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Melanchthon the Confessor

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BY definition, a confessor is "one who confesses." Specifically and strictly, a confessor is an ordained clergyman who hears confessions and is authorized to grant absolution. Or he is one who professes or gives heroic evidence of his faith in Christ, a saint who suffers persecution for his faith without undergoing martyrdom in the process.

A confessor in the first sense Blessed Philip Melanchthon was not. He was never ordained to the priesthood, and he stubbornly resisted the efforts put forth by Luther to make a preacher out of Melanchthon.²

¹ Presented at a convocation held at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., on April 20, 1960, in commemoration of the 400th anniversary of Melanchthon's death.

² *W. A., Briefwechsel*, 2, nos. 429—430, pp. 387—391. — A point has been made of the alleged fact that on at least one occasion, in the period of religious anarchy precipitated during Luther's absence from Wittenberg by the Enthusiasm of Andrew Bodenstein von Carlstadt, Melanchthon usurped the privilege of celebrating the Holy Communion for his students in St. Mary's Church, Wittenberg. The source of this erroneous idea is the statement of Clyde Leonard Manschreck, *Melanchthon: The Quiet Reformer* (New York: Abingdon Press [c. 1958]), p. 72: "On September 29 Melanchthon gave communion in both kinds to some students at the Town Church." A footnote on p. 325 offers as documentation: "*Supplementa Melanchthonia* [!], VI, 1, 161. Cf. N. Müller, *Die Wittenberger Bewegung*, 16 to 17." Manschreck has misunderstood his sources. The basic reference is a letter of Sebastian Helman (probably Councilor Sebastian Heinemann or Hennemann of Breslau, d. 1549) to John Hess at Bratislava, written from Wittenberg Oct. 8, 1521: "Proinde nos *Wittenbergenses* non audimus missas. Verbum dei fideliter audimus, demum sub vna specie non communicamus, sed vtranque capimus, et id

Neither was Melanchthon a confessor in the sense that he risked martyrdom or even persecution for the Faith. Spiritual anguish he suffered at times, and a limited measure of physical inconvenience, but hardly in a heroic measure.

While we could regard Melanchthon as a confessor in the strictly liturgical sense, like St. Aphraates or St. Gilbert of Sempringham or St. Robert of Newminster, we commemorate him this morning as a confessor in a technical sense that the dictionary recognizes only by indirection. We remember him because he was uniquely responsible for a number of perennially significant formulations of the Faith — notably the Augsburg Confession (1530), the Apology (1531), and the Tractatus on the Authority and the Primacy of the Pope (1537).

It should not be without significance for us that this confessor was a layman who became a lay theologian neither through professional preparation nor personal inclination but through the force of circumstances.

sepe nobis continget. *Philippus Melanchthon* cum omnibus suis discipulis in parrochia in die Michaelis sub Vtraque specie communicavit, et iam fiet in omnibus." (Nikolaus Müller, *Die Wittenberger Bewegung 1521 und 1522*, 2d ed. [Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger, 1911], p. 17.) From this is clear that Melanchthon received Holy Communion under both kinds with his students at the festival service on Saint Michael's Day; he did not celebrate the Holy Communion. Manschreck's error is the more difficult to understand because his other source translated Helman's letter correctly: "Mit seinen Schülern in der Stadtkirche sub utraque kommuniziert" (Otto Clemen [ed.], *Melanchthons Briefwechsel* [*Supplementa Melanchthoniana*, VI], I, 1 [Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger Eger und Sievers, 1926], no. 133, n. 1, p. 161).

Yet almost precisely two fifths of the *Book of Concord*, to which we stand committed, comes from his lay pen. This segment of the *Book of Concord* includes the particular Creed of the Lutheran community, the Augsburg Confession. Again it should not be without significance that this whole Melanchthonian segment of the Symbols owes its origin to lay impulses. It was on behalf of lay princes and lay city administrations that Melanchthon wrote the *Augustana*. It was on their behalf that he prepared the September 1530 draft of the Apology³ which the Emperor refused to receive and of which the printed version of the spring of 1531 is only a leisurely expansion. Again it was at the behest of the lay estates of the Smalcald League that Melanchthon in 1537 prepared the *Tractatus* as a supplement to the Augsburg Confession and the Apology.

