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Twentieth-Century Melanchthon Scholarship and the Missouri Synod: With Particular Reference to Richard Caemmerer's "The Melanchthonian Blight"

Ken Schurb

Many causes lay behind the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod controversy that came to a head in the 1970s: the practice of historical criticism within the Synod, a stubborn impulse toward ecumenism, and a deeply-felt urge to "get out of the ghetto" and overcome the "German church" image. There was even a generational dimension to the conflict. But amid all the other factors—theological, sociological, and psychological, among others—one that is almost never talked about or even noticed is the role of historiography, especially Melanchthon historiography.

In a church body like the Missouri Synod, where there is a confessional orientation as well as an historical interest, pastors and others constantly bump into Philip Melanchthon. He wrote three of the Lutheran Confessions, he was at Luther's side from 1518 on, and he stood at the center of the storm as several important disputes swirled after Luther died. Confessionally committed pastors and others tend to have very strong views about Melanchthon and his influence.

The present essay deals with historiography primarily and only secondarily with Melanchthon himself. It contends that during the 1940s and 1950s Richard Caemmerer, Jaroslav Pelikan, and others started applying to a particular church body, the Missouri Synod, one of the considered conclusions from the Luther Renaissance and other late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century theological and historical scholarship. This conclusion was about Melanchthon, the "*praeceptor* of Germany," his differences from Luther, and his alleged deleterious effect on the subsequent classic Lutheran theology

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that the Missouri Synod represented. That is the subject of part one below.

More recently in the wider world of scholarship, however, the historiography on Melanchthon has been shifting. It has moved away from some of the thinking that informed the work of Caemmerer, Pelikan, and others. Part two will explore some facets of this change.

Melanchthon Historiography in the First Half of the Century

This first part of the essay grows increasingly specific as its three sections unfold. After a few comments on the perspective that gripped much early- to mid-twentieth-century writing on the Reformation, that of the Luther Renaissance, it will focus on some of the assessments of Melanchthon made within the context of such scholarship. Then it will see how Melanchthon was treated in the Missouri Synod at mid-century.

General Picture: A Decline from a "Golden Age"

There is a stream of Reformation scholarship that holds that the sixteenth-century reform movement did not bring about many of the results that Luther initially desired. Steven Ozment captures this view in his aphorism that the "freedom fighters" of the 1520's became the "new papists" of the succeeding decades.¹ The argument is that as the years elapsed, a growing decline set in from a comparatively good set of circumstances in the early Reformation. The fresh effervescence of the movement went flat. Even the breathtaking verve with which Luther expressed theology gave way to textbook definitions, a development that is supposed to have taken its toll even on the cardinal teaching of justification by faith.

This argument may strike interpreters as plausible, at least at a glance. There is some truth to it. Unquestionably, Lutheran Germany became a theological battlefield as well as a political football after Luther's death. And as time went by there was a

¹Steven E. Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 159-166.

growing concern in the Lutheran Reformation, as in any movement, about passing along its gains to the next generation.

We should recognize, however, that whatever seeds of truth lay beneath the surface of this affirmation, they are prone to be watered by tears of romanticism mourning the passing of an imagined golden age. As James Kittelson puts it, Luther Renaissance scholars like Karl Holl and Wilhelm Pauck "labored mightily to absolve Luther of most responsibility for the Lutheran churches" especially in matters like organization, deliberate training of pastors, formal confessions, and so forth.² That is, they downplayed Luther's own involvement in the grubby details connected with the institutionalization of the reform movement. At the same time they critically scrutinized a number of people who got their hands dirty in various attempts to continue what Luther started. The Luther Renaissance both raised and offered its own answer to the question: were the co-workers and heirs of Luther culpable for at least a share of the decline to which so many have pointed? And was Melanchthon the chief culprit?³

The Role Usually Attributed to Melanchthon

Many Reformation scholars have identified Melanchthon as a catalyst in a multi-faceted decline that allegedly started already during Luther's lifetime. Albert Herrlinger theorized that Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers was but poorly echoed by Melanchthon. Therefore under the *praeceptor's* influence the congregation became an "an object of education

²James M. Kittelson, "Luther the Church Bureaucrat," *Concordia Journal* 14 (October 1987): 295-296.

³Some scholars might observe that it is just like theologians to get themselves a-buzzing over the question, "what went wrong?" But in and of itself, there is nothing wrong with this question. Think of Gettysburg. An amazing amount of ink has been spilled over the years by American historians, military historians, southern historians, and others who have tried to analyze the most decisive moments and actions in this crucial Civil War battle. Why? Deep down, it seems that they do realize, all diatribes against "presentism" notwithstanding, that unless history can help us to understand how we got to where we are today, its value comes into serious question. Neither historians nor theologians ought to shrink from inquiring about "what went wrong?"

through doctrine and discipline," not the warm *Gemeinde* of Luther's thought.⁴ Decades later, speaking along identical lines, Wilhelm Pauck argued that ". . . Melanchthon tended to regard the church as a kind of school . . ." Accordingly, Pauck went on, "he was wont to put special stress on the teaching aspects of the ministerial office and the sermon, thus minimizing Luther's concept of the church as the *communio sanctorum*, especially insofar as it was connected with the idea of the universal priesthood of believers."⁵

