Philip Melanchthon and the historical Luther

by Ralph Keen

'Isaiah ... John the Baptist ... Paul ... Augustine ... Luther': with these five names Philip Melanchthon identified the points of descent in the transmission of the true faith of the church.¹ The occasion was Luther's funeral, at which Melanchthon, the eulogist, would describe the Wittenberg community as being like orphans bereft of an excellent and faithful father.² The combination of reverence and affection for the great Reformer reflected in these comments has cast all of Luther's Protestant contemporaries in his shadow. If Luther remains a figure of heroic proportions, it is due as much to the work of his admirers as to his own efforts. And Philip Melanchthon, Luther's closest colleague, was so successful in creating a legendary Luther that his own role in Reformation history has been regarded as less substantial and influential than it actually was.

Born in 1497 in Bretten, a town north of Pforzheim, and educated at Heidelberg (BA 1511) and Tübingen (MA 1513), Melanchthon was very much a product of the southwestern German regions. His grandfather was mayor of Bretten; a great-uncle by marriage was the humanist Johann Reuchlin; and his father, who died when Philip was eleven, was an armorer for the Heidelberg court. Placed under Reuchlin's care after his father's death, Melanchthon attended the Latin School at Pforzheim, where he excelled at Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, and went on to the arts program at Heidelberg. Here he received as thorough a grounding in the classics as was possible in Germany at the time, and acquired some familiarity with theology and natural science as well.³

In 1518 Melanchthon was called to Wittenberg to take up a newly instituted professorship of Greek. It was the second such position in Germany (Leipzig had the first) and Melanchthon was the second choice (Leipzig's incumbent was the preferred candidate). Melanchthon, although only twenty-one, was well trained and showed potential for making Wittenberg a center of humanism like Heidelberg, Tübingen – or Leipzig. Saxony had been divided in the preceding century, and the electoral, or Ernestine, branch wished to build a center of culture comparable to Leipzig, in the rival Albertine branch. The political division between the two branches would become a bitter religious conflict by the 1520s.

Humanism would not, however, be the movement that brought Wittenberg

its fame. The preceding fall the university's biblical scholar, a pious Augustinian and an influential preacher, had identified a number of theological issues that he felt should be placed under critical scrutiny. The ninety-five issues that Martin Luther listed as debatable struck at the heart of Catholic practice. They also served as articles in an indictment of traditional ecclesiastical authority. Within a year Luther would become the pole around which, negatively or positively, Western Christendom would orientate itself. Within three years Luther himself would be condemned and excommunicated by the Roman church; and before his death the dividing lines that demarcate the Western confessions to this day would be firmly in place.

To 1530

One of the more fascinating historical questions is whether the youthful Greek instructor knew enough about Luther to want to join him in his work in Wittenberg. Records from Melanchthon's time in Tübingen are tantalizingly scarce, and speculating achieves little. What is undeniable is that Melanchthon found plenty of work at Wittenberg, for Luther needed the services of an energetic Hellenist. Luther's illuminating insight had rested on discovering the meaning of certain passages in the epistles of Paul, and the recovery of the original meaning of scriptural revelation demanded a higher order of philological ability than Luther possessed. Melanchthon proved a capable ally, placing his teaching and humanistic work in the service of the new religious movement. Much of the progress of Lutheran thought in its first dozen years is in fact Melanchthon's work.⁴

From the start of his Wittenberg teaching career, Melanchthon studied the early Christian canon as carefully as he had the pagan authors of classical antiquity. From his lectures on the Pauline epistles came commentaries on Romans and Colossians; from courses on the gospels came expositions of John and Matthew. These were some of the first Protestant commentaries to appear, and they helped set the tone and method for later efforts.⁵ With sensitivity to the meaning of the Greek, as well as careful understanding of doctrinal issues, Melanchthon crafted interpretations of book after book, each successive commentary a next step in the construction of a comprehensive new exegetical theology. This was both a return to the biblical sources and a retrieval of the Patristic tradition, in the Reformers' view the last body of theological writing that recognized the power of the scriptures.