The contribution to the *Book of Concord* which Melanchthon the Confessor made is something to be received and cherished as a great gift from Him who is the Source of every good gift. Twentieth-century Lutherans, remembering Luther's own words,⁴ sometimes regret that the partisan name "Lutheran," with which hostile malice stigmatized the supporters of the Great Reformer, stuck, and that it has become the name by which our church is conventionally and even legally known. For, after all, the "Lutheran" community is symbolically bound in only a limited degree to the literary productions of Martin Luther. Even if we add the quotations from Luther's works in the Formula of Concord to his Smalcald Articles and his two Catechisms, Luther's contribution to the *Book*

of *Concord* is significantly smaller bulkwise than that of Melanchthon. To say this involves no depreciation of the Catechisms and the Smalcald Articles; our symbolical canon would be much the poorer without them. Again, it does not imply that the theology which we could construct from these documents would be seriously defective. It does imply, however, that the theology that we can construct from all of the symbols in the *Book of Concord*, in which Melanchthon's three works are added to Luther's three, is much more complete, much more fully rounded, and more consistently precise. It does underline that ours is not a person-oriented but a symbol-based community. And it may well remind us that among the creeds to which alone—beside the Sacred Scriptures—our ordination subscription commits us, the *basic* particular creed to which we subscribe, is the Augsburg Confession, and that even the three Luther symbols are only commentaries on and corroborations of the Augsburg Confession.

When we are speaking of Melanchthon the Confessor, it is further worth noting that his activity in this area was not limited to the production of the three creedal statements to which we have already referred. The earliest document to achieve quasi-symbolical status in the Lutheran movement, the *Articuli visitationis* (1527)⁵ or the *Unterricht der Visitatoren* (1528),⁶ on the basis of which the church in Electoral Saxony received its Evangelical form, was from his pen. He assisted in drawing up the Schwabach Articles in 1529,⁷ he wrote the so-called [Witten-

³ C. R., 27, 275—316, 321—378.

⁴ W. A., 8, 685.

⁵ C. R., 26, 7—28.

⁶ C. R., 26, 42—96.

⁷ W. A., 30/3, 86—91.

berg-] Torgau Articles of 1530,⁸ and drafted the Wittenberg Formula of Concord⁹ between the Strasbourgers and the Saxons in 1536. When the Council of Trent was to be reconvened in 1551, after its brief and inglorious first 13-month phase had ended in 1547, it was Melanchthon who composed the *Repetitio Augustanae Confessionis*,¹⁰ the Saxon Confession of 1551, as it was called, and who stood prepared to go to Trent himself and to present it to the assembled fathers in the name of Elector Maurice.

It is to Melanchthon's lifelong concern for purity of doctrine likewise that we ultimately owe the concept of a *corpus doctrinae*,¹¹ of which our own *Book of Concord* is the most successful example. It was Melanchthon's conviction that a statement on a single controverted theological issue was inadequate to demonstrate a church body's orthodoxy and that doctrinal purity needed massive and comprehensive manifestation. Such a *corpus doctrinae* must be patently Biblical and catholic. In

his *Loci communes* of 1543 he insisted that the judge in a theological controversy must be the Word of God, to which is added the confession of the true church.¹² For Me-

