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Melanchthon versus Luther: the Contemporary Struggle

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Luther and Melanchthon in Modern Research

In many churches in Scandinavia or in Germany one will find two oil paintings of the same size and dating from the same time, representing Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon, the two prime reformers of the Church. From the point of view of modern research it may seem strange that Melanchthon is placed on the same level as Luther, side by side with him, equal in importance and equally worth remembering as he. Their common achievement was, above all, the renewal of the preaching of the Gospel, and therefore it is deserving that their portraits often are placed in the neighborhood of the pulpit. Such pairs of pictures were typical of the nineteenth-century view of Melanchthon and Luther as harmonious co-workers in the Reformation. These pictures were widely displayed not only in the churches, but also in many private homes in areas where the Reformation tradition was strong.

In modern research, however, the difference between the two reformers is often over-estimated and overplayed. Melanchthon's theology is represented not only as a deviation from Luther's, but also as the beginning of the decline of the theology of the Reformation. In a manner historically untrue, Luther has been considered the only real Reformer. Yet Luther himself declares his high esteem for the contributions of Melanchthon. Luther accepts him as the leading spokesman of the Reformation on many important occasions. We are prone to forget the core of truth present in the idea expressed by the old pairs of pictures of the two cooperating reformers.

In many respects the idea that the Reformation was the common work of Luther and Melanchthon corresponds to the facts. There were, in fact, many others who also made very fundamental contributions, so that we rightly call them "reformers" too. But the two outstanding personalities were Luther and Melanchthon. We know that Luther himself appreciated his co-reformer as his most valued colleague, whose skill, learning, and depth of theological insight were of the greatest importance for the entire Reformation. The differences between Luther and Melanchthon have often been underlined, not only by modern theologians since Ritschl and Harnack, but also by sixteenth-cen-

tury theologians, especially by the so-called Gnesio-Lutherans. The meaning and relevance of these differences, however, have often been misinterpreted.

The learned and skillful way in which Melanchthon interpreted evangelical theology was gratefully accepted and highly esteemed by Luther. In much modern research, however, it has often been evaluated in a negative way: Melanchthon did not really understand the deepest intentions of the Reformation, and with him began the decline of Lutheran theology. The blame is laid partly on the influence of contemporary sixteenth-century philosophy and the combination of theology with philosophical education which was introduced by Melanchthon. Clearly this evaluation is untenable. There is no evidence that Melanchthon really failed to understand the intentions of the Reformation or the theology of Martin Luther, or that we in our time have understood the Reformation better than he did. It is true, however, that Melanchthon had definite reservations concerning Luther's teaching at some points. His deviation from Luther on these points was not a misinterpretation but the result of conscious theological considerations. How to estimate these doctrinal differences between Luther and Melanchthon has been widely debated in modern research. But such debate is not peculiar to our time. Also the theologians in the sixteenth century itself and the great Lutheran theologians at the beginning of the seventeenth century had decided opinions about Melanchthon's deviations from Luther.

Points of Difference in Doctrine

(a) Free Will

One of the points where the theological differences between the two reformers came to the fore was the question of free will and predestination. Melanchthon's declarations in the later editions of his *Loci* that the free will of man includes an ability to accept divine grace have been characterized as a form of synergism. His formulations were, therefore, rejected in the Formula of Concord, yet without mentioning Melanchthon's name. An unqualified charge of synergism would, however, be wrong, since Melanchthon never denied the "sola gratia." His theory was founded on definite psychological considerations, and he raised thereby a problem that had to be solved by Lutheran theology. The later theologians were forced to formulate their theological answer and position with great skill and clarity, in order to avoid a synergistic misinterpretation. The doctrine of "free will" in Lutheran theology is the result of long and intricate discussions, evoked by the so-called synergism of Melanchthon. The final

solution was not identical with the standpoint of Melanchthon, nor with that of Luther, but was rather a combination of both of them.