Georg Wehrung was one of many who suspected this ecclesiastical development of forming only the tip of a theological iceberg. He thought that beneath a formalization of church life there lurked the idea that faith consisted primarily if not exclusively in knowing doctrine. This amounted to another Melanchthonian departure from Luther, Wehrung contended.⁶ In the same vein, Pauck asserted that "the older he [Melanchthon] became, the more he tended to think that the substance of the gospel was represented by 'doctrines.'"⁷ Pauck drew a contrast between this approach and that of Luther, who "understood . . . a divine action which men must apprehend or 'feel' by experience, a giving on the part of God to which, in the Holy Spirit, a receiving on the part of man corresponds, a divine speaking and promising which becomes actualized in human hearing and trusting."⁸ While he was willing to allow that Melanchthon comprehended the real import and meaning of the Reformation quite well, Pauck still maintained that, encumbered by his "defining theology" and "basic concepts," Philip "did not mirror that immediate, dynamic actuality of the gospel of Christ which Luther was able to express so directly and forcefully. This," Pauck added, "was noticeable particularly in his treatment of justification."⁹ We can discern in that last sentence

⁴Albert Herrlinger, *Die Theologie Melanchthons* (Gotha: Perthes, 1879), 271.

⁵Wilhelm Pauck, "Luther and Melanchthon," in *From Luther to Tillich*, edited by Marion Pauck (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 50.

⁶Georg Wehrung, *Kirchen nach evangelischen Verständnis* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1947), 81-82.

⁷Pauck, 50.

⁸Pauck, 50-51.

⁹Pauck, 51.

from Pauck the influence of his teacher Karl Holl, who never approved of Melanchthon's emphasis on forensic justification.¹⁰

The twentieth-century high-water mark for this stream of Melanchthon interpretation may well have come in international circles at the 1960 Luther Congress. There it received its most forceful, though by no means its only, expression in Pauck's lead address entitled "Luther and Melanchthon," which is the origin of the previous Pauck quotes. One must recall that Pauck was not only the student of Karl Holl but also the teacher of Jaroslav Pelikan. And so we see one of the ways in which these historiographical meanderings reach the Missouri Synod.

Melanchthon as Interpreted in the Missouri Synod

By the middle of the 20th century, voices within the Missouri Synod echoed the claim that Melanchthon had made faith a matter of knowledge and accordingly depicted the Office of the Ministry merely as a purveyor of information. In *From Luther to Kierkegaard*, a book he published as a young St. Louis seminary professor, Jaroslav Pelikan advocated these notions. He wrote that "Melanchthon was very fearful of an uneducated ministry. This fear is to be understood in terms of his understanding of the ministry. Inasmuch as the primary element in faith was assent, the primary task of the ministry was that of providing the information to which the people were to assent."¹¹ Pelikan

¹⁰See Lowell C. Green, *How Melanchthon Helped Luther Discover the Gospel* (Fallbrook, California: Verdict Publications, 1980), chapter 1.

¹¹Jaroslav Pelikan, *From Luther to Kierkegaard* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 34-35. Interestingly, while Pelikan and Pauck (as seen above) were in the mainstream, some voices had already been raised in dissent by this time. For example: Charles Leander Hill ("Critical Estimate of the Character and Influence of Melanchthon and of His Contributions to the History of Thought," in *The Loci Communes of Philip Melanchthon* [Boston: Meador Publishing, 1944], 38-39), although he was very positive toward what he described as Melanchthon's rationalizing and philosophizing tendencies, nonetheless held that when Melanchthon compared the church to a school "it is . . . clear in what sense he does this." Hill continued, "If Melanchthon calls the church a 'schola' it is only to say that the evangelical church should be and is constituted out of an inner working power of religious proof and instruction as opposed to the outer legal principle of authority so characteristic of Roman Catholicism. The church is the elected

held that Melanchthon's unhappy bequest to the period of Lutheran orthodoxy consisted precisely in an intellectualization of the Christian faith. And since the Missouri Synod had been shaped to such a large degree by the study of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Lutheran Orthodoxy, the conclusion lay close at hand that intellectualization of the faith constituted the essential problem with the Missouri Synod itself.

The kind of allegations that Pelikan and others were raising differed significantly from the standard sort of Melanchthon criticism found on the pages of F. Bente's *Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord*.¹² Missourians had long drawn attention to Melanchthon's defections in particular areas such as the doctrines of conversion and the Lord's Supper. Pundits like Pelikan were talking about something much more pervasive: a whole approach to theology. Nonetheless, Bente's analyses laid the groundwork for these kinds of criticisms to receive a favorable hearing in the Missouri Synod. Could it be that there was an unwillingness to assess Melanchthon on his own terms in the Missouri Synod of the 1940s and 1950s? Too much readiness to believe that anyone who went awry on topics like conversion and the Lord's Supper was capable of whatever other aberration anyone might attribute to him?