¹² Philip Melanchthon, *Loci theologici recogniti* (Leipzig: Officina Voegeliana [1543]), "De ecclesia," p. 353: "Quis igitur erit iudex quando de Scripturae sententia dissensio oritur, cum tunc opus sit voce dirimentis controversiam? Respondeo: *Ipsum verbum Dei est iudex, et accedit confessio verae ecclesiae.* . . . Et cum maior pars hunc verum iudicem et hanc veram confessionem non audit . . . Deus Ecclesiae iudex tandem dirimit controversiam delens blasphemus." P. 355: "Audienda est ecclesia ut doctrix, sed fides et invocatio nituntur verbo Dei non humana autoritate. . . . Nec contemnamus docentem ecclesiam, et tamen iudicem esse sciamus ipsum verbum Dei. . . . Docentem ecclesiam amare, vereri at venerari discamus et purioris ecclesiae testimonia inquiramus." (C. R., 21, 836—837.) In his concern to demonstrate the distinction that Melanchthon made between the Sacred Scriptures and the Symbols, K. D. Schmidt in his article, "Corpora doctrinae," in Heinz Brunotte and Otto Weber, ed., *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon*, I (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1956), p. 816, makes the (undocumented) statement that Melanchthon insisted that we must obey (*obedire*) the Sacred Scriptures and only receive (*amplecti*) the Symbols. It should be noted, however, that Melanchthon also uses *amplecti* with reference to the Sacred Scriptures, for instance in the introduction to the 1543 *Loci* on p. 4: "Commonefacti voce recte docentium, *amplectantur* [pii] utraque manu et toto pectore *libros propheticos et apostolicos* a Deo traditos et adjungunt enarrationes et testimonia purioris ecclesiae ut Symbola" (C. R., 21, 606—607). On the relation of Scripture and the Symbols in Melanchthon see Ritschl, I, 276—349; Reinhold Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, IV, 2 (Erlangen: A. Deichertsche Verlagsbuchhandlung [Werner Scholl], 1920), pp. 430 to 435; Friedrich Wilhelm Kantzenbach, *Das Ringen um die Einheit der Kirche im Jahrhundert der Reformation* (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk [1957]), pp. 103—109; and Adolf Sperl, *Melanchthon zwischen Humanismus und Reformation* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1959), pp. 183—198. All offer extensive citations from and references to Melanchthon's works. On the broader issue see the perceptive

⁸ "Der nach Torgau berufenen Wittenberger Gelehrten Bedenken über die streitigen Artikel," parts A—E, in Karl Eduard Förstemann, *Urkundenbuch zu der Geschichte des Reichstages zu Augsburg im Jahre 1530*, I (Halle: Waisenhaus, 1833), no. 27, pp. 68—97.

⁹ C. R., 3, 75—77.

¹⁰ C. R., 28, 369—568.

¹¹ Otto Ritschl, *Dogmengeschichte des Protestantismus*, I (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1908), p. 331, believes that Melanchthon used the term *integrum corpus doctrinae ecclesiasticae* for the first time in the University of Wittenberg Statutes of 1533 (*Liber decanorum facultatis theologicae academiae Vitebergensis*, ed. K. E. Förstemann, 1833, p. 155). See also (Heinrich Heppe and) Georg Kawerau, "Corpus doctrinae," in Albert Hauck, ed. *Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, 3d ed., IV (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1898), pp. 293 to 298.

lanchthon this "confession of the true church" found pre-eminent expression in the catholic creeds. Here is the reason why every important Lutheran *corpus doctrinae*, including our own *Book of Concord*, embodies the so-called Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian creeds, which the Latin version of the *Concordia* describes as *summæ auctoritatis*. (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Summary Formulation, 4 [Latin]).

Melanchthon's influence as a Lutheran confessor was not exhausted by his own contributions. We do not fully understand the significance of the Formula of Concord if we forget that half of its six authors — on balance the more influential half — were devoted disciples and past protégés of Melanchthon, Martin Chemnitz, Nicholas Selnecker, and David Chytraeus, through whom Melanchthon exerted a further vicarious and posthumous influence on all subsequent generations of Lutheran theologians.

