

## *Reflections on Melanchthon as Theologian of the Augsburg Confession*

by ERIC W. GRITSCH

The logo of the Melanchthon Institute, based on Melanchthon's own coat-of-arms (pictured on page vi), symbolizes quite well the theologian Melanchthon: a cross adorned with an attractive serpent, winding its way from the bottom to the top, with the head resting on the right sidebar of the cross. The logo also recalls Christ's first of two missionary mandates in the Gospel According to Matthew (10:16), "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." The second mandate is issued at the end of that Gospel (28:19), "Make disciples of all nations." That is why the Nicene Creed speaks of an "apostolic" church, a church "sent" into the world to share the good news of a new life with Christ by faith and, when he comes again, by sight. Martin Luther's theology has been called a "theology of the cross" because he rediscovered the christo-centric focus in the Christian life. God provides (from above, as it were) the gifts in Christ: unconditional love without human merit, grace; faith as the means by which grace is mediated; and a ministry of Word and sacrament to communicate the good news in Christ, the gospel. So gifted, Christians can move out into the world, on the side-bar of the cross, as it were, in apostolic (missionary) succession of the gospel through time until its end, with "new heavens and a new earth" (2 Peter 3:13).

Melanchthon shared Luther's theology of the cross. But he was in many ways wiser than Luther, more serpentine and yet still sharing the same other-worldly, indeed naive faith of the Wittenberg reformer. In this sense Melanchthon was a theologian of the cross who combined a cruciform faith with the wisdom of a serpent and the purity of a dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:16). As a churchman and theologian, he was indeed "wise" (*fronimos* in the Greek text—quick-witted, alert) and innocent (*akeraios* in Greek—pure, uncorrupted). In this manner he combined the theology of the cross with a wisdom aimed to heal the schism in

the church and to labor for harmony in humankind. For the serpent symbolizes healing in the ancient Greek culture which Melancthon knew so well. Even today, the logo of medicine is a staff with two serpents winding to the top. In the Bible, the serpent first symbolizes evil and its temptation (Gen. 3:5), then healing as the bronze serpent of Moses (Num. 21:9, the text on which Melancthon's coat-of-arms was based), and finally Christ himself in John 3:14-15: "just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

Melancthon always tried to be rational in his wise diagnosis of the state of the church, and he was known in his many prayers as one who, like a dove on a rooftop, could coo his faith with praise and thanks to God in Christ. He honored tradition; he loved education; and he did everything possible for the sake of Christian unity. He was the first reformer who, as a non-ordained theologian, published a widely used Lutheran systematic theology, the *Loci Communes* of 1521 (revised in 1535 and 1543).

### *A Normative Confessional Theology*

Melancthon speaks about God and the world in ways designed to create certainty in his hearers. Thus theology is to be like mathematics. For just as mathematics is based on the precise insights of human reason so theology is grounded in a biblically verified revelation. Melancthon shuns any type of human speculation about God as a supernatural being. God's will for the world is known only in Jesus Christ. The hermeneutical key to God's will is the proper distinction between law and gospel. God created a natural, civil law to prevent chaos in the world of sin where people always want to "be like God" (Gen. 3:5). Thus there is the Decalogue, with its various prescriptions for a civilized life, ranging from rules for worship to regulations for human relationships. Melancthon calls this civil law the first function of the law. The second function of the law is the disclosure of human sin (Rom. 3:20). Since no one can fulfill the law with perfection, the law reveals sin in the

human conscience. This function of the law, therefore, leads to repentance, the recognition that God's laws cannot be fulfilled with total satisfaction.

Repentance leads to the gospel, the good news that in Christ sin is overcome. To be in the right relationship with God through Christ, to be justified, one must make the proper distinction between the law and the gospel. The improper relationship between law and gospel is characterized by Melanchthon as the confusion of a philosophical righteousness with Christian righteousness, of human merit with divine love. Like Paul and Luther, Melanchthon teaches that one can never be reconciled with God by one's own efforts, but only by God's love for the world in Christ. Christians live with God by Christ alone, by grace alone and by faith alone. When they arrange their lives according to this basic insight they have begun to live the daily struggle between law and gospel, anticipating the victory of the gospel. Melanchthon calls this the third function of the law.