In the synodical centennial year of 1947, three years before Pelikan's book appeared, Richard R. Caemmerer, Sr., professor at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, had published one of the most significant articles ever to appear in the Missouri Synod: "The Melanchthonian Blight."¹³ This article was not only about

organ for the declaration of the gospel. Its whole function is to show the 'efficaciam verbi divini.' But in this proclaiming the efficacy of the divine word, its ministry must teach as well as preach." One may also see Hill's, "An Exposition and Critical Estimate of the Philosophy of Philip Melanchthon," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1938.

¹²Bente's volume, first published in the *Concordia Triglotta*, continues to find use as a stand alone volume. It has likely done more than any other piece to color the theological image of Melanchthon in the Missouri Synod.

¹³Richard Caemmerer, "The Melanchthonian Blight," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 18 (May 1947): 321-338. There is irony in the fact that the 500th anniversary year of Melanchthon's birth, 1997, also marks the 50th

Melancthon, I submit, but also implicitly about what the Synod should become in its second hundred years. Caemmerer taught homiletics, but he had studied modern European history for his Ph.D. at Washington University and was quite familiar with the Reformation historiography of his day.¹⁴

Caemmerer began with the premise that the spiritual vitality of the Lutheran Reformation (significantly, he called it "Luther's Reformation") seemed to wane around 1525. The reason for this decline, he went on to suggest, was none other than the "Melancthonian blight": a phenomenon admittedly larger than Melancthon himself, yet nonetheless exemplified by him. Caemmerer summarized it by saying that Melancthon's "humanistic heritage and his educational preoccupation combined to produce the un-Lutheran but potent oversimplification of Christian knowledge as information, apprehended by a mind which is to all intents and purposes identical with the natural mind."¹⁵ In other words, Caemmerer depicted Melancthon's version of the gospel basically as sacred information, which does not change those who hear it. Accordingly, faith would amount to mere agreement with a set of propositions. Elsewhere, Caemmerer put it still more simply. He said Melancthon knew not of God speaking but only of statements about God.¹⁶

anniversary for Caemmerer's essay.

¹⁴Caemmerer wrote, decades later, that "Frederick Mayer helped me on one of my first serious theological papers, 'The Melancthonian Blight.'" Richard Caemmerer, "No Continuing City," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 5 (October 1978): 282. The role of F. E. Mayer as an advisor to Caemmerer and the extent to which he might have knowingly or unknowingly aided and abetted Caemmerer's plans would be a valuable topic for further research.

¹⁵Caemmerer, "Blight," 328. One of the essays released to explain and defend the "Statement of the 44" (*Speaking the Truth in Love: Essays Related to A Statement, Chicago Nineteen Forty-five* [Chicago: The Willow Press, n.d.], 52) stated: "There is the ever present danger to look upon the accepted *corpus doctrinae* as a set of intellectual propositions which are to be grasped merely by the mind of man."

¹⁶One may see Peter Fraenkel, "Revelation and Tradition: Notes on Some Aspects of Doctrinal Continuity in the Theology of Philip Melancthon," *Studia Theologica* 13 (1959): 97-133, especially 100, note 2.

Moreover, in "The Melanchthonian Blight," Caemmerer said that "Melanchthon put the Humanist emphasis into the training of the clergy."¹⁷ "Hence," he continued, "ministers trained in the Melanchthonian mode became a proud and learned caste, and their theology became a proving ground for dialectic competence."¹⁸ Further, added Caemmerer, Melanchthon "wrote obedience to the clergy into the Christian's creed."¹⁹

In an article published a year before "The Melanchthonian Blight" appeared, Caemmerer had written of Melanchthon as the "First Lutheran Scholar." But his purpose in this earlier article had hardly been to commend the *praeceptor*. On the contrary, there he set down a sketch of his "Melanchthonian blight" thesis. He wrote:

Melanchthon's Aristotelian psychology, identifying man's will and hence motives with his information and mental knowledge, was a radical abridgment of Luther's concept of man under the grace of God. For Luther the Gospel was a power because it was God's means of rebirth through faith in Christ; for Melanchthon it was one of a series of facts, along with the deposit of classical learning, to be stored in the mind and thus to influence man on the natural level. . . . For Melanchthon, learning was the badge of the scholar, the instrument of his pride and distinction.²⁰

¹⁷Caemmerer, "Blight," 327.

¹⁸Caemmerer, "Blight," p. 336. The afore-mentioned essay on thesis VII of the "Statement of the 44" (*Speaking the Truth in Love*, 52-53) cautioned against "the danger of silencing the heart and operating with the head, of sniping, and of engaging in dialectic skirmishes which are not motivated by the love of Christ and of the brethren."

¹⁹Caemmerer, "Blight," 336. Somewhat later, Caemmerer complained that in the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy "the ministry and consistory were in effect agents of civil government for the preservation of civic morality." Caemmerer, "The Basic Motives of Christian Ethics in Action," *The Lutheran Scholar* 6 (April 1949): 26.

