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Luther and Melanchthon

By ERWIN L. LUEKER

1. Luther speaks directly to us in the German language; Melanchthon in Latin. This may have some significance whether or not we agree with Schiller that the "soul of a people is in its language." The German language is the language which expressed the thoughts of a people that could conceive of a *Weltbrand* and at the same time of a *Valballe*; that could express the pronouncements of *Norn* (goddess of fate), and at the same time have *Lebenslust* and *Lebenswucht*. It is the language of a people which did not strive to reconcile paradoxes but lived in the midst of contrast. The Latin language, on the other hand, is a language which received much of its literature from the Greek, and this in turn was developed among people who sought to reconcile all differences and bring all within a smooth system.

2. Luther's theology grew in the paradox of sin and grace. He was always aware of a contrast between man in his sin and God in His holiness. The remarkable thing for him was the bridge which was created from God to man through faith. Melanchthon, on the other hand, developed in a humanistic environment. Before his coming to Wittenberg the leading humanists of the period were his close friends, and this friendship continued after he associated with Luther. He himself says, "I am conscious of having pursued theology for no other reason than in order to improve life." (CR 1, 722)

3. When Melanchthon came to Wittenberg he was steeped in Aristotelian philos-

ophy. In fact, he had made preparations to publish an edition of Aristotle's works. Under the influence of Luther he, for a brief period, rejected philosophy and spoke disparagingly of it. His interest in it, however, later revived.

4. As far as their approach to their work is concerned and their conception of their own position in that work there is also a difference. Luther saw himself as a man whose function was that of *προφήτεια*. Melanchthon saw his work as being that of *διδασκαλία*. This approach can be illustrated by a quotation from Luther and one from Melanchthon:

Ich bin dazu geboren, dasz ich mit den Rotten und Teuffeln musz kriegien und zu Felde liegen, darumb meiner Bücher viel stürmisch und kriegisch sind. Ich musz die Klötze und Stämme ausrotten, Dornen und Hecken weghauen, die Pfützen ausfüllen und bin der grobe Waldrechter, der die Bahn brechen und zurichten musz. Aber M. Philipp fährt säuberlich und still daher, bauet und pflanzet, säet und begeuszt mit Lust, nach dem Gott ihm hat gegeben seine Gaben reichlich. [WA XXX, 2, 68 f.]

Die Kirche erzeugt keine neue Lehre sondern ist gewissermaszen die Grammatik des göttlichen Wortes. [CR 7, 576]

5. The nature of the two men was also different. Luther reminds one of a storm sweeping onward. As illustrated in the preceding quotation, his work was the rough work of coming in with the message of

the Reformation. Melanchthon, on the other hand, was quiet and peaceful. Even in the midst of controversy he seemed always to be in control of himself and used kindness over against the opponents.

6. Luther seemed to be continually aware of the fact that he was *coram Deo*. As a prophet with a message to deliver he stood before men wrapped in the message. Melanchthon, on the other hand, constantly saw the need of contacting men, of working in an environment. His theology was contact seeking. If we study some of the events which have especially occasioned accusation against Melanchthon we will note that in all of them there were contacts to be made which Melanchthon then sought to make. Instead of working for the pure white he often struggled toward the gray.

7. Thus it often seems as though Luther and Melanchthon were attracted to each other more by their contrasts than by their similarities. The two men complemented each other, and in the work of establishing the Reformation both were needed.

8. Luther and Melanchthon were aware of their differences and were often irritated by faults which they saw in each other. Melanchthon's letter to Carlowitz shows, perhaps more than any other statement of his, the depth of this feeling. (CR 6, 879 ff.) Luther's frequent admonitions to Melanchthon at Augsburg show how well he understood the character of his co-worker.

