

Melanchthon and Education

I want to address these four aspects of Melanchthon's contributions to Christian education: teacher in the Liberal Arts, interpreter of Paul, organizer of theology, and confessor of the faith. And I want to do this chiefly by quoting Melanchthon.

Teacher in the Liberal Arts

Nowadays, this is perhaps the most important thing Melanchthon has to teach us: God has two hands or, as Melanchthon would put it, there are two kinds of righteousness for Christians: human, external righteousness, which we work on to achieve in this world and hold in common with all human beings; and divine, internal righteousness, which comes a sheer gift from the mercy of God in Christ alone for forgiveness, life and salvation. Put another way, there is nothing wrong with human knowledge when it serves human beings in this world. This means that for Melanchthon Christians can always use and appreciate human wisdom and knowledge.

There are today countless Christians who somehow think that human knowledge is in itself sinful. This is not just a mistake; it is itself a grievous sin, because it sets the Christian up as judge over the whole world. I remember when I was serving a parish in a suburb of Minneapolis and someone sent us a Christian Yellow Pages—as if somehow using a Christian plumber or physician or car mechanic would somehow be better. When I go to the doctor, I don't want someone who has memorized Luther's Small Catechism, I want someone who has memorized Grey's Basic Anatomy. In this world on God's left hand, all human beings serve creation. This goes for politics, too. Some politicians who wrap themselves in the Bible are not doing Christianity any favor. We need people who respect the rule of law and will care for the poor, not someone who can quote the Bible, which, Luther once remarked, a donkey can do.

Here's what Melanchthon said relating God's two hands to politics.

Therefore let us carefully discern these two kingdoms: the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of Christ. ... The kingdom of Christ is found in the hearts of the saints who according to the gospel believe that they have been received into grace on account of Christ, who are renewed and made holy by the Holy Spirit and taste eternal life, who show forth their faith in good works and, on account of God's glory, do good to all, so that they invite many to knowledge of the gospel. ...

Furthermore, the kingdom of this world, as I have often said, is a legitimate order that defends public peace with the authority of magistrates, with laws, judgments, punishments and war.¹

When it comes to this life and its righteousness, Lutherans do not have to check their brain at the door, but can use it in politics, education, history, psychology and the rest in their proper place.

Interpreter of Paul

I want to say a word to those of you who have been trained in theology. Don't believe the "New Perspectives on Paul" for a moment. A group of modern English Puritans have managed to dismiss Luther and Melanchthon's approach to Paul, imagining that justification by faith is a distortion of Paul. They make Paul into a supporter of doing good works to get in good with God. They represent the same approach to Paul championed by one of Luther and Melanchthon's foremost opponents, Erasmus of Rotterdam. Why return to medieval moralisms when the Reformers offer a refreshing, new approach to Paul as a bearer not of more or different

¹ Philip Melanchthon, *Scholia ad Colossenses* (Wittenberg, 1528), 69^r f.

laws but of the gospel, the good news of God in Christ? Try reading Paul from Melanchthon's perspective. Here's what he said about justification by faith in Romans.

Thus, Paul teaches about justification as follows. The Gospel preaches repentance and “proves [the world wrong] about sin” [John 16:8] and offers forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life to all—not on account of our worthiness or our works or our disposition or virtues but through mercy on account of Christ, as long as they believe this, namely, that God is certainly well-disposed to them on account of Christ. He teaches this when he says (Rom. 3:28), “We hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.” Or, again (Rom. 10:10), “It is believed in the heart for righteousness.” And [the Reformers] say it with other words: “By faith alone a person is justified.” Using statements of this kind, this type of discourse ought to be understood.²

Organizer of Theology

Melanchthon's *Loci communes theologici*, which we could translate as Major Theological Topics, set the standard for Lutheran theology into the next century. In the 1550s, graduate students in theology were required to lecture on the book for beginning students. It was a remarkable example of how Melanchthon's training in logic and rhetoric combined with his close reading of Paul in Romans to produce a completely new way of doing theology, as stated in its subtitle: “A Theological Outline.”