²⁰Richard Caemmerer, "The First Lutheran Scholar," *The Lutheran Scholar* 3 (April 1946): 23. In keeping with the theme of this article, Caemmerer concluded: "To Melanchthon, German scholarship owes . . . the pride of caste, the satisfaction with scholarship as an end instead of a means to service, and the reliance upon mental acumen and inability to differentiate between prejudice and knowledge, which have defaced much of German

In 1947 Caemmerer offered two suggestions or antidotes, as it were, to counteract the malady he had diagnosed as “the Melancthonian blight.” For one thing, he said, the church should constantly keep in view that “religious knowledge is more than information, that it is the gift of the grace of God in Christ Jesus by which the Christian becomes aware of God in a fashion different from, and beyond, the scope of natural thinking (1 Cor. 1 and 2; Col. 1)” Also, he said, “realize the evangelical character of the ministry.”²¹

In short, there was a “one-two punch” in Missouri Synod publications of the late 1940s. First Caemmerer stated his “Melancthonian blight” thesis in articles, then Pelikan drew out some of its larger implications in a book released by Concordia Publishing House. The book argued, especially in the wake of Kant’s philosophical work, that existentialism *a la* Kierkegaard offered a much more promising philosophical road than the blighted trail first marked off for Lutherans by Melancthon.

While Pelikan went on to make a name for himself in wider academic circles, Caemmerer’s influence was more significant within the Missouri Synod itself. One of his students pointed out that “The leaven of Caemmerer’s insights [in the 1947 “Blight” essay] was sure to have implications for the missionary thinking of the church body as generations of students carried his evangelical confessional emphasis into the Synod at large

scholarship into our own time.” That last assertion, made in the immediate post-World War II setting and not clearly following from the premises that Caemmerer had laid down earlier in the article, was a particularly unkind cut at Melancthon.

²¹Caemmerer, “Blight,” 337-338. Caemmerer advocated the “ministry of the laity” with “the pastor serving as coach and trainer” (see his theological autobiography, “Stance and Distance” in *The Lively Function of the Gospel: Essays in Honor of Richard R. Caemmerer on Completion of 25 years as Professor of Practical Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*, edited by Robert W. Bertram [St. Louis: Concordia, 1965], 5). Perhaps another cause for his dislike of Melancthon had its roots in the latter’s distinction between the Ministry and the laity. See Caemmerer, “The Ministry of the Word,” *Theology in the Life of the Church*, edited Robert W. Bertram (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), especially 219 and 223.

through preaching."²² For some time, Caemmerer also promoted his ideas with small groups of students who gathered for evening discussions in his seminary campus office.²³

Toward an Assessment of the Historiography

The second part of this essay points out a few places where Reformation historiography in general has moved away from the ground on which Caemmerer and Pelikan stood. It then spotlights an element in Melanchthon's theology that calls into question some of the conclusions that these men and their followers reached. Finally, it reports on a few relatively recent scholars who have painted a different picture of Melanchthon than one finds in the "blight"-oriented literature.

Shifts in Reformation Historiography

Three brief observations are in order here. First, scholarship is becoming less and less quick to describe sixteenth-century humanists, particularly those in Northern Europe, as a phalanx pitted against the reformers. That Caemmerer aligned himself with the historiography of his day, which was influenced by the Luther Renaissance and Ernst Troeltsch, is demonstrated by his statement that "the reason for Melanchthon's point of view is that he was initially an exponent of the movement of German Humanism, [and] that he only temporarily and slightly modified his Humanistic outlook."²⁴ However, especially on the basis of work by Paul Oskar Kristeller, today's consensus recognizes that humanists "did *not* share philosophical or theological positions on human nature, revelation, justification, sacraments, free will, or the other questions that generated the

²²F. Dean Lueking, *Mission in the Making: The Missionary Enterprise Among Missouri Synod Lutherans 1846-1963* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), 289. On the influence of Caemmerer's approach to preaching, see also Robert C. Schultz, "From Walther to Caemmerer: A Study in the Development of Homiletics Within the Missouri Synod," *American Lutheran* 44 (July 1961): 7-10, 25-26.

²³One may see Martin E. Marty, "The Church in the World," in *The Lively Function of the Gospel: Essays in Honor of Richard R. Caemmerer on Completion of 25 years as Professor of Practical Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*, edited by Robert W. Bertram [St. Louis: Concordia, 1965], 133.

²⁴Caemmerer, "Blight," 323.

Reformation controversy. On these points, their theologies could and did differ widely."²⁵ What did they share? "Methods of discourse," which included philological expertise, a passion for rhetoric, and an opposition to scholastic method.²⁶ It is no longer so persuasive to assert (as Caemmerer did) that Melanchthon's "humanistic heritage and his educational preoccupation combined to produce the un-Lutheran but potent oversimplification of Christian knowledge as information. . . ."²⁷

A related point is that today's Reformation scholarship tends to view Luther as more than grudgingly or tangentially interested in humanist education curricula. Pauck was fairly typical of thinking under the sway of the Luther Renaissance when he argued that Luther "did not interfere with his friend's [that is, Melanchthon's] efforts to establish a humanistic educational program on the soil of the Lutheran Reformation."²⁸ Lewis Spitz Jr., however, has tellingly drawn attention to a letter Luther wrote some five months before Melanchthon arrived at Wittenberg, at a time when we might expect him to have had the indulgence controversy and its growing impact uppermost in mind. Luther said: "Our university is making progress. We may shortly expect to have lectures in two, yes, in three languages, and beyond that to receive lectures on Pliny, mathematics, Quintilian, and other outstanding lectures. But we

²⁵James Michael Weiss, "Humanism," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, Hans J. Hillerbrand editor in chief (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 2:265. See James D. Tracy, "Humanism and the Reformation," *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research*, edited by Steven Ozment (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1982), 41, and Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 32-34.