9. Yet Luther and Melanchthon managed to work with each other. More than that they valued each other highly. Some of the most glowing expressions of praise for Melanchthon come from Luther, and for Luther from Melanchthon. As far as their work is concerned Melanchthon prob-

ably viewed Luther as a mighty movement which must be kept in proper channels and must be brought into fruitful activities. From this point of view even some of the duplicity in the case of Melanchthon should be studied. Luther, on the other hand, undoubtedly saw Melanchthon's inclinations toward rationalism and his constant search for contacts as a possible deterrent for the Reformation. With some justification it has been said that in Luther and Melanchthon theology and philosophy struggle with each other.

10. And yet these two men will always stand at the fountainhead of the Lutheran Reformation. Luther, the miner's son, dug rich ore, and Melanchthon, the smith's son, forged it into form.

11. In periods of crisis, like the period after the peasant's revolt, it was Melanchthon, the educator, who played a leading part in bringing about system and order. There are numerous examples of his ability to systematize the thought of Luther, the Visitation Articles, the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, and the *Loci* of 1521, being some of the more prominent ones.

12. The message of the reformation lived in the form given it by Melanchthon. Melanchthon did this so successfully that even those who later opposed him, men like Flacius, were thoroughly Melanchthonian.

13. The basic characteristics of Luther and Melanchthon are evident in their attitude toward the old symbols. For Luther an appeal to the ancient church was valid because the ancient church was close to the Gospel as far as content is concerned; Melanchthon, on the other hand, as a true humanist, saw a temporal nearness to the original sources in an appeal to the an-

cients, and this was associated with the content nearness.

14. Melanchthon did not stay with his earlier criticism of reason but developed a new Ciceronian Aristotelianism which led immediately to Protestant scholasticism.

15. Melanchthon bridged reason and revelation by paralleling Law and Gospel with reason and revelation. Melanchthon perhaps did not see that reason must be separated from its content and cannot produce anything really new. Melanchthon's rationalism shows itself in rational proofs for the Scriptures, proofs for God, the combination of logical, impersonal, and living Biblical characteristics in his God thoughts. It is interesting to note that while Luther often found paradoxes in the Scriptures and problems which he admittedly could not solve, such admissions, at least as far as I have been able to ascertain, are rare in Melanchthon. Yet Melanchthon did not intend to place reason above revelation, but he thought only of taking reason into the service of revelation.

16. It also seems that Melanchthon at no time was interested in removing the treasures of the Reformation which Luther had obtained. Here and there he felt that corrections had to be made, the corrections which a jeweler feels to be necessary on the surface of precious stones.

17. Up until the 20th century it was generally felt that Luther and Melanchthon had the same basic approach to theology but that Melanchthon in his later life deviated on certain points. In the 20th century some scholars have held that the deviations were in the direction of *ratio* in all areas of theology. They also see the seeds of this in works written during the

time of Luther, even in the Augsburg Confession and in the Apology. But in these documents, they hold, the thoughts were so stated that they could be acceptable to both. If we compare the statements on justification, for example, in the Apology and in the Smalcald Articles we notice that Luther continually states them more radically. (Compare AC IV, VI, SA III, 13)

18. The relationship existing between Luther and Melanchthon, then, is a "with" and an "against" each other. Yet the question is whether these basic natures and these basic positions over against each other were of such a nature that the Lutheran Church found its life and must continue to live in the synthesis and in the paradox of these two personalities. Certainly Melanchthon found clear, comprehensible formulations for Luther's doctrine. Certainly Melanchthon was also the contact to the world, intellectual world especially, of his day. Furthermore he was the able organizer who took the lead in such actions as confessional subscription.

19. In periods of crisis and stress Luther has been raised to the fore. In periods of quiet and peaceful existence Melanchthon has come to the fore. The 19th century thought highly of Melanchthon. The early 20th was more inclined to discredit him. Certainly no one would want to defend Melanchthon against the accusations of aberration. But it requires a deeper insight and a deeper evaluation to understand why Luther felt that he needed this man for his work and why some of the basic expressions of the Lutheran Church are traced to him. The Lutheran Church has lived in this "for, with, against."

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