(b) The Lord's Supper

Another crucial point in the relationship between Luther and Melanchthon was the interpretation of the Lord's Supper. Melanchthon tried to find formulations that were acceptable also to other "reformers," such as Bucer and Oecolampadius. He was partially successful in the Wittenberg Concord of 1536, when Luther and Martin Bucer both agreed to a formula which was partly repeated in the Formula of Concord. But soon after 1536 Melanchthon came close to schism with Luther on this point, and the negotiations of 1536 did not lead to a lasting unity between the Lutherans and the other "reformers." In his new formulation of the Augustana, in 1540, Melanchthon took a further step in search of unity between the different Protestant parties. The altered article on the Lord's Supper was not contrary to Luther's doctrine, but it was also open to a Calvinistic interpretation. This form of compromise was later commonly rejected in the Lutheran churches as an early example of a false ecumenism. The Cryptocalvinistic party in Wittenberg in the sixties and seventies of the sixteenth century could rely on Melanchthon in some respects; but there is no strong reason to assume that he himself was a "cryptocalvinist" or a "Philippist" in his doctrine of the Lord's Supper. He was convinced of the real presence of the body and blood of Jesus Christ in Holy Communion, even if his explanation of the mode of presence was not quite the same as Luther's. A new investigation by Swedish theologian Tom Hardt, indeed, tries to show that Melanchthon shared the same Christological standpoint as Luther, namely, that the body of Christ did participate in the omnipresence of God Almighty. Hardt argues that in his doctrine of the Lord's Supper Melanchthon taught the presence of the body of Christ on the basis of His divine omnipresence. Since this omnipresence was not limited to the divine nature of Christ, Melanchthon's view was not a spiritualistic one but rather was identical with the Lutheran doctrine best enunciated by John Brenz, the reformer of Württemberg.

Melanchthon's efforts to find a Protestant unity in the doctrine of the Lord's Supper are in many respects similar to the attempts in our days to unite the Lutheran and Reformed churches in common doctrinal formulas. I think we have much to learn from Melanchthon's achievements and from his mistakes. His deviations from the standpoint of Martin Luther on this point left to later Lutheran theologians the task of finding the right course

between the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation and Calvinistic spiritualism. It seems evident that there is more clarity to be attained in this task than can be found through the compromising formulations of Melanchthon. But his desire for doctrinal unity with the different Christian groups of his time was significant and should never be forgotten.

Church Policy

The tension between Luther and Melanchthon concerned not only doctrinal questions but also the church politics, the way in which they developed, declared, and fought for an evangelical confession. Once again, our point of departure will be Melanchthon's position. We will especially pay attention to the important role he played at two crucial moments in the development of the Reformation, the diet of Augsburg in 1530 and the Interim debate in the latter part of the 1540's.

(a) Augsburg (1530)

Melanchthon's first biographer, Joachim Camerarius, tells us that when Melanchthon was sent to the diet of Augsburg in 1530, it was his wish that the confession on which he was working might be subscribed only by the theologians, so that it would be clear that this document was a matter only for the teachers in the church, a purely theological concern, not a political one. As we know, he did not obtain this wish; also the princes and their representatives participated in the confessional discussions. The complexity of the situation in those days made it impossible to handle religious questions without the intermingling of political interests. The first evidence of this truth is the fact that the whole religious controversy was submitted to a worldly diet, with the Emperor and the princes as the main participants. This way of dealing with the evangelical movement might seem to conflict with the distinction between the spiritual and the secular realms, which was a crucial point in the negotiations at the same diet (cf. Article 28 of the Augsburg Confession). Conditions being what they were, however, in those days there was no choice for the Lutherans. They had been summoned by the Emperor to come to the diet and declare their standpoint, and the evangelical princes had agreed to the summons.

In that situation Melanchthon faced the most difficult task of his life. It was a crucial moment for the whole process of the Reformation, and he had to bear the main burden of formulating the text of the declaration and of the argumentation, not only for the theologians but also for the whole assembly of the diet. In spite of the accumulated accusations from the opposing side (e.g.,

the 404 articles of John Eck) Melanchthon wrote, not a polemical apology, but a short, clear confession to what he called the common catholic faith in accordance with the old authentic Christian tradition. The solidity of his work is best shown by the fact that this document came to be the doctrinal basis of the Lutheran churches, not only in Germany, but the world over. In our day, four hundred and fifty years after the Diet of Augsburg, the same document is considered to be a fundamental text in the ecumenical discussions between the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans, a "Magna Charta of ecumenicity," as a Roman theologian, Walter Kasper of Tübingen, has called it.

