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# In Response to Bengt Hägglund: Did Luther and Melanchthon Agree on the Real Presence?

David P. Scaer

## *I. The Melanchthonian Problem for the Church*

This anniversary year of 1980 puts confessional Lutheran theology in an ambivalent position in commemorating the reformer Philipp Melanchthon. While some churches may have the pictures of Luther and Melanchthon side by side in stained-glass windows in chancels, others may feel compelled to have only Luther's and to keep empty the place reserved for the man who has justly earned the title of Praeceptor of Germany. In 1980 we are celebrating two years, 1530 and 1580. Whatever honor Melanchthon receives from our celebrating 1530 is mitigated in commemorating 1580. Melanchthon's Augsburg Confession will always be the Magna Carta of the Lutheran Church. Its brevity, clarity, and lack of provincial polemics have elevated it to the status of an "ecumenical" creed for Protestants. Even the Roman Catholics recognize its merit. Though its theology is Luther's, its form as well as content is also Melanchthon's. The Augsburg Confession is Melanchthon's document and remains a living tribute to him.<sup>1</sup> The adoption of the Formula of Concord in 1577 and subsequently of the Book of Concord in 1580 was at least partially a rebuke of Melanchthon or at least of positions claiming to represent Melanchthon. Melanchthon, "the quiet reformer," was also "the complex reformer," and the tradition which has grown up around him and his positions since his death bears this image of complexity and apparent contradiction.<sup>2</sup> He is theological patriarch for the two great and conflicting traditions of Protestantism, the Lutheran and the Reformed.<sup>3</sup>

The 1540 edition of the Augsburg Confession, known as the Variata, came to be understood as characteristic of Melanchthon's view of the Lord's Supper. The Variata states, "Concerning the Lord's Supper our churches teach that with bread and wine the body and blood are truly shown to those who eat in the Lord's Supper."<sup>4</sup> Several brief and familiar differences between this and the 1530 edition, as it is known, can be noted: (1.) Bread and wine are now mentioned. (2.) Whereas the first edition stated that body and blood were present, the later edition states that they are offered with bread and wine. (3.) The condemnation of what was understood as the Reformed, or then Zwinglian, position is

lacking. Melanchthon's hesitancy to attach the Real Presence to the elements becomes evident.

## II. *Luther and Melanchthon: The Differences*

The 1540 edition must have been different in some way from the 1530 version or at least more capable of being understood differently if Calvin and those mediating between the Lutherans and Reformed parties found it acceptable. Luther, on the other hand, must have been aware of this edition, but did not produce any formal strictures against it.<sup>5</sup> We are faced with several questions: Did Melanchthon change his position?; If he changed, when did he change?; Was Luther's position very different from Melanchthon's?; In what way did Luther's and Melanchthon's positions embrace each other?

Professor Hägglund alludes to this issue when he states, "He [Melanchthon] 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." In one sense the two Wittenberg reformers shared a common vocabulary but with different explanations. Some claim that the two reformers at first agreed and that Melanchthon around 1534 changed, pointing to the 1540 *Variata* as proof conclusive.<sup>6</sup> This observation is hard to refute.

A more recent scholar has attempted to find an internal consistency in the Melanchthonian view which can be traced from his early period right through his life.<sup>7</sup> What nearly all agree on is that Luther and Melanchthon did not in fact share the same perspective on the Lord's Supper though both were in some sense convinced of the Real Presence. For Luther, the presence was *in* the elements and for Melanchthon *in* the action *with* the elements. The real problem is whether their different views on the Real Presence are capable of mutual toleration or are inherently self-exclusive. Here there are historical, dogmatic, and exegetical problems.

First, a certain fundamental difference in approach to theology must be noted. Luther was by far the more strictly Bible-oriented theologian. In his debate with Zwingli he could insist upon the word "is." Melanchthon as a humanist was also a Christian antiquarian. He saw God's truth being given to Adam and being passed down into the present by successive generations. This meant that the truth of a doctrine could be demonstrated by whether or not it was held by the church fathers as well as being revealed to prophets and apostles. Heresies were condemned as revivals of former positions previously found unacceptable in the