He applied this basic insight (known by the slogan "justification by grace through faith apart from works prescribed by the law"—Rom. 3:28) in the work that made him the fundamental Lutheran theologian, *The Augsburg Confession of 1530* (and its defense or *Apology of 1531*; hereafter, by article, as AC and AP). As a theologian, therefore, Melanchthon is the architect of the centerpiece of the normative Lutheran Confessions, published in 1580 as *The Book of Concord* (ed. & tr. Theodore G. Tappert, hereafter cited, by page, as BC). He viewed these Confessions as a summary of an ecumenical consensus designed to remove medieval abuses in the church. That is why he entitled the first part "Articles of Faith and Doctrine" and the second part "Articles About Matters in Dispute, in Which an Account is Given of the Abuses Which Have Been Corrected" (BC 27). This purpose is clearly stated in the Preface to the AC: "we on our part shall not omit doing anything, in so far as God and conscience allow, that may serve the cause of Christian unity" (BC 26).

Articles 1 to 3 of the AC state that the Lutheran reform movement asserts the triune God as the God who, in Christ, overcomes sin. God is "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (1—BC 27); there is

“original sin” (2—BC 28); and the Son of God atoned for this and all other sins, using the Holy Spirit to sustain believers until he come again (3—BC 30). These three articles want to make it clear that justification by faith is not a subjective struggle for faith through anxiety (as Luther’s opponents assumed), but an integral part of the activity of the triune God.

Articles 4 to 6 describe the ministry of Word and sacrament as the instruments of the gospel in distinction from the law. Believers are justified before God on account of Christ’s atoning death (4—BC 30). This is the article that defines the church, and Melancthon drafted an extensive defense of it in AP 4 (BC 107–68). God instituted an ordained ministry to provide Word and sacrament. But the Holy Spirit, not the ordained pastors, creates faith “in those who hear the gospel, when and where he pleases.” This article calls on pastors to concentrate on gospel communication and not on numerical success. Pastors are to “instrument” Word and sacrament (5—BC 31). When the Holy Spirit gives faith through such a ministry there will be a new obedience; that is, faith will produce good works, not for merit before God, but as a testimony of divine love, fruits of faith (6—BC 31–32).

Articles 7 to 15 deal with the church as the assembly of Word and sacrament. First Melancthon asserts the Lutheran principle of unity, namely, that it is enough (*satis est* in Latin) for true unity to have a ministry of Word and sacrament (7—BC 32). Everything else in the church is negotiable for the task of its mission in the world. But Melancthon is a realist. He knows that the church is a mixed body, consisting of true believers and “hypocrites, and even open sinners” (8—BC 33). Indeed, “they are mingled with the church and hold office in the church” (AP 8—BC 171). Membership in the church begins with baptism. Lutherans affirm the ecumenical tradition of infant baptism, perhaps because infant baptism shows that no one can be justified by merits. How would an infant have accumulated merits before God? (10—BC 33). Melancthon also includes private confession as part of penance among the sacraments (11–12—BC 34), besides baptism and Holy Communion, in which Christ is truly present (12—BC 34). There had been fierce arguments regarding Christ’s presence in the Lord’s

Supper. According to the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) the Supper included no real presence of Christ; it was a memorial of his work. He, therefore, ordered its celebration only four times a year at festivals like Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. John Calvin (1509–1564) argued for a “spiritual presence” of Christ’s divine, not human, nature. Melanchthon himself tried a compromise in a second edition of AC which, though based on the Wittenberg Concord of 1536, no one finally accepted. The “altered AC” of 1540, (the so-called *Variata*) stated that Christ was “with” the bread; Calvin approved of this phrasing. But this “consubstantiation” (from *cum substantia*) never became an accepted Lutheran position. For the mystery of the sacraments is not to be explained, but to be used “to awaken and confirm faith in those who use them” (AC 13—BC 35). Melanchthon insists that Word and sacrament should never be separated because God communicates the gospel audibly and visibly. “Through the word and the rite God simultaneously moves the heart to believe and take hold of faith . . . As the word enters through the ears to strike the heart, so the rite itself enters through the eyes to move the heart. The word and the rite have the same effect” (AP 13—BC 211–13). The ministry of Word and sacrament needs to be properly regulated through ordination and calling (14—BC 36). Here Melanchthon expresses the Lutheran desire to keep the ancient, medieval hierarchy led by bishops, provided that they not abuse their power (AP 14—BC 214). All this should be done “to contribute to peace and good order in the church” (15—BC 36).

Article 16 teaches that Christians can serve in political offices because God created them for the sake of good order. “But when commands of the civil authority cannot be obeyed without sin, we must obey God rather than human authority (Acts 5:29)” (BC 38). Article 17 affirms the biblical teaching that Christ will return for the great, final judgment (BC 38).