A modest handbook of theological concepts that appeared in 1521 would prove Melanchthon's most enduring monument. The book was called *Theological Outlines*, though for later editions it was renamed *Loci communes*, in English, *Commonplaces*. This work was a comprehensive treatment of the theological positions recognized from the evangelical perspective, but without the elaborate philosophical structure found in the scholastic summas of the preceding centuries. As such, it bridged the gap between the scholastic treatise and the biblical commentary.⁶

Melanchthon's ability to conceptualize and arrange the components of Protestant thought was as instrumental in the implementation of religious reform as it was in its formulation. Beginning in 1527, the Wittenberg theologians together with secular magistrates began a process of visitations throughout a number of German territories. These were inspections of parish life with an eye to evaluating the quality of pastoral care. Melanchthon prepared the manual for these visitations, and in so doing he both adopted a procedure of the Roman church and anticipated some of the pastoral initiatives of the Council of Trent.⁷

Visitation protocols were only one way in which the young Melanchthon sought to extend evangelical principles to everyday life in society. Another was through education; and this was the work that earned Melanchthon a reputation as an architect of German education and the label 'Preceptor of Germany.'⁸ This activity began with efforts to re-establish the Nuremberg Latin school, an institution that had prospered under the patronage of an educated patrician class, and continued through the reorganization of a number of higher institutions that would acquire and hold prominence for centuries. No individual before the nineteenth century was as influential in the history of German education as Melanchthon. However, Melanchthon's educational work gave him a place in secular cultural history that ignores important connections between his view of culture and his religious convictions. His work as an educator and humanist is carefully controlled by his theological program.⁹

Melanchthon's educational efforts represent more than an attempt to reclaim, within the secular realm, something that until then had been the almost exclusive province of the Catholic church. For Melanchthon, as for much of the Christian tradition before him, the worldly realm is a product of divine ordering, and thus no more 'secular' than the church itself. Moreover, in Melanchthon's view the refinement of manners and speech that classical studies could bring was an essential component of a complete Christian society. A well-ordered people is one that clearly discerns the difference between the godly and worldly realms (and thus avoids having the church control worldly affairs) and benefits from classical culture as the most perfect products of the worldly imagination.¹⁰

With the formal 'Protest' issued by the evangelical states at Speyer in 1529, the Reformation, already well under way, received the name that would identify it as a rival to Catholicism. The formation of the Schmalkald Federation in the same year marked a solidification of political boundaries between Catholic and Protestant states, a division that would bring bloody conflict in coming decades. Catholic court theologians like Johannes Cochlaeus set about defining the responsibilities of a Christian ruler in matters of religion. Melanchthon and his Wittenberg colleagues labored to clarify for Protestant rulers the points of difference from the Roman religion, and to specify the rulers' duty to institute and protect Evangelical worship in their lands.

1530–46

In 1530 Charles V, recently crowned Holy Roman Emperor, set the Protestant question at the forefront of his political program, and called a diet to address matters in dispute. As Speyer had demonstrated, it was not unusual for significant political developments to arise from debates about religious issues. Charles had sworn an oath to protect the interests of the Roman church, and was therefore obligated to address problems in religious matters. But the stability of his secular realm was also at stake.

The Diet of Augsburg in 1530 was a decisive moment for the Protestant interests, clerical and political alike. The Confession presented by Melanchthon represented both a comprehensive statement of Wittenberg theology and a challenge to the Empire on behalf of the Protestant territories. Rather than suppressing the Reformation, the Diet helped consolidate the movement, as the Confession became a statement to which more and more of the German nobility subscribed.¹¹

With the growth of the Reformation came more controversy, increasing in frequency and ferocity. Hopes for a resolution of religious differences ran high after the accession of the new pope in 1534. When Paul III called for a general council of the church, Protestant and Catholic interests alike began preparing their positions. Rulers convoked colloquies in which opposing theological points could be resolved if possible and clarified if not. Indeed, even those theologians who may have questioned the authority of a papally convened council welcomed the opportunity to propound and defend their convictions. Melanchthon was the most visible representative of Wittenberg theology at a number of these meetings, and he was the ideal choice for the role. Eloquent, logical, and erudite, Melanchthon was a powerful advocate of Reformation thought and (usually) an amiable adversary of his Catholic opponents.¹² Never ordained, he escaped some of the attacks that Luther and other former priests drew; but his lay status also led to dismissive comments about his 'amateur' status as a theologian.