This perennial interest in the Augsburg Confession need not be traced only to its irenic nature. It is true that Melanchthon expressed himself cautiously, in an unpolemic way. His interest was to show that the confession of the Lutheran teachers in no point went against the old catholic faith of the church. But it would be a mistake to say — as some of his contemporary opponents did — that he had given up or concealed something of the genuine Lutheran position and thereby deceived his opponents. A testimony of the reliability of the Augsburg Confession as a genuine expression of the Lutheran faith is the fact that Luther himself gave full assent to the way in which Melanchthon had formulated the text. Another testimony lies in the commentary which Melanchthon has given us in his Apology, formulated in connection with the Diet of Augsburg and intended as an answer to the Roman Catholic Confutation. In contrast to the Confession, the Apology contains a sharp polemic and defense of the Lutheran position, also on controversial questions that receive little or no treatment in the Augsburg Confession.

The efforts of Melanchthon and his colleagues at the Diet of Augsburg to obtain a consensus and a doctrinal peace between the two religious parties, the avowed aim of the Augsburg Confession, were soon lost and forgotten, hidden by the diet's transactions. But in the last decade, however, these forgotten attempts have been drawn back into the daylight and treated as a suitable and adequate point of departure for the interconfessional discussions of our day, together with the Augsburg Confession itself. In their Confutation the Roman Catholic theologians disagreed with many points in the Lutheran Confession; but in the committee negotiations that took place in August and September of 1530 much of this criticism was withdrawn and many misunderstandings were removed. The astonishing result of these negotiations (in the so-called committee of fourteen and then in a committee of six persons, three from each side) was that a far-reaching con-

sensus could be obtained on the main questions of doctrine treated in the first twenty articles of the Confession. The disagreements that remained mainly concerned some questions of church practice (e.g., the adoration of saints, Holy Communion in one kind, the ministry of the bishops, etc.). To prevent these controversial points from becoming a hindrance to peace, the theologians proposed submitting them to a future general council of the church. The remarkable consensus of the theologians, however, and the partly positive results of their negotiations had no political success. The diet came to an end with the Emperor's condemnation of the evangelical position and rejection of their Confession. The fact that the theologians in Augsburg had obtained agreement in most of the fundamental doctrinal questions was confirmed in the bilateral discussions of the thirties and of Rengesburg in 1541, but was then forgotten. The two parties thereafter went different ways. The Council of Trent, which began in 1545, was a one-sided Roman Catholic affair, and a polemical attitude characterized most of the relations in the years following.

Melanchthon combined in his theology and church policy two interests and two modes of argumentation: he defended the Lutheran position with sharp polemics against the Roman Catholic theology of his time; but he is also the leading personality in the theological negotiations at Augsburg, where his main concern was to retain the peace and find a tenable consensus in the catholic faith. In both cases his theological standpoint was the same, and there is no reason to assume a contradiction between the two attitudes. He has, to be sure, been criticized for his activity in Augsburg — for being too cautious and yielding too much to his opponents. The renowned utterance of Luther that Melanchthon “moved softly and lightly” is often interpreted as a negative judgment. If we read these words in their context, however, we shall find that they were meant in a positive way. Luther said in a letter sent from Coburg on May 15:

I have read over M. Philip's Apology [the first draft of the Confession is meant]. It pleases me very well, and I know of nothing therein to be improved or changed; nor would it become me, for I cannot move so softly and lightly. Christ our Lord grant that it may bring much and great fruit, as we hope and pray.¹

In the negotiations with the Roman Catholic theologians in Augsburg Melanchthon went as far as possible without compromising and without giving up the evangelical position. On the theological level there was no conflict between him and Luther. Luther agreed to the way in which he defended the evangelical

faith. But as regards church policy there was a difference that came to the fore, as may be seen in the letters of Luther from Coburg. Melanchthon saw the negotiations as a potential way of obtaining a theological consensus, a *pax dogmatica*. And he was eager to reach that goal; for as he judged the situation, he saw peace in religion as a necessary condition for political peace. His fears in that matter were, as we know, well founded.