Articles 18–20 clarify the relationship between the gift of faith and the obligation to do good works. Human creatures have a free will to make decisions in the world, but they have no such free will to choose their salvation from sin. “This is accomplished by the Holy Spirit, who is given by the word of God” (18—BC 39).

There is the mystery of the power of sin which is neither willed by God nor created by human creatures. Melancthon affirms the tradition of the devil without any explanation (19—BC 41). Moral deeds are done as the fruit of faith which is always a gift of the Holy Spirit through Word and sacrament rather than a merit earning salvation. “When through faith the Holy Spirit is given, the heart is moved to do good works” (BC 45:29).

Article 21 expresses the Lutheran view of saints. They are faithful members of the church who should be honored, after their death, with thanksgiving, as sources for strength of faith among the living, and as examples to be imitated (AP—BC 229—30). But they are not to be invoked as mediators for the salvation of the living. For there is only one mediator, Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5). Even though it could be assumed that Mary, the mother of Jesus, prays for the church, neither she nor any other saint’s merits can be transferred to the living saints on earth (BC 232—33).

Melancthon summed up his exposition of this confessional theology in the assertion that the AC is “grounded clearly on the Holy Scriptures and is not contrary or opposed to [the teaching] of the universal Christian church, or even the Roman church (in so far as the latter’s teaching is reflected in the writings of the Fathers)” of the ancient church in the West (BC 47:1). He proposed that on many other articles of faith there could be compromise through dialogue since these articles are signs, not guarantees for a faithful ministry of Word and sacrament. These articles have a wide range, dealing with sacramental practices (offering the eucharistic cup to the laity, 22—BC 49); the marriage of priests (23—BC 51); retaining the worship form of the Mass (24—BC 56), as Lutherans do every Sunday (AP 24—BC 249); private confession (25—BC 61); fasting (26—BC 63); monastic vows (27—BC 70)- and bishops (28—BC 81).

Melancthon also drafted a treatise on the papacy in 1537 as part of the normative Lutheran Confessions (BC 320—34), contending that the Roman medieval church had gone too far when it defined the papacy as a divinely-willed institution based on the misunderstood biblical statement of Christ to Peter, known as “rock”: “on this rock I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). “The church is

not built on the authority of a man but on the ministry of the confession which Peter made when he declared Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of God" (Matt. 16:16—BC 324–25). But Melancthon was willing to accept a papacy that would symbolize Christian unity. As he wrote alongside his subscription to Luther's Smalcald Articles, "Concerning the pope I hold that, if he would allow the gospel, we, too, may concede to him that superiority over the bishops which he possesses by human right, making this concession for the sake of peace and general unity among the Christians who are now under him and who may be in the future" (BC 316).

### *Conclusion*

Melancthon was the ecumenical voice of Lutheranism. As a theologian he always opted for compromise regarding "non-essentials," that is, the means to carry on the mission of the church. The essentials were the Word and sacrament ministry that celebrated the divine gifts of grace, faith and love. Today it is called full communion: the sharing of the ministry of the gospel. Melancthon tried to achieve full communion with Rome, but was unable to persuade Luther, just as irenic Roman Catholic theologians could not change the mind of Rome regarding Lutheranism. So the movement was destined to remain schismatic.

Melancthon was drawn into various controversies after Luther's death in 1546. Conservative "Gnesio-Lutherans" (from the Greek *gnesios*—authentic) battled Melancthon's disciples, dubbed "Philippists," over a range of issues, especially the difference between essentials and non-essentials and the interpretation of the Lord's Supper. Some Gnesio-Lutherans called his followers crypto-Calvinists because of Melancthon's compromise on the language of Christ's real presence; Melancthon thought it was not necessary to speak of that presence in terms of "in, with and under the bread and wine" (BC 575:35). "With" might do, he thought. But disagreement prevailed. He called it the fury of theologians (*rabies theologorum*) of which he wanted to be relieved. Melancthon combined Luther's insistence on the authority of the Bible with a love

for the ancient Christian tradition. Thus he used the Bible, tradition, and common sense in his enduring efforts to heal the division between Lutheranism and Roman Catholicism. He was truly formed by faith and culture (*gebildet*) and disclosed the best and brightest time of Lutheranism. That is what Luther saw in the theologian Melanchthon when he closed a letter to him, dated August 1, 1521, with the words: “if you are a preacher of grace then preach a true and not fictitious grace. If grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death and the world” (LW 48:281).



Melanchthon and His Motto:  
 “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Romans 8)  
 from *Opera omnia*, frontispiece



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