

8-1-1960

## Melanchthon the Theologian

Robert D. Preus

*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Preus, Robert D. (1960) "Melanchthon the Theologian," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 31, Article 52.  
Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol31/iss1/52>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact [seitzw@csl.edu](mailto:seitzw@csl.edu).

# Melanchthon the Theologian

By ROBERT D. PREUS

IT would seem impossible that the theme "Melanchthon the Theologian," which is as comprehensive as it is indefinite, could be discussed satisfactorily in any brief presentation. The actual purpose and scope of this study is, however, narrower than the rather general theme might indicate. I propose to consider Melanchthon's contributions to that discipline which is now known as dogmatics, to trace the impact of his systematic bent upon Lutheran theology, to delineate some of his main ideas on theology, and thus to assess him as a theologian.

First it must be said that Melanchthon wrote no dogmatics in the modern sense of the term. There were no branches of theology, such as exegetical, systematic, historical, and practical, in those days. There was only theology. For the Reformers' theology, no matter what the occasion, was always oriented in Biblical study, whether the method was linear like exegesis today or topical like modern dogmatics, catechetics, or Biblical theology. It is somewhat of an anachronism therefore to call Luther an exegete and Melanchthon a dogmatician. Luther did systematic work in his catechism and disputations, and Melanchthon did exegetical work in Psalms, Matthew, John, Romans, Corinthians, and other books of the Bible.

How did Melanchthon contribute to modern dogmatics? It was by his intense desire for system and order, not system in the sense of an alien synthesis being imposed on revealed doctrine, but order and

method for instructive purposes.<sup>1</sup> This theological method is unique. In philosophy there is method, demonstrative in nature, proceeding from certain basic principles; in theology the only method called for is an adequate arrangement of revealed doctrine.<sup>2</sup> In philosophy certainty comes by way of experience and demonstration. Again theology differs: God's revelation offers us certainty, a revelation which is true and self-authenticating.<sup>3</sup> This method is to be found in Scripture itself, where there is not only a historical order but also an order in the arrangement of the articles of faith.<sup>4</sup> Melanchthon actually

<sup>1</sup> CR 21, 601: "It is well to have definite and clear declarations of the individual articles of Christian doctrine arranged in order and set forth as on a blackboard, so that when we consider these things and tie them together (*anguntur*), certain definite thoughts come to our view by which troubled souls can be instructed, elevated, strengthened, and comforted."

<sup>2</sup> CR 21, 604.

<sup>3</sup> CR 21, 605: "Philosophy teaches that we should doubt those things which are not given to the senses, which are not principles and which are not supported by demonstration. Thus we may doubt or suspend judgment whether the concavity of a cloud is the only reason for the rainbow being an arch. But the church doctrine which God has vouchsafed—this doctrine we know to be certain and immovable, even if we cannot discover it with our sense, even if it is not an innate principle with us, even if we cannot ascertain it by proofs. No, the cause of our certainty is God's revelation, which is simply true."

<sup>4</sup> CR 21, 606: "Like an artist Paul speaks in his Letter to the Romans of the distinction between Law and Gospel, of sin, of grace or reconciliation, and by the knowledge of such things we are restored to eternal life."

identifies such method with exposition, interpretation.<sup>5</sup> And this method of collecting in an orderly way the main points or topics (*praecipui loci*) so that doctrine may be presented in summary form (*in summa*) is nothing new. It is found in the ancient creeds, symbols, books, and treatises.<sup>6</sup> And even though the later fathers injected philosophy into the discussion, still such method must be attempted.<sup>7</sup>

Two complementary emphases emerge rather persistently in Melanchthon's discussions of theology: first, that all theology is based upon Scripture, and second, that philosophy and reason have no place as a source of theology. "The first thing we must know is this," he says, "that to seek the will of God without the Word of God or in opposition to it is utterly wrong, for God does not wish us to know Him, neither can we know Him, except through the Word which He has accorded us, as Scripture everywhere teaches."<sup>8</sup> Again he says, "He who seeks the form of Christianity from any other source than canonical Scripture is utterly in error."<sup>9</sup> It was Luther's forte that he recalled the church to Scripture, as even the adversaries must admit.<sup>10</sup> Concerning the *sola Scriptura* prin-

ciple Melanchthon is most insistent and never wavered,<sup>11</sup> although we may feel at times that he was not faithful to it.

