

Philipp Melanchthon: A short introduction


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Philipp Melanchthon was one of the most influential theologians of the Reformation of the 16th century. He was responsible for transforming the secondary and tertiary educational systems in Germany. He was responsible for a new theological curriculum. He wrote the first Protestant 'systematic theology' and was the author of the *Confessio Augustana*. He is called the 'teacher of Germany and Europe'. In spite of all the praises, most South Africans know very little about this important theologian. In this year of jubilee, it is imperative that a short introduction to his life and work be published – in the hope that he would receive more attention in future from South African scholars.

Introductory remarks

Philipp¹ Melanchthon was the colleague and friend of Martin Luther (cf. Müller 2010 for the relationship between the two reformers as well as the differences between the two of them). He, as the man next to Martin Luther, received very little attention in South African journals linked to the Reformed tradition in the past. His name is mentioned now and then, but I know of only one article in the recent past on this man (cf. Van Wyk 2013). This is difficult to understand, hence Melanchthon's status as Reformation theologian. He was with Luther, Zwingli and Calvin² one of the main theologians of the Reformation of the 16th century. Melanchthon was the author of the *Confessio Augustana*, he was responsible for a new structure of theological training (cf. Köpf 2013), he wrote the first handbook in 'systematic theology' and he was the lecturer and mentor of Zacharius Ursinus, who was mainly responsible for writing the Heidelberg Catechism (cf. Ehmann 2012; Van Wyk 2013). It is therefore strange that Melanchthon was almost totally ignored by the theologians of the Reformed tradition. At the Lutheran institutions, Melanchthon most probably receives the attention he deserves.

The *HTS Theological Studies* makes it possible to introduce Melanchthon in this special collection, *Reformation 1517–2017*, to its readership. We hope that this will not be the last article on this man who was in a certain sense the chief theologian of the Reformation.

The article starts with a short biography of Melanchthon. In the second section, we look at some of his contributions to the Reformation. It is followed by a compact overview of some of the central ideas and insights of his theology. We end with an investigation into his understanding of prayer because prayer played a central role in his personal life and theological work.

The life of Philipp Melanchthon (16 February 1497 to 19 April 1560)³

Philipp Melanchthon was born in Bretten, near Karlsruhe, Germany on 16 February 1497 as Philipp Schwartzertd (literally, black earth). Melanchthon was left orphaned in 1508 after the death of both his father and grandfather. His mother sent him to live with his maternal grandmother in Pforzheim that enabled him to attend the prestigious Latin school. At this school, he was introduced to Latin, Greek and the philosophy of Aristotle. Since his childhood, he was influenced by his grandmother's brother, Johann Reuchlin, who was a famous humanist scholar. Reuchlin changed his surname on 15 March 1509 to Melanchthon, the Greek version of the name. This was a custom among the humanists of that time. He later (1531) changed his name to an easier version, namely Melanthon, but the academic community never followed him in this regard (Jung 2010a:13; Kuropka 2010:19).

1. His first name is frequently written in the English-speaking world as Philip. I, however, prefer to use the German version, Philipp. On the cover-pages of the first editions of his *Locī Communes*, *Locī Theologici* and the *Heubtartikel Christlicher Lere*, his name is mostly presented as Philippo, sometimes as Philippi, and once as Philippum. A few times the abbreviated version Philip. Melanth. was used (cf. Melanchthon [1553] 2010:50–67).

2. Cf. Selderhuis (2008:57–63) and Freudenberg (2011:355–368) for the close relationship between Melanchthon and Calvin.

3. Scholars interested in the life and work of Melanchthon should not look further than Scheible (2016). This will remain the standard biography for many years to come. This book will in the near future be available in English. English versions of his earlier works (1992; 2002 and 2014) are already available.