²⁶Weiss, 265. The last item is the place where scholars in varying ways might still hold out for some substantive theological import to the humanists' shared agenda. For instance, see Charles Nauert, "The Clash of Humanists and Scholastics: An Approach to Pre-Reformation Controversies," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 4 (April 1973): 1-18, especially 11.

²⁷Caemmerer, "Blight," 328.

²⁸Pauck, 48. Caemmerer similarly wrote that Luther "was interested in the languages, but only for the sake of their service in unfolding the meaning of the Word" ("Blight," 324-325).

shall throw overboard those on Petrus Hispanus, Tartaretus, and Aristotle."²⁹ These are hardly the words of someone who lacked passion or sympathy for the humanist educational program.³⁰

Finally, today's scholars, especially as they reflect on the later years of Luther's career, are taking greater notice of Luther's personal involvement with the "nitty-gritty" side of the Reformation. Once again, Caemmerer had been in step with much of the scholarship of his time when he claimed that, in contrast to Luther, "the formal detail of administration of the church . . . was developed by his [Luther's] coworkers, particularly Philip Melanchthon."³¹ But the academic world is now appreciating more and more that in a variety of ways, the last fifteen to twenty years of Luther's life manifest his great determination to build the church and to pass the gospel on to a new generation. He wanted to ensure, under the Lord's blessing, that there would be Lutheranism after Luther. While he was very much aware of the impressive gifts and abilities that suited Melanchthon to such a task, Luther did not avoid becoming personally involved in it in his own ways.³²

These are but three places in which Reformation historians have refined and even changed their perspective. As in the case of the Israelite army, they have withdrawn from positions once rather firmly held to take up new stances that better reflect the sixteenth-century data. In so doing they have left Caemmerer and Pelikan and some of their assertions like Uriah the Hittite – out there pretty much alone. This gives us a first reason

²⁹Quoted in Lewis W. Spitz Jr., "The Course of Christian Humanism," *The Springfielder* 27 (Summer 1963): 28. Still earlier, a Concordia Publishing House product had called attention to such statements by Luther: E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 297.

³⁰One may also see Lewis W. Spitz Jr., "Luther, Humanism, and the Word," *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 65 (Winter, 1985): 3-26, especially 8-12.

³¹Richard Caemmerer, "The Education of Representative German Princes in the Sixteenth Century," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Washington University, 1944, 56.

³²One may see James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), especially 15-16, 300.

for pause as we evaluate the "Melanchthonian blight" thesis that they advanced.

In Light of Melanchthon's Position on Church and Ministry

During the years after 1530, Melanchthon, Luther, and others did indeed set about building an evangelical church establishment to replace the traditional Roman hierarchy from which they had separated. If a cool aloofness between clergy and laity were to set in, this was a likely occasion. Still more, if church life was to become rigorously intellectualized as a function of a nascent but already operative Protestant "scholasticism," here was an organizational opportunity.

But an under-noticed fact in Melanchthon's theology suggests that he has been miscast in the role of "blighter." If we read his writings from this very period when the time was ripe—1530 and thereafter—we find that they are quite consistent with a confessional point: that the keys were given "principally and immediately to the church," to put it in Melanchthon's own words from paragraph 24 of the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope.³³

No matter how much the *praeceptor* insisted on education within organized church life, he never placed doctrine into the hands of a cluster of "new papists" as a tool by which to exercise control. Melanchthon's position on church and ministry points to such a conclusion. He noted that the keys belonged not only to the preachers but also, in the first place, to the church as a gift from Christ. Therefore individual Christian laypeople could use them in private and in emergencies.

³³Even as he lamented Melanchthon's "concessions to power" in the form of "state interests" leading to the *landesherrliche Kirchenregiment*, Franz Hildebrandt observed that for the *praeceptor* it was "the common priesthood of all believers" that formed the "basis for the historic alliance between throne and altar." *Melanchthon: Alien or Ally?* (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1946), 62. One may also see Ken Schurb, "Melanchthon on Church and Ministry," *Concordia Journal* 15 (October 1989): 447-466; and Ken Schurb, "The Meeting of Church and Ministry in the Lutheran Confessions and Some of their Interpreters," in *The Pieper Lectures: Volume 1: The Office of the Ministry*, edited by Chris Christophersen Boshoven (St. Louis: Concordia Historical Institute and the Luther Academy, 1997), 60-112.