Like Luther, Melanchthon has a negative attitude toward philosophy.<sup>12</sup> It can play no role as a basis for theology. Philosophy turns God's truth into a lie.<sup>13</sup> Therefore we must purge ourselves of philosophy by running with avidity to those things which are theological.<sup>14</sup> Melanchthon is attacking philosophy in the concrete, Aristotelian philosophy, although he admitted that Aristotle excelled the philosophy of all other sects.<sup>15</sup> Melanchthon has some good things to say about philosophy, but we must understand that he is referring only to the art

(CR 1, 402 ff.) of 1521. Luther did not teach against Scripture, he insists, but only against the expositions which the Fathers and Councils propounded. And just this was the nub of the trouble (*controversiae summa*). For Scripture must stand without the glosses of the fathers. Furthermore, it was ever the claim of the Fathers that they taught according to Scripture. And so it is by Scripture that we judge both fathers and councils. And the Scriptures are clearer than the glosses. Therefore Luther rightly opposes Scripture to the fathers and councils, although many, like Augustine, are on his side. What has happened is that Luther recalled the church to Scripture and the Fathers, whereas the Paris faculty urges Scotist formalities and Occamist implications and thus makes the divine Word conform to the philosophy of Aristotle.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. CR 3, 604 [*De ecclesia et de auctoritate verbi Dei*, 1539]: Sed addendum est, ut auditi iudicentur ex verbo Dei quod semper manet regula doctrinae. Cf. also CR 1, 127; 12, 604; 15, 188—89; 24, 271. Hans Engelland, *Melanchthon: Glauben und Handeln* (Muenchen, 1931) has shown that Melanchthon never changed his position on this matter. Cf. pp. 1—3, 68—69, 179—82, 470—4.

<sup>12</sup> CR 1, 405; 21, 82; 23, 134.

<sup>13</sup> CR 14, 563.

<sup>14</sup> CR 1, 50.

<sup>15</sup> CR 12, 691.

<sup>5</sup> He considers his *Loci* simply an orderly exposition of Scripture. Cf. CR 21, 606 ff. Cf. his *Loci communes* of 1521 (CR 21, 84): "For I have nothing in mind but to aid in their studies those who desire to become acquainted with the Scriptures."

<sup>6</sup> CR 21, 253.

<sup>7</sup> And this method obtains in the epistles of Paul and in John, with their emphasis on certain articles of faith. *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> CR 14, 180.

<sup>9</sup> CR 21, 82.

<sup>10</sup> The *sola Scriptura* principle is excellently set forth in Melanchthon's *Adversus theologorum Parisinorum decretum pro Luthero apologia*

of speaking or our knowledge of nature or of natural law.<sup>16</sup> Rhetoric and dialectics are elementary for the understanding of Scripture as is a knowledge of nature; and philosophy as ethics is the very Law of God.<sup>17</sup> And with all this Luther concurs.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> CR 12, 689: "Philosophy embraces the art of speaking, the natural sciences, and precepts concerning civil ethics. Such teaching is God's creation and is good, and of all the gifts of God in nature it is the most excellent. Philosophy is a necessary concern to our bodily and social life, just as food, drink, public laws, and other matters." Cf. also CR 13, 509 ff.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. "Philosophy which concerns itself with behavior is the very Law of God concerning civil behavior."