With the help of Reuchlin, Melanchthon was able to afford a university education. He started his tertiary studies in October 1509 in Heidelberg at the age of 12. He studied Greek, philosophy, rhetoric and astrology in Heidelberg. On 10 June 1511 – after only 2 years of study – he received the degree *Baccalaureus atrium in via antiqua* (Scholasticism). He immediately began his studies for the Master of Arts. When a year later he had completed the requirements for this degree also, his application was denied by the faculty, who cited his young age as their reason. The University of Tübingen, however, allowed him enrolment. Besides Greek, he also studied mathematics and medicine. On 25 January 1514, he obtained his Master of Arts, but this time in *via moderna* (Nominalism). For the next 4 years, Melanchthon taught Greek in Tübingen. On 15 May 1518, he published a Greek Grammar that was used as a textbook for centuries to come (cf. Scheible 2016:24–33).

On 28 August 1518, he became professor of Greek in Wittenberg at the age of 21 because of the commendation of his grand-uncle Reuchlin. His inaugural address ([1518] 2011d), *On Reforming the Studies of the Youth*, impressed Luther a lot. He argued that educational reform would be possible by studying the classics in their original languages, by going back to the sources, including especially a fresh look at the works of Aristotle, and by doing this, students could be taught to pursue true philosophy, philology, rhetoric and dialectic, and not the stale traditions of men pawned off as knowledge. Luther was convinced that Melanchthon was a gift sent to Wittenberg by God. The student population tripled within 3 years after his arrival. He also immediately started studying Scripture, especially Paul, and ‘evangelical theology’ with Martin Luther. On 19 September 1519, he received the degree *Baccalaureus biblicus*. It was then expected of him to lecture on the books of the Bible from the *Vulgate*. He, however, did it from the Greek text (cf. Scheible 2016:39–69).

Melanchthon was present as a spectator at the disputation of Leipzig in 1519. There, he had a brief encounter with Johann Eck. He (Melanchthon [1519] 1844), afterwards, responded with a booklet *‘Defensio contra Johannem Eckium’* [‘Defence against Johann Eck’]. This publication was the starting point of Melanchthon’s apologetic work as Reformer. As rector, from March 1523, he initiated a variety of changes at the university. He insisted on a mentor for every student. He changed the traditional disputations. He shortened them and insisted on a thematic approach. He also introduced *declamations* – training in public speech (cf. Scheible 2002:1003). In 1525 he received, with Luther, extraordinary status. Both received huge salaries and big homes (that were used as hostels for students from abroad). He personally helped to transform the universities of Tübingen, Heidelberg, Leipzig and Frankfurt and grounded the universities of Jena and Marburg (cf. Scheible 2002:1003).

In 1520 Luther ‘forced’ him to marry Katharina Krapp. Although he did not want to get married, the couple was happily married. In 1522 his daughter Anna was born. Her unhappy marriage plunged him for several years into a deep

state of depression (Jung 2010a:93–99). He also had other children, namely Philipp (born in 1525), Georg (born in 1526) and Magdalena (born in 1531). He lost his wife in 1557, 3 years before he died on 19 April 1560. He was buried next to Martin Luther in the ‘Castle-church’ in Wittenberg.

His contributions to the Reformation

Melanchthon is generally known as the ‘teacher of Germany’ [*praeceptor Germaniae*]. In recent times, scholars (such as Selderhuis 2010) tend to rather refer to him as the ‘teacher of Europe’ (*praeceptor Europiae*) because he has changed many aspects of European life. He, more than anyone else, was responsible for the embracement of humanism⁴ by the Protestant movement. He convinced church and university that research should be done from primary sources by reading classical texts in the original languages. He was therefore responsible for the radical transformation of theological education. Melanchthon did not only convince the authorities that theologians should be able to study the Bible in the original languages but also transformed the whole system of theological training. He introduced many of the subjects that form the cornerstones of theological training worldwide (cf. Beyer 2011; Frank 1996).

Melanchthon worked for 28 years alongside⁵ Luther and was mainly responsible for shaping the new ‘Evangelic Church’. After Luther’s death, he continued the Protestant struggle for another 14 years. Melanchthon was responsible for grounding the central identity of this new approach to the Christian faith. This identity could be summarised as ‘educated faith’ (*gebildeter Glaube*) – to use the expression of Jung (2011). This does not only mean academically educated but also intellectually developed. Melanchthon, as the rector of the University of Wittenberg, did not only insist on high academic standards at his institution of learning but also on a practise of daily prayer. Melanchthon insisted that prayers and praying should be incorporated into the academic activities of the universities. For this reason, Melanchthon is also called *praeceptor atrium and praeceptor theologiae et pietatis* [the teacher of basic education and the teacher of theology and faith-practice] (cf. Jung 2011:162).