Because all Christians have the command to confess doctrine, Melanchthon's emphasis on education and doctrine also for the unlearned shows that he had not set out to pit the preachers against the laity: the informed, as it were, against the uninformed. Instead, he wanted to raise everyone's level of doctrinal knowledge and aptitude for confession. German Melanchthon scholar Klaus Haendler affirmed that the *praeceptor's* goal was to ensure proper biblical exposition, not to develop a learned caste as such.³⁴

Intellectual attainment was neither Melanchthon's chief goal nor the burden of Christianity as he saw it. Again, his position on church and ministry is revealing. Melanchthon taught that Christians had a command from God to confess doctrine, but there was more to it than that. In doing so, they were at the same time speaking to one another the word that has the power of God to forgive sins, and so using the very keys that open heaven itself.

In short, doctrine stood out as important for Melanchthon, but as a means to an end. Being a Christian typically involved knowing certain things, of course. Beyond that, however, it meant being a member of the church—a people who have all things in Christ and who have the honor of bearing the keys in this world.

These observations on church and ministry form an under used vantage point from which to evaluate whether Caemmerer, Pelikan, and others had properly analyzed Melanchthon. It is ironic that within the Missouri Synod, of all places, there arose a movement devoted to decrying as "the Melanchthonian blight" the approach to theology characteristic of Lutheran Orthodoxy and at length of the Synod itself. Of all people, Missourians might have been expected to have known better. The Synod's position on church and ministry, informed in part by confessional material from Melanchthon's hand,

³⁴Klaus Haendler, *Wort und Glaube bei Melanchthon*, Band 37 of *Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte* (Gütersloh: Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1968), 343, note 281.

provided good reason to consider the arguments of Caemmerer and Pelikan carefully.³⁵

In Light of More Recent Melanchthon Historiography

In Peter Fraenkel's 1959 article entitled "Revelation and Tradition: Notes on Some Aspects of Doctrinal Continuity in the Theology of Philip Melanchthon," Fraenkel specifically mentioned Pelikan and Caemmerer and registered his disagreement with them. He noted that for Melanchthon "The Law is *both* given to reason *and* revealed by God in human speech; the mysteries of the gospel are divinely revealed by the medium of human speech *alone*."³⁶ Therefore, Fraenkel concluded, "the 'propositional' character of the Gospel would thus appear to be, in the mind of Melanchthon, a feature of the more than rational character of divine revelation and Christian faith." Fraenkel went on to note that for Melanchthon God reveals not only mysteries but Himself. "He . . . is the speaking subject."³⁷ When God speaks the gospel, He confers gifts. The word not only teaches Christians but nourishes them too. "Doctrine" is "effective" in saving people.³⁸ In fact, for Melanchthon "*doctrina*" is a verbal noun. Even when the word refers to subject matter, he depicts it as subject matter "at work."³⁹

Fraenkel's observations run directly counter to the claims of Caemmerer and Pelikan concerning Melanchthon's treatment of the word. Similarly, turning to Melanchthon on the church,

³⁵Further, the Augsburg Confession notes that "faith is not merely a knowledge of historical events but a confidence in God and in the fulfillment of his promises" (Augsburg Confession XX, 25). These words, of course, were put to pen by none other than the alleged intellectualizer, Melanchthon. So were the following: ". . . we have said several times that we are talking about faith in Christ and in the forgiveness of sins, a faith that truly and wholeheartedly accepts the promise of grace. This does not come without a great battle in the human heart. Sensible people can easily see that a faith which believes that God cares for us, forgives us, and hears us is a supernatural thing" (Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV 303).

³⁶Fraenkel, 104, emphasis original.

³⁷Fraenkel, 105.

³⁸Fraenkel, 106.

³⁹Fraenkel, 117.

Fraenkel wrote: “. . .all the life of the Church is connected with teaching and learning and the use of human speech, intelligence, and knowledge; yet again this is not only an intellectual occupation or thinking *about* God but at the same time a *gratus cultus* of God, for the subject matter that we teach and learn is the Gospel itself.”⁴⁰

In an essay delivered at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis for the observance of Melanchthon’s death in 1960, Robert Preus also quoted the *praeceptor* on the power of the gospel word. The word of justification brings forgiveness of sins and reconciliation, Melanchthon said. Receiving forgiveness involves consolation and vivification. For the *praeceptor*, the Son of God works through the external word, shows the Father’s mercy, and gives the Holy Spirit.⁴¹ Preus added that Melanchthon’s theological writings:

are remarkably free of philosophical jargon as well as doctrines. Melanchthon’s downfall therefore lies not in his prolegomena, not in his avowed method and purpose in theologizing, surely not in his insinuating any alien synthesis upon theology, for . . . he reveals an ardent desire to adhere only to Scripture, and he takes a dim view toward philosophy. His debacle may be traced rather to this, that certain philosophical points of view are uncritically and unwittingly imposed on certain theological discussions.⁴²

In a 1983 lecture, Heinz Scheible, director of Heidelberg’s *Melanchthonforschungstelle*, agreed with Bernhard Lohse that “Melanchthon both intellectualized faith and formalized what for the Reformation was the basic difference between Law and Gospel,” and that this can be found already in the very first

⁴⁰Fraenkel, 112, emphasis original.