Luther had come to a very different judgment concerning the situation. He had no hope for a positive result from the negotiations. He found it incredible that the Pope should give up his power and his position, and, therefore, it was his considered opinion that one could not expect that the opponents would ever really agree with the evangelical position or tolerate it. Since he, too, found it impossible to give up his theological stance, or to go back and to reintroduce into the church customs that were not in accord with the Word of God, he had come to the conclusion that a consensus in the religious field was unattainable. In contrast to Melanchthon Luther believed that peace in the community, the *pax politica*, could be retained even with two different religious parties in the land. In a letter to Melanchthon dated August 25, 1530, Luther declared his view on the theological negotiations at the Diet of Augsburg. He stated:

It is not in our power to place or tolerate anything in God's church or in His service which cannot be defended by the Word of God, and I am vexed not a little by this talk of compromise, which is a scandal to God. With this one word "mediation" I could easily make all the laws and ordinances of God matters of compromise. For if we admit that there is a compromise in the Word of God, how can we defend ourselves so that not all things become compromises In short, I am thoroughly displeased with this negotiating concerning union in doctrine, since it is utterly impossible except the Pope wishes to take away his power. It was enough to give account of our faith and to ask for peace And since it is certain that our side will be condemned by them, as they are not repenting, and are striving to retain their side, why do we not see through the matter and recognize that all their concessions are a lie?²

Luther's judgement in this case, his distrust of the merit of the negotiations, was confirmed by the actual development of the events. The negotiations were soon brought to an end, and their results had no influence upon the decisions of the diet. Nevertheless, it may be considered advantageous to the evangelical church that Melanchthon had done his utmost to exploit the possibilities

to unite the two parties and to retain peace in the church and the state. Had he not performed this task, there would have been a lingering suspicion that the cause of the schism should be attributed to the Lutheran side; but now the blame could be laid only on the papal system and the implacability of the bishops, who did not accept the preaching of the gospel.

(b) The Interim (1548)

In a passage in his Apology Melanchthon clearly stated a principle that he considered necessary and fundamental for church policy and doctrine: "It is necessary to retain the doctrine that we receive the remission of sins by grace for Christ's sake. It is likewise necessary to retain the doctrine that the keeping of the commandments of men is a useless worship." In the so-called Interim debate, eighteen years later, this principle was put on the test. Melanchthon's own failure in yielding to the rules of the Interim gave the Lutheran church an occasion to define its position concerning what here is called the "commandments of men," and in another context, the "adiaphora" (i.e., matters of indifference). The debate was of short duration, as was the struggle over the rules of the Interim; but the Formula of Concord dealt with the question again and brought it to a clear resolution (Article XII).

Already in the negotiations at the Diet of Augsburg it had been stated that indifferent church customs could be permitted for the sake of concord, even if they were not fully agreed upon, provided that they did not offend consciences (cf. Apol. XV, 52). When the Emperor had conquered the evangelical princes in the Smalcald War after the death of Martin Luther, he tried to bring the evangelical churches into conformity with the Roman Catholics through the so-called Augsburg Interim. Among its provisions were allowances for certain church-regulations, whereby many of the old customs would be reintroduced or permitted in the evangelical areas. Many Lutheran clergymen who refused to accept the Interim were severely punished; four hundred of them were banished and many evangelicals were killed. In Saxony, the center of Lutheranism, the political authorities could not hope to introduce such a document as the Augsburg Interim with its great concessions to Roman Catholic church customs. They tried, therefore, to effect a compromise, in collaboration with the leading theologians in Wittenberg. As a result, the Leipzig Interim was formulated, a more moderate form of the Augsburg Interim.

When Melanchthon and his colleagues in Wittenberg agreed to these regulations, they were moved especially by two motives: (1) Since church customs, according to the Confession, were indifferent things which could be altered according to the needs of

various communities, it was possible to yield in such questions, as long as the true doctrine of the Gospel could be retained. They considered it better to yield than that the clergymen should be forced to abandon their parishes and that evangelical preaching should come to an end. (2) They saw the whole evangelical church, with its center at the university of Wittenberg, threatened. In order to rescue the church from certain destruction by the ruling political powers they preferred to accept the Interim. It was easy to see afterwards that this decision was a mistake, a theological and political mistake. Five years later the Interim regulations were annulled, and through the peace of Augsburg of 1555 the Lutheran churches won their freedom and their right to exist under imperial law. Melanchthon himself admitted that he had been wrong in his decision in the Interim case. In a letter to his sharpest opponent, Matthias Flacius, he later wrote: "I have sinned in this matter and ask forgiveness of God."