One of the reasons why Melanchthon cannot just be ignored by South African theologians is because he was the author of the *Confessio Augustana*, the first important confessional document of the Reformation. The German version of the Confession was read out to the Diet of Augsburg on 25 June 1530, and both the Latin and German texts were presented to the emperor. The Confession emphasised the concept of secular order as established by God, condemned Anabaptists as heretical and set out the evangelic position on justification, free will and good works (cf. Maxcey 1980 for the

4. Melanchthon (1989) contains a variety of texts in which he combines humanistic ideas with the Christian faith.

5. Melanchthon was not only the man next to Luther in terms of theological and church activities (cf. Hahn 2010) but was also literally his neighbour. The two families had a close and warm relationship. The younger Melanchthon had the terrible duty of burying both Luther and his wife (cf. Schilling 2013).

development of his thought regarding these themes). In reply, the Roman Catholic *Confutation* was publicly read on 02 August 1530, after which the emperor declared the evangelic position refuted, and demanded submission by the Protestants. A counter-reply, written by Melanchthon, was ready by 22 September, but he was rejected by the emperor. His *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* was published in May 1531 in which many of the articles are given clearer exposition. In 1540 the Augsburg Confession was republished, and became known as the *Variata*. In this version, Melanchthon narrowed the bridge between the Reformed and Lutheran traditions (cf. Kusukawa [2004] 2013:63–65).

Melanchthon was the person who constantly motivated theological opponents to settle their disagreements by dialogue. Consensus is one of the important words constantly used by Melanchthon (cf. Rhein 1998:53–56). It was in this spirit that the *Leuenberg Agreement* (a consensus document between the two confessional groupings) was adopted in 1973. It is therefore appropriate to call Melanchthon the ‘father of the ecumenical movement’ (cf. Sattler 2010). An ecumenical theologian of this importance cannot simply be ignored by the Reformed tradition in South Africa.

Melanchthon also made many other important contributions to the Reformation-movement. What is not generally known is his important contribution to the development of Protestant church music. He wrote many hymns that were taken up in the first Protestant hymnals (cf. Rhein 2011). He also wrote important forewords to the early hymnals (cf. Spehr 2012). Lastly, it is important to mention Melanchthon’s attitude towards other religions. Melanchthon regarded Christianity as the true religion. He, however, very cautiously, promoted an attitude of tolerance towards the Jews and the ‘Turks’. He expected all Protestant students to study Hebrew and he motivated others to translate the Koran into Latin (cf. Plathow 2011).

His main publication

Melanchthon’s writings have been well preserved. Almost all his writings have been preserved (Jung 2010a:7). It is impossible to even give an overview of his writings in this publication. His writings (Melanchthon 1834–1860) are collected and published in the Bretschneider edition (28 volumes) of *Corpus Reformatorum*. The titles listed by the project of Günter Frank and Herman Selderhuis on Melanchthon’s *Opera Omnia* under the oversight of Refo 500 (Melanchthon [1525–1560] 2017) counts 19 pages. It is therefore impossible to provide the reader even with a summary of his works. Those interested in Melanchthon should consult either the *Corpus Reformatorum* or the *Opera Omnia*.

A short introduction on his main work, will provide the reader not acquainted with his writings, an idea of what to expect in Melanchthon. The work is called: *Loci communes rerum theologiarum seu hypotyposes theologicae* [*Common Topics*

of *Theology* or *Theological Outline*], first published in 1521. Melanchthon reworked this publication annually and renamed it later to *Loci Praecipui Theologici* [*The chief theological topics*]. The final edition was published in 1559. The academic community treats these two titles as two separate publications.