⁴¹Robert Preus, “Melanchthon the Theologian,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 30 (August 1960): 474, note 32. These were remarkable things to be saying on a campus where Caemmerer enjoyed great popularity in 1960!

⁴²Preus, 471, note 18. Preus echoed these thoughts ten years later in the first volume of *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970), 80-82. In an appendix to that volume, Preus provided a translation of the Preface to Melanchthon’s 1559 *Loci* (415-419).

edition of the *Loci Communes*.⁴³ But, Scheible asked, "should not Luther himself have been able to see these differences, when he lavished such praise on Melanchthon's book?" Maybe Luther took a more positive view toward this intellectualizing and formalizing than some scholars do today. Scheible contends that Luther did take this positive view, as shown in these expressions: "I cannot combine brevity and clarity the way Philip does" and "I prefer Master Philip's books to my own."⁴⁴

Drawing on and advancing further the thesis of a few scholars that Melanchthon's theological work must be understood and appreciated in the context of his rhetoric, John Schneider published a provocative book with wide-ranging import in 1990.⁴⁵ He is not surprised that the Luther renaissance was unimpressed with Melanchthon as a theologian. Its historians and theologians were "the children of Kant" who took religious truth to be found "not in cognitive propositions about divine reality, but in 'practical assertions,' in 'spirit,' in 'a consciousness of God.'"⁴⁶ While they admired Luther's spiritual genius and Melanchthon's practical side, they regarded Melanchthon as a terrible intellectualizer. Schneider is aware of their "broad critique": that the *praeceptor* "viewed Christian revelation in the terms of 'mind to mind' communication. Everything began with proper cognition, and it ended with that." But Schneider offers a better way to look upon Melanchthon's treatment of doctrinal topics: "They are not essentially propositions, but structures of truth, *loci communes*, which contain the seeds of wisdom and moral power that inhere in the created universe, or in divine

⁴³Heinz Scheible, "Luther and Melanchthon," *Lutheran Quarterly* 4 (Autumn 1990): 317-339.

⁴⁴WA Tr 2, 1649, quoted in Scheible, 323. WA 30/2, 68, quoted in Scheible, pp. 323 and 335. One may compare a recent article by Markus Wreidt, "Between Angst and Confidence: Melanchthon as a Man of the Sixteenth Century," translated by Robert Rosin, *Concordia Journal* 23 (October 1997): 277-294, especially 282-284.

⁴⁵John Schneider, *Philip Melanchthon's Rhetorical Construal of Biblical Authority: Oratio Sacra* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990).

⁴⁶Schneider, 235.

reality. Moreover, these precious, sacred *loci* have been revealed by God and put to use by the Spirit of God.⁴⁷

Schneider depicts Melanchthon as having used “a fusion of dialectical and rhetorical structures to select *loci communes*, which were by nature intellectually and affectively powerful when placed in their logically and existentially correct order.”⁴⁸ In short, “for him ‘doctrine’ was a grand elocutionary event between God and honest people. It was *oratio sacra*, not a theologian’s lexicon or dictionary.” Schneider also wonders whether “the widespread influence” exercised by Melanchthon’s *Loci* does not show that this book “communicated with a simple charm and power that may elude the modern reader.”⁴⁹

Unquestionably, the proclamatory theology of Luther differed from the more analytical approach that characterized both Melanchthon and his students.⁵⁰ This fact is apparent to any

⁴⁷Schneider, 235, emphasis original.

⁴⁸Schneider, 234-235.

⁴⁹Schneider, 237. Similarly, Timothy J. Wengert (“Philip Melanchthon’s 1522 Annotations on Romans and the Lutheran Origins of Rhetorical Criticism,” in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: Essays Presented to David C. Steinmetz in Honor of His Sixtieth Birthday*, edited by Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 118.) has recently pointed out in the case of an exegetical work, Melanchthon’s first published interpretation of Romans, that the *praeceptor* had produced “a commentary that to contemporary readers, who were also steeped in humanism’s rhetorical techniques, would have sounded like the Apostle Paul’s own voice commenting from the first century on the sixteenth century’s most critical theological debates. For these readers Melanchthon’s method rendered the exegete and the exegetical tradition nearly invisible. . .” The power that would have been packed by such an exposition should not be underestimated.

⁵⁰One may see, for example, Robert Kolb, “The Significance of Luther’s Galatians Commentary of 1535 on Later Sixteenth-Century Lutheran Commentaries on Galatians,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 84 (1993): 156-183 and also Robert Kolb, “‘Not Without the Satisfaction of God’s Righteousness’: The Generation Gap between Luther and His Students,” *Archive for Reformation History Special Volume: The Reformation in Germany and Europe: Interpretations and Issues*, edited by Hans R. Guggisberg and Gottfried G. Krodel in collaboration with Hans Fueglistler (Guetersloh: Guetersloher Verlagshaus, 1993), 136-156. For a critical, although not unsympathetic

reader. Franz Hildebrandt has hardly been the last to note the fact that Philip can be "so intolerably dull in his endless rhetorical repetitions that quotations from his works must be severely rationed if the modern reader is to keep awake."⁵¹

Still, the historiography has been shifting since mid-century.⁵² It has moved away from some of the thinking that informed both Caemmerer's and Pelikan's work, not only as regards general approaches to the Reformation and Luther, but also in specific interpretations at the very points where these men criticized Melancthon the most.