church.<sup>8</sup> Both the Augsburg Confession and the Apology reflect this particular Melanchthonian trademark of obsession with the past history of the church. Real exegesis in the Augsburg Confession is somewhat limited, whereas citations from and references to the church fathers abound. Historical romanticism of this sort eventually results in all sorts of difficulties, since antiquity had no less internal conflict than the present. Conflicting events of the past may have been reflected in a certain internal conflict in Melanchthon. Melanchthon's function as "negotiator" of the Reformation period (i.e., his dealing with both the Reformed and Roman Catholic parties) may in part reflect a certain historical romanticism which was truly convinced that in the annals of the past lay hidden the one true position of the ancient church.<sup>9</sup> An internal and perhaps unrecognized frustration drove him to formulations and opinions which could embrace what would otherwise have been considered opposing points of view. From the very beginning Melanchthon set forth positions on the Lord's Supper which were faithful to church history, as he saw it, and nevertheless embrace the major competing opinions. Thus, it is not impossible to understand Article X in the Augsburg Confession in Roman, Lutheran, and Reformed senses.<sup>10</sup> A solution of deliberate ambiguity to the problem of the apparent differences in his position seems to be more satisfactory than attributing to Melanchthon an actual change in philosophical outlook.

### III. *Melanchthon and the Lord's Supper*

Luther and Melanchthon's differences over the Lord's Supper surfaced in their sacramental piety. Luther could speak of teeth tearing away at the body of the Lord, he reluctantly surrendered the elevation since it was seen by some as an expression of the idea that the mass was the sacrifice for the living and the dead, and he could get down on his knees to drink the spilled sacramental wine as the blood of Christ. Melanchthon did not have the same attraction for the elements. He opposed the elevation as a false worship of God, a type of idolatry, and he was ultimately responsible for Luther's removal of the elevation.<sup>11</sup>

As Luther concentrated his sacramental theology on the elements, Melanchthon saw as primary the sacramental action.<sup>12</sup> Luther's key words were the "word" and the "element," the things (i.e., *res*). With Melanchthon the concentration is on the "word" and "ceremonies" (i.e., the *ritus* and *ceremoniae*). The sacrament for Melanchthon was viewed as *actio tota*.<sup>12</sup> Peter Fraenkel explains Melanchthon's position as functional, "i.e., the concentration on processes rather than things" and finds this theme

running through his entire thought.<sup>13</sup> "Efficacious presence" would also be adequate. Luther's view may be described as substantive, virtually materialistic.

The wording of the 1540 Variata with *exhibeatur* is generally recognized as characteristic of this functional, ceremonial, effective view of the Real Presence. *Exhibeatur* was used by Melanchthon as early as 1526 to describe the sacramental action.<sup>15</sup> Melanchthon is perfectly comfortable about speaking of the presence of Christ in the sacramental rite, but hardly in Luther's terms. It is revealing that Melanchthon sees the presence of God in the Ark of the Covenant as analogous to Christ's presence in the Supper.<sup>16</sup> The chief motivation in the Supper for Melanchthon is neither the activity of the worshipping congregation nor a spiritual presence, but a process in which God comes to the congregation. Modern process thought would be more comfortable with Melanchthon's formulas than with Luther's. The key word *exhibeatur*, again appears in the Apology of 1530-1531, the Wittenberg Concord 1534, and the infamous Variata of 1540. In the process of the sacramental action, Melanchthon attaches specific importance to the ceremonial eating (*manducatio ceremonialis*) (Fraenkel).<sup>17</sup> Melanchthon later did not teach Luther's *manducatio oralis* and *manducatio indignorum*, the doctrines that Christ's body and blood are eaten by the mouth and received by believers and unbelievers alike.<sup>18</sup>

The 1530 Latin version of the Augsburg Confession itself can be read in such a way as to allow for the functional, active, effective Real Presence theory which later Melanchthon more carefully articulated. The German version, not prepared by Melanchthon but by a group of theologians at Augsburg, is much more in the spirit of Luther and, unlike the Latin, incapable of the uniquely Melanchthonian interpretation.<sup>19</sup>

Melanchthon's position cannot simply be equated with Calvin's or a species of it, though certain similarities do exist. Both held that the sacrament nourishes the soul and is most important.<sup>20</sup> Melanchthon understood the Real Presence as a substantive touching or communication of the God-Man with the spiritual essence of the human being. This was not a communication of the Holy Spirit, but of the body and blood of Christ. The Redeemer, both bodily and in a glorified state, comes in the Lord's Supper to establish a transcendental contact with the Christian's spiritual essence. Melanchthon's view is nevertheless noticeably different from Luther's. The actual association of Christ with the bread and wine alone was considered magic for Melanchthon. He viewed the entire sacramental action as the

presence and the working of the entire Christ, but with stress on the deity.<sup>21</sup> With Luther, the concentration is on the sacramental elements themselves.