<sup>18</sup> WA Tr IV Nr. 5082b: "Plures hodie scribunt dialecticas, sed unus Philippus scripsit dialecticam, ex quo fonte reliqui omnes hauriunt sua, et nemo tamen assequitur Philippum, nedum ut superent eum." Luther then repeats what Melanchthon has written in his *Erotemata*. Cf. W<sup>2</sup> 14, 742 ff. That natural law is the Law of God is something Luther agrees with too. Cf. W<sup>2</sup> 20, 152.

Actually logic and syllogisms enter Melanchthon's theological discussions primarily when he is refuting the false arguments of adversaries. R. Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (Erlangen, 1920), IV, 2, 421, says that Melanchthon was the first Protestant to treat the new understanding of the Gospel systematically and with method, that his *Loci* is the first Protestant dogmatics, and that he brought Aristotle's method into dogmatics. I think that it is clear from the above that it is merely method that Melanchthon brought with him, and this is both natural and justified. Luther did the same, and so do we. Melanchthon in no way desires to make Christian revelation correspond to Aristotelian or Platonic thought; the opposite is the case. In his philosophical works he attempts to make Aristotle and others profitable by purging them by means of revelation. Thus he will go along, working out, for instance, a system of epistemology (cf. his *Erotemata dialectices*, CR 13, 509 ff.), patterned quite obviously after Aristotelian empiricism and with certain Stoic accretions (such as the doctrine of innate ideas). Whether these conclusions are merely convenient

There are certain themes or motifs which recur frequently in all of Melanchthon's theological works, themes which indicate to us what was basic in Melanchthon's theology.

### 1. The Natural Man, Natural Law, and Natural Knowledge of God (Philosophy)

God created man with intellect and will which are now both fallen. However, man is still above the brute. With his intellect he understands, counts, composes and divides, reasons, remembers, and judges.<sup>19</sup> The object of the intellect is God and the entire universe of things. God has formed man that he might take all this in. Man gains certainty through experience, through the working of basic principles (*principia*), such as numbers and proportions and in-

nominalistic abstractions to Melanchthon, or whether they express things as they really are, is not always quite clear, although the latter possibility seems more likely. But then Melanchthon goes on, adding to Aristotle when this seems to be demanded by revelation. But it must be repeated, this is his practice in his philosophical works. His 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 in all this 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 upon certain theological discussions. Sometimes this practice—which I suppose no one can completely avoid—is quite innocuous (as when he divides the soul into two parts, cf. CR 21, 86 ff.). But on other occasions it is dreadfully serious, as when out of a fear of Stoicism he teaches that the will of the unregenerate man is a factor in his conversion. (CR 21, 658—9)

<sup>19</sup> CR 13, 8 ff.

nate ideas (law), and through reasoning. In the church there is a fourth norm of certainty, namely, divine revelation.<sup>20</sup> Two of the aforementioned *principia* are the

<sup>20</sup> CR 13, 151: "In the church we have a fourth norm of certainty, viz., divine revelation, which was given with distinct and infallible testimonies and which obtains in the prophetic and apostolic books. Now although the human mind is inclined to assent more readily and firmly to those things which it perceives by natural light, still all rational creatures ought to assent with the same firmness to the judgments which have been revealed by God, even if we do not see by our own natural light that they are true and definite. Just as we assert without doubt that twice four is eight, we must be convinced that God will raise up the dead, that the church will be crowned with eternal glory, and that the wicked will be hurled into everlasting punishment. True, many, such as Epicureans and others, brazenly resist these divine oracles. Nevertheless some part of the human race gives its assent, moved as it is by the testimonies of miracles. In these people the Holy Spirit kindles His light by the Word of the Gospel, bends their minds to assent to it, and then their minds submit to the Holy Spirit, embrace the Word of the Gospel, and strive against all doubt. This assent, which embraces the thoughts disclosed by God, we call faith, which actually is more firm in this matter than in others. Let us not make light of this benefit of God, which has proceeded from His hidden abode and which He has disclosed to us. By this disclosure He has declared that the human race is truly of concern to Him. Let this revelation be the most eminent light of our life, let it rule all our actions and counsels. And in our daily prayers let us reflect upon the testimonies of this revelation, that our faith may be aroused; and let us acknowledge and celebrate the goodness of our dear God.