Epilogue

This essay has done its painting with an admittedly broad brush. But it offers a suggestion that has some potential for illuminating key aspects of recent Lutheran history in America. For without a Missouri Synod controversy there would have been no AELC; without the AELC, the ELCA as we know it today might not even be in existence. And the foregoing historiographical discussion has definite import for understanding the Missouri Synod controversy.

The 1945 "Statement of the 44" said, under thesis VII: "We . . . deplore any tendency which reduces the warmth and power of the Gospel to a set of intellectual propositions which are to be

assessment of Melancthon and other "humanists-turned-reformers" in this regard, see James M. Kittelson, "Humanism in the Theological Faculties of Lutheran Universities during the Late Reformation," in *The Harvest of Humanism in Central Europe: Essays in Honor of Lewis W. Spitz*, edited by Manfred P. Fleischer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), 1992, 139-157, especially 154-157.

⁵¹Franz Hildebrandt, xiii. For years now, Professor Leif Grane of Copenhagen has asserted in public lectures that Melancthon is the most boring theologian he has encountered.

⁵²A well balanced summary assessment of Melancthon is offered by Bengt Hagglund, "Melancthon versus Luther: The Contemporary Struggle," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 44 (July 1980): 123-133. One may also see Wilbert H. Rosin, "In Response to Bengt Hagglund: The Importance of Epistemology for Luther's and Melancthon's Theology," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 44 (July 1980): 134-140.

grasped solely by the mind of man."⁵³ This sentence formed a precursor to the statement of the "Melanchthonian blight" case made somewhat later by Caemmerer, who had been a drafter as well as one of the signers of the "Statement."⁵⁴

When taken together with Caemmerer's work, the above quote provides good reason for the conclusion that a peculiarly negative view toward Melanchthon and what he was taken to represent, based largely on then-regnant Reformation historiography, became one of the elements that guided the liberal (sometimes referred to as "moderate") movement in the Missouri Synod. It would be interesting to trace where and how the "Melanchthonian blight" idea (whether called that or not) exerted its influence into the 1950s and 1960s, building up to the explosion of the 1970s.⁵⁵ Here, oral history might prove more helpful than flipping through the pages of published works.⁵⁶

⁵³*Speaking the Truth in Love*, 51.

⁵⁴Richard Caemmerer, "Recollections of 'A Statement'," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 43 (November 1970): 157. See the letter in the same *CHIQ* issue from another guiding force in the development of the "Statement," O.P. Kretzmann: "Perhaps the strangest thing about it is that the most 'dangerous' theses are not considered at all by the brethren who are hollering their heads off" (189).

⁵⁵Caemmerer himself provided one hint, on the subject of the third use of the law, in his article "The Educational Use of Scripture in the Light of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 28 (March 1957): 217.

⁵⁶Occasionally one can find suggestive statements in print, such as this one by Robert C. Schultz ("Pastoral Theology," in *The Lively Function of the Gospel: Essays in Honor of Richard R. Caemmerer on Completion of 25 years as Professor of Practical Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*, edited by Robert W. Bertram [St. Louis: Concordia, 1965], 21): "Caemmerer . . . understood the Melanchthonian blight and its threat to Missouri Synod theology. Being freed of this intellectualization and moralization of the Gospel, he was free of the compulsion to affirm or reject a particular formulation as though eternal salvation depended on it. We [seminary students in the late '40s and early '50s] knew that he frequently disagreed with what passed for the 'official position' in those days, but no man was more loyal to the Synod. He could do this without dishonesty because his life was not centered in his relationship to the institution." On pages 17-18 Schultz mentions the "Melanchthonian blight" idea and its relationship to subsequent studies of the concept of the "word of God."

The reduction of Christianity to a mere matter of the intellect is a blight. No doubt, this phenomenon has at times crept into the Missouri Synod. But is it the Melancthonian blight? Is it an endemic theological malady handed down to our Synod in a more or less straight line from the *praeceptor*? Moreover, does the influence of this man—arising from his intentions and his work as a systematizer, regularizer, and teacher of the faith—constitute a blight both so terrible and so deeply-rooted that it had to be excised by unusual, even radical means? Or should our picture of Melancthon and his true heritage take on somewhat different contours?

Were the proponents of the “Melancthonian blight” idea in the Missouri Synod right about the cause they posited for the conflict toward which they were building? Given the present state of historiography, this appears to be a very good question, though admittedly posed with all the benefits of hindsight.⁵⁷

⁵⁷This paper was first presented as a lecture to the students of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, November, 1997. The essayist extends thanks to Dr. Karl Barth, the Rev. Gordon Bynum, and Dr. Walter Rosin for commenting on earlier drafts of this paper. Any errors of fact or judgment, however, remain the essayist’s sole responsibility.