Herrlinger notes that for Luther the body of Christ is *in pane* and for Melanchthon *cum pane*. He also notes that the whole matter came up for practical, personal, and in part painful discussion between the two reformers. One problem for us is how it is that Luther was aware of the Melanchthonian aberration, tolerated it, and permitted it to influence ritualistic questions.<sup>22</sup> But the other problem is determining how Melanchthon was able to be true to himself in putting forth a doctrine of the Lord's Supper in terms that first Luther and then later Calvin could accept. Peter Fraenkel, the Melanchthon scholar, claims that Melanchthon's description of the procedure of others might apply to himself, "si generaux que chacun y pouvait entendre tout ce qu'il voulait."<sup>23</sup> Such ambiguity hardly could fit Luther. The differences between Luther and Melanchthon became and still remain a heritage of struggle bequeathed to the Lutheran Church.

#### Footnotes

1. Depending upon one's perspective the Augsburg Confession (AC) belongs to both Luther and the Lutheran Church on one side and Melanchthon on the other. In a letter of June 26, 1530, the day after the AC was presented, Melanchthon wrote Veit Theodor that he had set forth Luther's position, "juxta sententiam Lutheri." Quoted from Albert Herrlinger, *Die Theologie Melanchthons in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklungen* (Gotha: Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1879), p. 135. As Melanchthon continued to publish new and revised editions, he undoubtedly saw it as representing his own and not Luther's theology.
2. The Philippists, the party favoring compromise with both Reformed and Roman Catholics on a variety of issues after Luther's death, took their name from Philipp Melanchthon. It is debatable whether every view held by the Philippists was actually his or whether their views simply shared in his generally mediating attitude. Michael Rogness in an abridgement of his dissertation exonerates Melanchthon of the Philippists' errors, but his arguments are unconvincing. *Melanchthon: Reformer Without Honor* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969), pp. 122-39.
3. Such characteristic Reformed views as the sovereignty of God and predestination were not taught by Melanchthon, but similarities on the Lord's Supper are recognizable. As Herrlinger points out, both Melanchthon and Calvin held to the sacramental nourishment of the soul, *nutricatio animae*, apart from the bodily eating. *Op cit.*, p. 147. With good reason Clyde Manschreck calls him "Father of Ecumenicity" in *Melanchthon: The Quiet Reformer* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958), p. 229.
4. Translation made by the writer from *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (Fourth Edition; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1959), p. 65.
5. Herrlinger offers the following observation about differences between the two reformers. "Die zwischen Luthers und Melanchthons

