

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 51

Philipp Melanchthon

Most of us have heard the names of the mighty men of the Protestant Reformation like Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox and Ulrich Zwingli. They wrote copiously, preached fearlessly and had an immeasurable influence on the Church. But there are others who worked tirelessly alongside these men who are not known very well at all. Yet their contributions were essential to the major changes that came about in faith and practice. One of those lesser-known individuals was the one we turn our attention to today for our study.

Philipp Schwarzerd was born in Bretten in 1497. Today the small city in the Southern part of Germany has a population of around 30,000. He later changed his name from Schwarzerd, which is German for “black earth,” to Melanchthon which is the Greek equivalent. He had godly parents who emphasized the importance of piety and prayer, but when his father died when Philipp was only eleven years old, he went to live with his grandfather.

In the providence of God, Philipp’s grandfather got him a tutor by the name of John Hungarus who was extremely hard on the young man but also someone that Philipp loved like a father. When his grandfather died, he and his brother went to live with a great aunt who was the sister of the great humanist and Hebrew scholar Johann Reuchlin.¹ Later both Luther and Melanchthon were grateful to Reuchlin for unraveling the mysteries of the Hebrew language. Even though he had initially been critical of the Roman Church, Reuchlin was more “a son of the Renaissance, not the Reformation.”²

Melanchthon was small and very timid, but he was an intellectual giant. Philipp earned his bachelors degree from the University of Heidelberg before he had turned 13 years old and earned his masters from Tübingen University at 17.

He was very astute in the ancient languages with expertise in both Greek and Latin. In fact, he was more proficient in these two languages than even his native German. He even gained the admiration of Erasmus who was also deeply influenced by humanism like Philipp. He loved the classics in art, ethics, philosophy, literature and architecture that had come to the forefront of culture during the Renaissance. He lectured in ancient literature and translated the works

¹ *New Dictionary of Theology*, p.419.

² William R. Estep, *Renaissance and Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), 55.

of the Greek philosophers. He had even produced a Greek grammar. After completing his course of studies at Tübingen, Philipp became restless because he had learned everything he could learn there and was ready for new challenges.

When he was 21, he accepted a call to come to the University of Wittenberg as a professor of Greek.³ When the very young professor arrived at his new post, the other professors were not in the least bit impressed with his slight build and reserved demeanor. However, when he began to deliver his talk to the faculty four days later, they were all amazed at his intellect. This would be a pivotal time in the young scholar's life because it was here that he would meet Martin Luther, fourteen years his senior, and the two men would become very close friends.

As the Greek chair, Melanchthon quickly began lecturing on Homer and Biblical books, as well as teaching Greek and Hebrew grammar. He became one of the favorite professors attracting students from all over Europe. This brought great prestige to the university.

God in His wisdom put the two men together. The more quiet and timid Melanchthon tempered the fiery and passionate Luther. While Luther could reach the common man, Melanchthon could reach the intellectuals and scholars. While Luther was certainly the driving force behind the Reformation, he could not have accomplished it without Philipp.

Melanchthon married Catharina Krapp in 1520. He had been unsure about marriage because he feared that it would severely hinder his studies and teaching. However, his concerns were unfounded and he enjoyed marriage very much. Catharina bore him four children.

In 1521, Melanchthon began writing his *Loci Commune*, which is Latin for Theological Common Places.⁴ It was a systematic theology based totally on the Word of God. It was based on his studies in the Book of Romans and was a practical expression of Christian theology. He paid special attention to the doctrines of original sin, faith, grace, and repentance. At this time, Melanchthon viewed the issue of man's free will the same as Luther—that man is not free in any way. However, he would later change his view and believed that man does have a will to either accept or reject God's grace even after the prompting by the Holy Spirit.

³ Kurt Aland, *Four Reformers: Luther, Melanchthon, Calvin, Zwingli* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1979), 61.

⁴ Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 703.

In 1522, Luther produced his German New Testament that would sell thousands due to its readability and affordability. Once again, Melanchthon's expertise in Greek, working by Luther's side for hours made this possible.

Luther enjoyed the encouragement and reassurance of Philipp Melanchthon's company during all of the important conferences (diets) which shaped the Protestant movement during the 1500's. The most notable ones were the Leipzig Disputation (1519), the Marburg Colloquy (1529), and the Diet of Augsburg (1530).

Melanchthon went to great lengths to bring Luther and Zwingli together and find compromise over their theological differences. He drew up Articles of Faith and the two sides found common ground on fourteen out of fifteen. However, Luther and Zwingli could not agree on the Lord's Supper, so they parted in disagreement. This brought great sadness to Melanchthon because he was a reconciler by nature. He not only sought this for Luther and Zwingli, but also for the Reformation and the Catholic Church.

It was at the Diet of Augsburg that Melanchthon made perhaps his greatest contribution known as The Augsburg Confession. Emperor Charles V had refused to listen to Luther's ideas at earlier meetings. At this meeting, Charles V asked for a systematic presentation of the Reformer's position. To this request, Melanchthon's wrote the confession that even today forms the basis of the classic doctrinal statement of the Lutheran church.⁵

The signers of the Confession did not back down from their faith. This obviously did not humor the Emperor. When the papal representative counseled the Emperor to crush and persecute the Reformation, Melanchthon continued to reason with Rome by upholding the common areas of doctrine that the two sides could agree on and minimizing the differences. However, the Catholic Church would not compromise. Many saw him as a compromiser and that he wavered in some of his views.

He became the obvious successor to his longtime friend and mentor Martin Luther when Luther died in 1546. However, he was not the forceful leader that Luther was. There were many days of heartache for Philipp, and even some of those who were staunch followers of Luther turned on him because they saw him as weak and did not trust him. They felt that he compromised on fundamental theological differences that Luther had held with the Catholic Church. However, in an

⁵ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Volume 2 The Reformation to the Present Day* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 43.

attempt to salvage some Lutheran ideas, he felt that some Roman Catholic rites were not essential to the faith and therefore could be accepted.

Philipp Melanchthon died on April 19, 1560. Not long before he died, he wrote some final thoughts on a piece of paper. As Kurt Aland records:

On one side he wrote, “You will be redeemed from sin, and set free from cares and from the fury of theologians,” and on the other, “You will come to light, you will look upon God and his Son, you will understand the wonderful mysteries which you could not comprehend in this life: Why we were so made, and not otherwise, and in what the union of the two natures in Christ consists.”⁶

He was buried in Wittenberg at the Castle Church beside his friend Martin Luther.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. We need to be living in the righteousness of God. Do you have a confidence in your relationship with the Lord that you are in faith, that you have His righteousness, and that there is nothing you can do to make yourself righteous? “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith.’” (Romans 1:17)
2. Sooner or later there will come a crisis in your life – be strong in the Lord when it does. “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” (Luke 9:23-24)
3. Are you willing to die for the faith?

⁶ Kurt Aland, *Four Reformers*, 79.