As much as any of his writings, Melanchthon's participation in these discussions helped shape his reputation, both among his contemporaries and for later generations. Two aspects of his reputation, mutually contradictory and both inaccurate, emerged from his work in the colloquies. The first quality associated with Melanchthon was that he was a reluctant participant, a humanist only grudgingly engaged in theological debate. This is at best a half truth. Melanchthon may have been averse to controversy, but he did not shy away from it. Indeed, his participation in the ecumenical debates of his time serves as evidence of his dedication to dialogue and mutual understanding.¹³ And to say that he was a humanist only pressed into the service of the church by others is to ignore Melanchthon's voluminous production of dogmatic work. Melanchthon's correspondence from the 1530s and 1540s bears this out.

The second quality that became associated with Melanchthon in the wake of his participation in confessional debates is irenicism.¹⁴ He certainly seems

to have been committed to dialogue; and his activities have been taken as signs of a desire for harmony in the church at all costs, but nothing could be less true. Like most theologians of his time, Melanchthon longed for peace in the church, aware of the adverse effects of discord on popular piety. But he resolutely refused to compromise on doctrine in the interest of such harmony. We come closer to the true Melanchthon if we see a polite but stubborn advocate of evangelical principles rather than the gentle and conciliatory compromiser of historical legend.¹⁵ In the second half of the last century Melanchthon became a hero of ecumenically minded scholars, advocates of conciliation who saw a sympathetic spirit in the Wittenberg humanist. In recent years it has become clear that other theologians, notably the erstwhile Dominican Martin Bucer, better fit the irenic model.

In point of fact, the Melanchthon who emerges from the religious colloquies of the 1530s, as well as from developments in the larger political sphere, is a determined opponent of compromise in matters of religion. He reserved his sharpest invective for 'Erasmians' like Georg Witzel (1501–73), who appeared to some to represent a return to the apostolic ideal, and Julius Pflug (1499–1564), a conciliator in principle and politics, and agent of imperial ecclesiastical policies.¹⁶ Taking up lines of thought initiated by Luther, Melanchthon developed a theory of secular rule that underscored the ruler's duty to protect religion in a territory. This duty might call for the expulsion of Catholic clergy, the establishment of evangelical worship, and the creation of secular agencies to take up disciplinary tasks previously performed by the Catholic church. Melanchthon's program of polity presented a heavy burden of pastoral responsibility to princes who may have wanted nothing more from Protestantism than freedom from the Roman church and the Holy Roman Empire.

1546–60

With the death of Luther in 1546 the Wittenberg movement entered a period of instability. The Schmalkald War pitted the Empire against the Protestant forces of the Schmalkald League, who were defeated at the Battle of Mühlberg in 1548. Charles V, out of desire to establish uniformity in religious practice, imposed a series of measures intended to mediate Roman and Lutheran practice. Such a middle way was anathema to Melanchthon and his fellow evangelicals, since it included practices the Protestants had for decades condemned as idolatrous. It was equally repugnant to conservative Catholic theologians, such as Cochlaeus, who rejected on principle any form of conciliation with critics of Roman ecclesiastical authority.

The disputes that followed tested Melanchthon severely. His opposition to the conciliation effort remained strong.¹⁷ Indeed, his convictions may have been strengthened in the wake of the defeat of Protestant forces. The Reformation was at its most vulnerable, and Melanchthon recognized that wavering could spell the end of the movement. On the other hand, the political theory that had granted the ruler the right to impose religious reform seemed to give the

Emperor sufficient authority to impose the Interim.¹⁸ It was a dilemma that demanded either resistance or capitulation. Melanchthon chose the latter, responding to the Interim with reservations and qualifications. Not doing so would have further imperiled the cause of religion.¹⁹

In the view of many of his fellow Protestants, this was the wrong choice. A faction claiming fidelity to Luther undertook a polemical campaign against the Interims and any of its defenders, whether Catholic or Protestant. Melanchthon was accused of weakness, of giving in to Catholic interests (and thus being a crypto-Romanist), and of betraying the cause he was supposed to have led after Luther's death. The antagonism created a schism within the Lutheran church, with Melanchthon's supporters calling themselves 'Philippists' and partisans of Luther calling themselves the 'genuine Lutherans', or *gnesiolutherani*, using the Greek word for 'authentic' in their name. The feuding continued through the final decade of Melanchthon's life and for most of the next two decades. Only with the Formula of Concord in 1577 was harmony restored to the Lutheran ranks.²⁰