Although some imagine this work to be systematic, it is better understood as a combination of Biblical theology and an appeal to the heart. Even though Melanchthon's

² *Commentarii ad Romanos* (Wittenberg, 1532), 2 iii^v – iv^f.

method may be foreign to us today, it contains some remarkable insights into how we teach. Let me share just two.

[After giving a list of possible topics in theology, Melanchthon states:] Just as there are some subjects among these that are completely incomprehensible, so there are some that Christ wants every Christian to know most intimately. We should adore the mysteries of divinity, not investigate them. ... God almighty clothed his Son in flesh to draw us away from contemplating his majesty and toward contemplating our flesh, and thus our weakness.

[After criticizing speculative theology that tries to pry open the secrets of God's divine nature, he writes:] But whoever is ignorant of the other topics—the power of sin, the Law, grace—I do not know how I can call such a person a Christian. For through these topics Christ is properly known, since to know Christ is to know his benefits, and not, as they teach, to contemplate his natures and the modes of his incarnation. Unless you know why Christ took on flesh and was crucified, what is the profit of having known historical facts about him? Or is it enough for a physician to know the shapes, colors, and features of [medicinal] herbs, no matter that he does not know their inherent power? ... This, finally, is Christian knowledge—to know what the Law demands, where to find the power to fulfill the Law, where to claim grace for sins, how to strengthen a wavering soul against the devil, the flesh, and the world, and how to console the afflicted conscience.³

³ Philip Melanchthon, *Commonplaces: Loci communes 1521*, trans. Christian Preus (St. Louis: Concordia, 2014), 23-25.

Confessor of the Faith

Philip Melanchthon wrote three documents that are contained in the standard collection of Lutheran confessions called *The Book of Concord*, published in 1580, especially the 1530 Augsburg Confession, which he drafted, and its defense, the so-called Apology. A line from article 4 of the Augsburg Confession summarizes the heart of his testimony to the Christian faith:

It is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight, as St. Paul says in Rom. 3 [:21-26] and 4 [:5].⁴

In article 20 of the same confession, he explains this even further by connecting the teaching to its effect: comfort for the terrified conscience.

To begin with, our teachers remind the churches that our works cannot reconcile God or merit grace and forgiveness of sins, but we obtain this only by faith when we believe that we are received into grace on account of Christ, who alone has been appointed mediator and atoning sacrifice through whom the Father is reconciled. Therefore, all who trust that they merit grace by works despise the merit and grace of Christ and seek a way to God without Christ through human

⁴ Augsburg Confession, art. IV, in: *The Book of Concord*, ed. by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis, 2000), 38/40.

powers, since Christ has said about himself [John 14:8a]: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” This teaching concerning faith is treated in Paul everywhere. Eph. 2 [:8-9]: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is ... not the result of works....”

So that no one may quibble that we have contrived a new interpretation of Paul, this entire approach is supported by the testimonies of the [church] Fathers. In many writings Augustine defends grace and the righteousness of faith against the merit of works. Ambrose [actually Prosper of Aquitaine] teaches similar things in *Concerning the Calling of the Gentiles* where he writes, “Redemption by the blood of Christ would become worthless and the preference for human works would not give way to the mercy of God if justification, which takes place by grace, were due to antecedent merits. For then it would be the worker's wage rather than the donor's gift.”

Moreover, although this teaching is despised by those without experience, nevertheless devout and anxious consciences find by experience that it offers the greatest consolation. For consciences cannot be calmed by any work but only by faith when they are certain that they have a God who has been reconciled on account of Christ. As Paul teaches in Rom. 5 [:1]: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith we have peace with God.” This whole teaching must be referred to that struggle of the terrified conscience, and it cannot be understood apart from that struggle. That is why those who are wicked and without experience judge it

badly. For they imagine that Christian righteousness is nothing but civil and philosophical righteousness.⁵

I will end as Melanchthon ended his speeches: “Dixi!” “I have spoken.”

⁵ Augsburg Confession, art. XX, in *The Book of Concord*, 55.