In retrospect, however, we can say that his failure was a kind of "fruitful mistake," because it gave Lutheran theologians an occasion to clear up a difficult problem in church policy. When Melanchthon agreed to the Leipzig Interim, he encountered strong opposition from Matthias Flacius. The most important contribution of Flacius to the debate was a tract *On True and False Adiaphora* (*De Veris et Falsis Adiaphoris*), in which he skillfully scrutinized the whole problem of how to deal with the questions of order in the church. Flacius' main argument was that the so-called adiaphora (i.e., ceremonies, customs and other indifferent things in the church) are no longer indifferent matters if the accepting of them is combined with a violation of conscience or if they are to be judged as a yielding to a false theology. Another important side of his argumentation concerned Christian liberty. If the accepting of definite church customs is demanded under coercion, or if these customs are introduced as necessary for the salvation of man, it is no longer compatible with evangelical faith to yield in such matters. To the gospel belongs freedom, that is, evangelical liberty from the commandments of men. The only authority is the Word of God, of which the Apostle says that it "is not bound" (II Tim. 2:9). In this point Flacius was fighting for exactly that which Melanchthon himself had urged so clearly in his Apology of the Augsburg Confession: ". . . It is necessary to retain in the church the doctrine that the commandments of men are a useless worship."

The main argument of Flacius was summarized in the sentence: "In casu confessionis et scandali nihil est adiaphoron" — that is, in a situation where confession of the evangelical position is

required and where it would be obscured through yielding in external matters, or where the conscience of believers would be offended, indifferent things can no longer be held to be indifferent. This rule was valid for church policy not only in relation to religious authorities but also in relation to worldly powers. The relations between the evangelical churches and the political authorities came to be a problem many times in the years that followed. But the principles for correct response in moments of conflict had already been clarified in a most helpful way through Flacius' contribution to the Interim debate. His position was later confirmed by Article X of the Formula of Concord where freedom in questions concerning indifferent things is clearly stated, but also the responsibility not to yield to the enemy in such matters when the Evangelical Confession is threatened or when the weak in faith might be offended. There is no doubt that on this question Flacius and, after him the Formula of Concord, represented the stance that would have been Luther's, if he had been alive long enough to witness the Interim debate.

Concluding Remarks

In an ecumenical time such as ours, it is easy to remember and understand Melanchthon in his efforts to restore the unity of the church, to retain peace in society and in the religious arena, on the foundation of a common catholic faith. His contributions in this respect are really worth remembering. They seem capable of serving as a model and a point of departure for interconfessional discussions also in our day. But we have much to learn also from Melanchthon's mistake concerning the Interim regulations. In our time as well situations arise where a clear confession is required, also in matters that are indifferent in themselves. The Formula of Concord in Article X speaks about times of persecution. The pressure on the church, or on small groups in the church, may come from civil powers, from powerful people in the ecclesiastical sphere, and, not least, from the subtle but strong power that is called "the common opinion" or "the majority" ("Herr Omnes," as Luther called it). The Lutheran standpoint, as it was defined in opposition to Melanchthon and confirmed in the Formula of Concord, is an explication in clear terms, founded on deep experience, of how the freedom of the gospel can be and must be combined with firmness in one's confession of the true faith without yielding to the mighty power of the enemy. The difficulty of an adequate application of these principles remains as the task for the church in every new situation — and for every new

generation in the churches who share the same confession as the reformers and are still capable of receiving inspiration from them.

Footnotes

1. Clyde Leonard Manschreck, *Melanchthon: The Quiet Reformer* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958), p. 181.
2. Michael Reu, *The Augsburg Confession, A Collection of Sources with an Historical Introduction* (Chicago: Wartburg Publishing House, 1930), p. 386 f., as quoted in Manschreck, p. 204.