"It is well to consider at this point a distinction. Certain things have been handed down by God which are known to nature, such as the precepts of the Decalog. But God wishes to add His own voice to this to show us that these natural notions have been instilled in our minds by Him and to confirm the Law by a new and fresh testimony. The confirmation of this truth is welcome to a ready mind when it realizes that the divine Word has been added to the natural

innate recognition of law and the knowledge of God. The law of nature, which is often called philosophy,<sup>21</sup> is equated with the Law of God.<sup>22</sup> The obedience of this

knowledge. Reason apprehends that the earth stands still and the sun moves. But when we hear that the same truth has been divinely communicated, then we assent the more firmly.

"But there are certain divinely given truths which previously were completely unknown to all creatures, such as the Word of the Gospel of the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, or the Word of reconciliation, of reward and eternal punishment. He who believes on the Son has everlasting life. But he who does not believe the Son does not have life, but the wrath of God remains upon him. As I live, says the Lord, I do not wish the death of the wicked, but that he turn and live. Believe that your sins are assuredly forgiven for the sake of the Son of God, believe for His sake that your sighings, your prayers have been received by God. Such words should be grasped with firm assent. For the cause of this assent is divine authority, by which these truths have been vouchsafed to us and confirmed by clear testimonies, such as the resurrection of the dead and other testimonies. Let the mind, then, recognizing why these truths should be immovable, given attention to God, the Author, who in just such a way wishes to be acknowledged and invoked. Nor does He want us with our human brazenness to play with other opinions of Him, as heathens and philosophers have done."

<sup>21</sup> CR 12, 690.

<sup>22</sup> CR 23, 294: *Itaque leges naturae sint divinae et immotae. Leges naturae sunt notitiae principiorum practicorum de moribus, et conclusionum inde extractarum congruentes cum regula aeterna et immota mentis divinae, quae principia cernimus et amplectimur firmo adsensu, quia notitiae eorum nobiscum nascuntur divinitus insitae humanis mentibus in creatione, sicut numerorum notitiae.*

Cf. also Melancthon's *Moralis epitomes libri duo*, 1546 (CR 16, 20 ff.). It is a true part of moral philosophy, he says, to recognize what is truly a part of divine Law, although "philosophy teaches nothing of the forgiveness of sins, nor can it show us how it happens that God receives the unworthy." The law of nature is the Law of God, he insists. This must be considered the

law is civil righteousness and is in utter contrast to the righteousness of the Gospel.<sup>23</sup> Coupled with the natural knowledge of law is the natural knowledge of God, an important emphasis in Melanchthon's theology. In his commentary on the Nicene Creed<sup>24</sup> Melanchthon says that since all natural laws are embraced in the Decalog, man has a knowledge of God, of His existence, and to some extent of His essence, e. g., that He is wise, true, beneficent, but also one who punishes wrongdoing by His Law. To my knowledge he never implies that such knowledge is saving, but it leaves man with a limited and distorted picture of God. In his *Initia doctrinae physicae*<sup>25</sup> he argues with Paul that from the physical world God can be known, but this knowledge is obsessed with many

wisdom of God even though it has nothing to do with the Gospel. Such teaching is useful for the church (2 Tim. 3:16) in the following ways: (1) for discipline (*paedagogia*), (2) for jurisprudence. It must be remembered that this is a philosophical work. Thus we find Melanchthon leaning heavily on Aristotle for definitions and conclusions which go beyond Scripture (which only shows the danger and futility of the entire effort). For instance, p. 38, he defines virtue as a *habitus* which inclines the will to yield to right reason (following Aristotle). But then he concludes by speaking of the causes of virtue for the Christian: "Concerning Christian virtues the following causes ought to be added: the knowledge of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit aiding and moving the human powers. And when we consider how great the weakness of these human powers, we will know what is lacking in philosophy and will love our Christian teaching all the more, which brings help to such weakness." One can only wonder how Melanchthon, who can make the preceding statement, could bother to work out a moral philosophy.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Apology XVIII 4, 93; II 12; IV 181.