- Abendmahlslehre obwaltende Differenz: *cum pane vel in pane*, kam noch bei Luthers Lebzeiten zu praktischer und persönlich z. Th. peinlicher Erörterung, so jedoch, dass erhellt, wie Luther die melanchthonische Anschauung, obwohl er ihr Abweichendes erkannte, doch neben der seinen tolerirte, ja sogar in einer rituellen Frage dieser Anschauung Einfluss auf sich gestattete." *Op. cit.*, p. 144. See note 22 below.
6. Clyde Manschreck sees a complete conversion for Melanchthon by 1535, but, as other scholars, sees the reformer buckling already in 1530 under Oecolampadius's influence. *Op. cit.*, pp. 233-241.
  7. Peter Fraenkel, "Ten Questions Concerning Melanchthon, The Fathers and the Eucharist," in *Luther and Melanchthon in the History and Theology of the Reformation*; edited by Vilmos Vajta (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), p. 163. Fraenkel sees the root of Melanchthon's attitude in his horror over doctrinal controversy about a matter so sacred as the Lord's Supper. This made him susceptible to the influence of the Reformed.
  8. Fraenkel (*op. cit.* pp. 161-3) agrees on this. The matter should not be oversimplified as both Luther and Melanchthon used Scripture and the church fathers; but for Luther the Scriptures were an absolute guide and the church fathers evidence of that truth. Melanchthon was guided by the fathers as an essential part of the process of truth-seeking.
  9. Fraenkel discusses Melanchthon's almost indiscriminating appreciation for the church fathers, which virtually equated what was old with the truth. Applicable was Tertullian's rule: "Primum est quod verum, secundarium vero quod falsum." *Op. cit.*, p. 160.
  10. While there is little debate about the built-in ambiguity of the Variata of 1540, the same has not been noted about the 1530 edition. With no mention of bread and wine in the Latin version, the Roman Catholic party could easily read their view of transsubstantiation into Article X. Herrlinger points out that the particular Melanchthonian dislike for the *physica conjunctio* between the bread and the body is quite visible in the Latin text. Christ's body and blood are present and distributed, but only the German text states that they are received by those who eat the Lord's Supper. *Op. cit.*, p. 136. Manschreck sees Article X as being "near-Catholic" but fails to see it as capable of a Reformed interpretation (*op. cit.*, p. 24). The Latin version, however, is capable of a Reformed understanding.
  11. Manschreck, *op. cit.*, p. 234. Herrlinger, *op. cit.*, p. 141. Manschreck credits Melanchthon with the abolition of the elevation in 1544. *Op. cit.*, p. 237. In 1543 he was already writing Philipp of Hesse, calling for its removal. Herrlinger, *op. cit.*, p. 145. Charges of "idolatry" have been levelled by the Reformed against the Roman Catholic position. The mere use of this term by Melanchthon in describing Luther's position is revealing. This statement by Melanchthon puts him in a position squarely opposed to Luther. "Haec Sacramentalis Praesentia est voluntaria; non est geometrica vel magica, qua Christus in pane manere." Quoted from Herrlinger, p. 143.
  12. Klaus Haendler, *Wort und Glaube bei Melanchthon* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1968), p. 172. Haendler, in what seems to be the most exhaustive and scholarly study on Melanchthon in recent times, agrees with Fraenkel that this reformer concentrated not on the physical elements as did Luther but on the action. Manschreck is much more sympathetic than is Herrlinger to Melanchthon. About Luther Manschreck writes that the "physical presence of [Christ]. . . lasted beyond the ordinary use." Melanchthon, as opposed to Luther, could write, "God is not to be bound to bread and wine apart from the purpose for which the communion was instituted. It would be wrong to portray the union in a manner which at the words of consecration would

make Christ's body so united with bread as to be perpetually there. Only while the visible signs are being received is Christ present and effective." Cited from Manschreck, p. 242. During the convocation, at which this essay was presented, I was asked whether there was a similarity between Melanchthon's view and what is commonly understood as "receptionism," the view that Christ's body becomes present only in the actual eating by each recipient. My answer was then hesitant, but I am now thoroughly convinced that the concentration in both positions on the process was similar. Melanchthon soon gave up teaching the *manducatio oralis* (*op. cit.*, Herrlinger, p. 145), an essential ingredient in the receptionist view; but limiting the presence to the activity rather than to the elements is Melanchthon's and not Luther's view. Both Melanchthon and the "receptionists" focus the attention on the words "Take, eat" (Rogness, *op. cit.*, p. 132), while Luther focuses on "This is my body."

13. *Op. cit.*, 147-8.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 154-5.
15. During the discussion which followed the delivery of this response Dr. Robert Fischer of the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago correctly pointed out that the *exhibeo* should not be translated by the English words "exhibit" or "show," but "offer." He is correct and agrees with Fraenkel. "Thus *exhibere* is even here the technical term for the process of giving or offering and Melanchthon uses it when discussing the direction in which this process moves." *Ibid.*, p. 115.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
18. Herrlinger, *op. cit.*, pp. 145-6.
19. See note 10.
20. Herrlinger, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 143-4.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 144. Manschreck contains a lively discussion of the dispute between the two Wittenbergers with communication breaking down between them in 1543 and 1544. Melanchthon expected that Luther would devastatingly attack him in his *A Short Confession on the Holy Sacrament, Against the Fanatics* (1544). Neither he nor Bucer were mentioned. *Op. cit.*, p. 245.
23. I.e., "so general that every one could understand them how he liked." Original taken from Fraenkel, *op. cit.*, p. 163, as is the translation, *op. cit.*, p. 147.