The last dozen years of Melanchthon's life were a time of tumult and uncertainty, in which divisions among Evangelicals multiplied and became more pronounced, just as the Roman church in Trent was consolidating its position against the Reformation in all its forms. To the end a committed defender of the doctrines he and Luther had begun formulating in the early years of the Reform, Melanchthon collected his most important writings into a *Corpus of Christian Doctrine*. On his sixty-third birthday he prepared a preface which identified those texts as his theological last will and testament. He died two months later.²¹ His colleagues and students gave him a funeral equaling Luther's in praises of his work and expressions of grief, and buried him opposite Luther in the Wittenberg Castle Church where, according to the legend for which Melanchthon is our only source, the Reformation began in October 1517.²²

Melanchthon's *Life of Luther*

Their close collaboration over almost thirty years made Melanchthon an ideal custodian of Luther's legacy after his death in February 1546. The eulogy he delivered in Wittenberg was printed quickly and circulated broadly.²³ A collection of the Reformer's major works, assembled by Melanchthon, followed shortly afterward. In preparing these volumes for the press Melanchthon prepared a life of Luther, to introduce the author to future readers and to correct false reports about Luther's life and character.

Just as Melanchthon had served as the arranger and systematizer of Luther's theology, so he presents Luther's life in a noticeably Melanchthonian fashion: clearly and straightforwardly. Melanchthon's orderly mind, ever averse to ambiguity, creates a Luther who rises heroically from the dregs of late medieval Catholicism, and with prophetic zeal restores the piety of the ancient church.

It is evident from the *Life* that Melanchthon saw Luther as a prophet, and depicted him as one, with as little stylistic embellishment as the genre and

theme would permit. Melanchthon had identified Luther as a prophet in his funeral oration in 1546,²⁴ and implied it in his 1548 oration on Luther and the ages of the church.²⁵ Casting Luther in such a role separated him from all the Bugenhagens, Jonases – and Melanchthons – in his circle, setting them among the followers rather than the agents of the movement.

Just as the prophetic narratives serve a theological purpose in the biblical canon, and just as the lives of great figures play a pedagogical role in humanism, so should Melanchthon's depiction of Luther be seen as an integral part of his larger work of elucidating the salient qualities of the Christian life. The Melanchthon who wrote encomiums of Aristotle, Galen, and Erasmus, praising their usefulness for learning, would not have been complete in his life's work without some record of Luther's life and praise of his contribution to piety.

Melanchthon's interest in history was extensive and genuine. Describing it as philosophy taught by examples, Melanchthon saw the record of human events as an essential component of culture. Moreover, the Protestant theological enterprise called for a certain measure of historical argumentation. In contrast to their Catholic contemporaries, Protestant theologians needed to articulate a vision of history that accounted for the deterioration of religion over time and its restoration in their own day. From his first years in Wittenberg, Melanchthon stressed the purity of the distant past over the corruption of recent times.²⁶ The heroic figure was the one who could restore ancient thought, practice, and piety. The contrast of a heroic antiquity with a decadent modernity is a prominent theme of Melanchthon's work.

Nevertheless, the *Life of Luther* is structured strangely, and one would be tempted to dismiss it as an incomplete work. Melanchthon's part of the narrative stops at 1521. It is followed by the official account of the proceedings of the Diet of Worms, and that is in turn followed by a eulogy Melanchthon delivered before an academic assembly. Instead of dismissing this arrangement of texts as a poor substitute for a continuous narrative, we might see the use of the Worms narrative as a record that accentuates the heroic character of Luther's stand before the Empire. Like a Passion narrative from the New Testament or one of the ubiquitous hagiographies of the later Middle Ages, the record of Luther's trial presents in a factual manner a steadfastness that is larger than life. The episode is so dramatic that to present this with rhetorical embellishments is actually to undermine the record. The facts speak for themselves, and they do so more eloquently than even Melanchthon, a master of Latin style and a literary mentor, could. Hence the transition from Melanchthon's narrative to the transcript of the proceedings at Worms is a rhetorically effective change of tone.

The eulogistic piece at the end of the *Life of Luther* is not the third part of a three-part work, but a concluding text for a two-part essay. The piety recorded in the 1546 text echoes the stolid faith of a quarter century earlier. The centerpiece of this final passage is Luther's prayer, which like the Worms testimony serves as a witness in the Reformer's own words. By withdrawing from the authorial stage and allowing Luther's words to stand out as they do,

Melanchthon preserves an element of Luther's personality, an echo of a majestic presence recently departed from the stage of history.