<sup>24</sup> CR 23, 336 IV *Enarratio Symboli Niceni*, 1550.

<sup>25</sup> CR 13, 200 ff.

doubts. He then offers ten arguments (mostly teleological but some ontological) to confirm honest minds.

## 2. Revelation in Contrast to Natural Knowledge

What natural knowledge cannot supply revelation provides.<sup>26</sup> Or to put it differently, what philosophy cannot offer the Gospel offers—a gracious God, a forgiving God. Those who worship God must know who He is.<sup>27</sup> We know Him by recognizing what He does. Heathens and Jews can know certain things about God, that He is wise, that He is Creator, etc., "but they cannot know the true God, who has made Himself known in the church, who affirms that He is one Essence, yet threefold, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." They err because they do not know that God's Son is Mediator; they do not know God's promises. As constant as Melanchthon's emphasis upon natural knowledge is his emphasis upon the limitations of natural knowledge.

## 3. Law and Promise

The former theme is intensified by the distinction between Law and Gospel (promise), a distinction Melanchthon never tires of making. What is the Gospel? "It is the promise of a Mediator, a solemn promise given to men, a promise affirming the forgiveness of sins, reconciliation, the imputation of [Christ's] righteousness, the Holy Spirit, and the inheritance of life eternal, not because of the Law or our own dignity, but by grace on account of the Son, our Mediator, for this promise is to be accepted by faith and

<sup>26</sup> Cf. n. 20.

<sup>27</sup> *Explicatio Symboli Niceni*, 1561, post mortem. CR 23, 355 ff.

trust in the Son." This promise was given to Adam and Eve and all the patriarchs.<sup>28</sup> And all who have ever been saved have been saved by the same Gospel. This Gospel has nothing to do with philosophy or law. "The distinction between Law and Gospel (or promise, which is the peculiar property of the Gospel) must obtain in the church and be intimately known by all, for if this distinction is lost, horrible darkness will follow."<sup>29</sup>

#### 4. Justification and Faith

Melanchthon caught the urgency of Luther's emphasis upon justification by faith, an emphasis meshing with the former stress on Law and Gospel. Justification is the sum of the Gospel, of Christian doctrine; it manifests God's wonderful benefits and brings comfort to troubled consciences.<sup>30</sup> It is the article which separates Christians from Jews, Pelagians, and heathens. Like Luther, Melanchthon stresses the forensic nature of justification as an *imputatio iustitiae*,<sup>31</sup> but it is more than a bare verdict. It brings forgiveness, reconciliation, life, and the Holy Spirit, for the Word of jus-

<sup>28</sup> CR 23, 337: "And we must not imagine that the Gospel was unknown to the fathers and that there was only a new and better Law at the time of Moses, as many of the unlearned of all ages have supposed. Rather we must recognize that the one and same Gospel promise of a Mediator and of reconciliation was known to the fathers, known from that very first proclamation of it in the words received by Adam and Eve: the Seed of the woman shall crush the head of the serpent. And it has always been the same. All who have been, are, or will be true members of the church have been and are saved by faith in the Mediator, from Adam to the resurrection of the dead."

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> CR 21, 739 *Loci praecipui theologici*, 1559.