In central-eastern Europe the Augustana exerted a profound influence on the Hungarian Lutheran *Confessio pentapolitana* of 1549;¹³ the Transylvanian *Formula pii consensus inter pastores ecclesiarum Saxonicarum* of 1572;¹⁴ and the *Confessio*

and heavily documented essay of Peter Fraenkel, "Revelation and Tradition: Notes on Some Aspects of Doctrinal Continuity in the Theology of Philip Melanchthon," in *Studia theologica*, XIII (1959), pp. 97—133. Formula of Concord, Solida Declaratio, Von dem summarischen Begriff, 4 (Latin).

¹³ Reproduced in John Michael Reu, *The Augsburg Confession: A Collection of Sources with an Historical Introduction* (Chicago: Wartburg Publishing House, 1930), pp. 433—437. The *Confessio pentapolitana* became the basis of the *Confessio heptapolitana* (1559) and the *Confessio Scepusiana* (1569) (*ibid.*, p. 169).

¹⁴ Reproduced *ibid.*, pp. 440—454.

Bohemica of 1575,¹⁵ which was designed to unite all the Evangelicals in the Kingdom of Bohemia and which was finally adopted by the Bohemian *Unitas Fratrum* of 1609.

Outside the Lutheran community Melanchthon's influence as confessor was both direct and indirect. Richard Taverner published the Augsburg Confession and the Apology in English in 1536.¹⁶ From that same year the articles agreed upon by the commissioners of Henry VIII and the Wittenberg theologians,¹⁷ as well as the king's own Ten Articles,¹⁸ reveal that they have been strongly informed by Melanchthon's formulations. Through Archbishop Thomas Cranmer's private compilation, the so-called Thirteen Articles of 1538,¹⁹ the Augsburg Confession exerted considerable influence on the Church of England's Forty-Five Articles of 1552,²⁰ which became successively the Forty-Two Articles of 1553 and,

¹⁵ Reproduced in an English translation by W. Sandrock, *ibid.*, pp. 424—454.

¹⁶ Richard Taverner, trans.-ed. *The confession of the fayth of the Germaines exhibited . . . in the Counsell or assemble holden at Augusta the yere of our lorde 1530, to which is added the Apologie of Melanchthon* (London: Robert Redman, 1536).

¹⁷ An abridged reprint of the Latin text, supplemented with an English translation of the missing portions from the German version, is reproduced in Reu, pp. 454—466, from the 1905 edition of G. Mentz, *Die Wittenberger Artikel von 1536*, pp. 18 ff.

¹⁸ Reproduced in Charles Hardwick, *A History of the Articles of Religion*, 3d ed. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1881), pp. 237—258. See Henry Eyster Jacobs, *The Lutheran Movement in England during the Reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: General Council Publication House, 1916), pp. 88—96.

¹⁹ Hardwick, pp. 59—63; reproduced on pp. 259—276, thence in Reu, pp. 466—478.

²⁰ Reproduced in Hardwick, pp. 277—288.

ultimately, the Thirty-Nine Articles of 1571.²¹ Via this Anglican confession, Melanchthon's residual influence reached American Methodism in the form of John Wesley's reduction of the Thirty-Nine Articles to the Twenty-Five Articles adopted by the Baltimore Conference in 1784.²²

Finally, it may not be amiss to point out that after the Formula of Concord had forced the more extreme disciples of Melanchthon out of the Lutheran churches into the Reformed community, their influence played a prominent role in keeping German Calvinism from ever conforming wholly to the classic type of Reformed orthodoxy. From the *Repetitio Anhaltina* of 1579²³ on, the Melanchthonian message of universal grace served to restrain the pull toward the grim and rigid predestinarianism of Geneva and Dort.

If we analyze the symbols that Melanchthon has bequeathed to the church, we find a number of characteristics:

First, acceptance of the authority of the Sacred Scriptures because they are in their totality the Word of God. Melanchthon is

²¹ Reproduced in Hardwick, pp. 289—253. See Jacobs, pp. 136—139, 339—342, and E. J. Bicknell, *A Theological Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England*, 3d ed. by H. J. Carpenter (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1955), pp. 10—15.

