commonwealth as yet never any man could see. Or except ye do think that Quintilian hath hurt the whole order of orators, because he feigned such an example of an orator as yet never was. And though thou be far from the principal and chief patron Christ, thou art not yet therefore cast away, but stimulated and moved to