<sup>31</sup> CR 23, 449.

tification is a powerful Word. And it comforts.<sup>32</sup> To be justified means to receive the comfort of forgiveness.<sup>33</sup>

Faith clings to forgiveness, to the God who forgives for Christ's sake. It is as though Luther's voice spoke through Melanchthon: "When Paul says we are justified by faith, he means by faith not only a historical knowledge, for devils also are acquainted with history and dogmas. No, he means that we assent to all the articles of faith, and of all the articles to this one in particular: I believe in the forgiveness of sins and the life everlasting, that these gifts are bestowed not only on others but also to me. When with such an assent you believe that you are forgiven, this faith, which rests in God for the sake of the Mediator, lifts up your heart in the promise of mercy. Such assent, which embraces the promise of the Gospel, enlightens the mind, and such faith in the Mediator and His mercy enlightens the heart."<sup>34</sup> This

<sup>32</sup> CR 23, 451: "Haec dicta perspicue ostendunt relationem, videlicet remissionem peccatorum, et reconciliationem includi in verbo iustificandi. Haec ipsa autem acceptio remissionis, non est frigida imaginatio, sed fit, cum in vero dolere sentitur consolatio, quae est vivificatio, quae fit, cum Filius Dei simul est efficax cum verbo externo, et dicit consolationem in corde, et ostendit misericordiam Patris, et dat Spiritum Sanctum, sicut clare dicitur, 1 Johan. 5." This is a highly significant statement, illustrating the true Lutheran emphasis. And remember that it is the late Melanchthon who writes the *Explicatio Symboli Niceni* here quoted.

<sup>33</sup> CR 23, 458: "Iustificamur, id est, accipimus remissionem peccatorum et reputamur iusti seu accepti gratis, ipsius gratia, id est, misericordia gratuita propter Christum, quem proposuit Deus propitiatorem." The themes Law, promise, sin, justification, faith are the recurring emphases in all of Melanchthon's writings.

<sup>34</sup> CR 23, 451. Cf. also the *Loci praecipui theologici* (1559), CR 21, 751: "Cum autem dicimus de assensu promissionis, complectimur

doctrine of comfort Melanchthon never wished to abandon. It is one of the great tragedies of history that his vacillation and his later synergism undermined this article.<sup>35</sup>

St. Louis, Mo.

omnium articulorum notitiam, et in Symbolo ceteri articuli referuntur ad hunc: Credo remissionem peccatorum, Credo vitam aeternam. Haec est enim summa promissionum et finis, ad quem ceteri articuli referuntur: Quia Filius Dei missus est, ut Ioannes inquit, ut destruat opera Diaboli, id est, tollat peccatum et instauret iustitiam et vitam aeternam."

<sup>35</sup> The sadness, of course, is that his later synergism necessarily undermined his clear statements on justification and faith. Faith becomes a movement in the will which we perform, a *virtus* (CR 21, 751). Again, contrition which is prior to faith becomes something we do. There must be some contrition (*aliquam contritionem*), he says, and contrition is merely recognizing (*agnoscimus*) that we have doubts, greed, and other sins (CR 21, 884). This is

surely a softening of his words in the Apology which call contrition "true terror of the conscience" (XII, 29) and a work of God in us (*opus Dei in hominibus*), and of the words of Luther which say that contrition is not our work at all. Luther says (WA 39, 103—104): "Contrition is not our work, but the work of God's Law, which incites hatred toward God and flight from God. Now what merit does a man have in fleeing and hating God? in not being able to hear God? What merit is there in Adam when he runs from the voice of God calling to him and looks for some shelter from it? And so God grabs hold of man while he is running away, and has mercy on him, and says, Thou shalt not die. . . . Contrition is the very suffering of hell fighting with the remission of sins. It is the thunder and lightning of God's wrath in the conscience. I am the *materia* and subject of this divine work." These words of Luther, which the later Melanchthon never could have uttered, offer the clue to his change of position. If Melanchthon yielded to philosophy and humanism, it was because he had never like Luther known *Anfechtung*, he had never like the passionate Luther "probed and suffered in his own person every academic problem." (R. Thiel, *Luther* [Philadelphia, 1955], p. 191)