²² Reproduced in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, III (New York: Harper and Brothers, c. 1905), 807—813.

²³ I.e., *Repetitio (Augustanae Confessionis) Anhaltina*, translated into German as *Kurze und einfältige Wiederholung der rechtgläubigen Kirchenlehre und Bekenntnis, zu dem sich die Kirchen im Fürstentum Anhalt in etlichen Artikeln bekennen, welche von Anderen in Streit gezogen worden sind* (1581) and reproduced in Heinrich Heppe, ed., *Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche Deutschlands* (Elberfeld: R. L. Friderichs, 1860), pp. 19—67.

not averse to establishing a point with a pertinent proof-text when he can quote one decisively, but he displays considerable skill—notably in the Apology—in drawing upon the evidence provided by less obvious passages.

Second, an unwavering concern for preserving and demonstrating the catholicity and apostolic continuity of the Church of the Reformation, particularly in the controverted articles of original sin, forgiveness of sins by grace for Christ's sake through faith, the Sacrament of the Altar, the Sacred Ministry, and the late medieval abuses that the Lutheran estates had corrected in the churches in their domains.

Third, insistence on the primacy of the doctrine of forgiveness of sins by grace alone, without meritorious works.

Fourth, stress upon the forensic metaphor in describing justification.

Fifth, an abiding passion for the manifestation of the unity of the church in confession and in worship, in order to contain, as far as loyalty to the truth would permit, the further spread of schism and to achieve the restoration of broken associations. It is this passion which finds misguided expression in the equivocation and ambiguity of the Variata of 1540²⁴ and of the confessional portions of the Leipzig Interim of December 1548.²⁵

Sixth, a sturdy sense of the essentiality of the empirical church for the acquisition and preservation of saving faith and of

²⁴ Hans Lietzmann, ed., *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche, herausgegeben im Gedenkjahr der Augsburger Konfession*, 4th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Rupprecht, 1959), pp. 57—59, 62, 65, 83 b; excerpts in an English translation in Reu, pp. 398—411.

²⁵ C. R., 7, 51—62, 215—221, 259—264.

the necessity of sacred ministry for the normal functioning of the church as a matter of divine right.

Seventh, a practical sacramentalism that is interested not only in the doctrine about the sacraments but also in their actual use in the church.

Eighth, a profoundly pastoral attitude which realizes that theology is never an end in itself, but always only a means for undergirding the faith of the Christian community.

Ninth, an almost agonizing concern for precision. It is largely to this that we must ascribe the incessant rewriting of section after section of the documents that he produced, during and after publication. We are less than fair if we regard this as a fault uniquely his. Blessed Martin Luther likewise revised the Smalcald Articles to a significant extent between their signing and their publication.²⁶

Tenth, a professional schoolmaster's outlook that sometimes gives an exaggerated

priority to the intellectual and pedagogical aspects of issues, to the neglect of equally important and even more important aspects.

The fathers of the church in every generation have been human beings like us, simultaneously sinners in themselves and righteous in Christ, but always creatures in finitude. All of them have been children of their age and of their environment, with the marks of the matrix of their own time and their own place upon themselves and their work. The influence of even the greatest — not excluding a St. Athanasius, a St. Augustine, a St. Thomas, or a Martin Luther — has never been wholly constructive. So it is also with Philip Melanchthon the Confessor. But they have all been instruments of God's Holy Spirit, endowed with His grace and with His graces for the profit of His whole church. So also it is with Philip Melanchthon the Confessor. And for what the Holy Spirit has through him done for the church and for us, let us give thanks unto the Lord, our God, for it is truly meet and right so to do.

St. Louis, Mo.

²⁶ H. Volz, "Die Schmalkaldischen Artikel und der *Tractatus de potestate et primatu papae*," in *Bekennnisschriften* (see n. 24 above), p. xxvi.