His first publication of systematic importance is his *Loci Communes* [*Common Topics*] of 1521. This publication originated from his lectures on Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. He never planned to publish these lectures. They were, however, published without his consent. The academic community then insisted that he should publish his lectures. The original document, which Melanchthon calls his ‘night-time studies’ (*lucubratiuncula*), was entitled ‘The Chief Points or Topics of Theology’ (he would in later years return to this title). The *Loci Communes* offers an alternative to Peter Lombard’s philosophical interpretation of the Christian faith as found in his *Sentences*. Melanchthon’s version of faith is based on his in-depth study of Romans. *Loci Communes* [*Common Topics*] is the translation of the Greek *topoi koinoi* and finds its origin in Aristotle. But Melanchthon’s understanding of ‘common topics’ differs radically from Aristotle’s conception of this terminology. Whereas Melanchthon thinks of common topics in Ciceronian terms, namely as indices or guides showing where to find the material whereby to defend a proposition, Aristotle thought of common topics as propositions common to dialectical investigation. The difference is important: To Melanchthon, the subject matter of theology is already present in Scripture. The task of the theologian is to learn the common topics of Scripture, the doctrinal veins of Scripture, so that he may be driven further into Scripture to confirm what Scripture expresses clearly elsewhere. Whereas Scholastic⁶ theology argued technical points using logical syllogisms and complex dialectic, Melanchthon wants to show what Scripture clearly says. He does this rhetorically, by gathering several key topics that Scripture treats in abundance. In this sense, the *Loci* of 1521 is more a hermeneutical handbook than a dogmatic treatise (cf. Introduction to Melanchthon [1521] 2014:10).

The *Loci* was first published in December 1521. Melanchthon used the *Loci* as a handbook for his lectures. He, however, reworked the content year by year. In 1535, a second edition, under the new title *Loci theologici*, was published that was a major recension from the first edition. A next revised edition was published in 1543, while a slightly adjusted version was finally published in 1559. This final edition was almost four times the size of the original version. Justus Jonas translated the *Loci theologici* in 1536 into German. Melanchthon was, however, not happy with the end result. In 1552, he started with a *Theologia germanica*, a German version of the *Loci Theologici*. In 1553, the book was published under the title *Heubtartikel Christlicher Lere* [*Chief articles of Christian teaching*] (cf. Schillings introduction to Melanchthon [1553] 2010:1–73).

6. Scholasticism (beginning in the 12th century) stressed the systematic articulation of Christian doctrine through dialectic and logical inference and deduction. In its critical examination and organisation of the statements of the ecclesiastical fathers, Scholasticism applied Aristotelian logic and Platonic categories to develop logically defensible systems of Christian theology.

His main theological arguments⁷

Theology is not philosophy

Melanchthon restructured and re-interpreted the *sacra doctrina* in his *Loci* from the perspective of the doctrine⁸ of justification (*regverdigsleer*). With this approach he ensured that Paul and his letters became the centre of theological interest. In his attempt to unify evangelic⁹ Christianity (*das evangelische Christentum*) or the Protestant movement, he left behind the idea of 'theology as such' and concentrated on the *sacra doctrina* or the *doctrina ecclesiastica* but then as *de doctrina consentire* (that on what the whole church could agree). A unified understanding of the gospel, as taken from Scripture, was also necessary for the critical discussions with the people of 'the old faith' (*den Altgläubigen*). In his aim of breaking away from tradition, he distanced himself from two influential theologians, namely John of Damascus and Peter Lombard. He ([1521] 2014:22) argued that both theologies are unusable (*inepte utrumque*) for sound biblical teaching, '[f]or John of Damascus is an excessive philosopher and Lombard preferred to collect human opinions rather than record the judgement of Scripture'.¹⁰ Although Melanchthon rejected scholastic theology, he did appreciate the theology of Augustin that emphasised the radical nature of sin and the importance of grace. According to Melanchthon, the shortcoming of scholastic theology has to do with its failure to concentrate on the essential aspects of Christian teaching – that which lie at the heart of Scripture.¹¹ Melanchthon ([1536] 1844) summarises the essence of the gospel, over against scholastic theology, in the following way:

The gospel is not philosophy neither law, but forgiveness of sins and proclamation of the reconciliation and eternal life for the sake of Christ. About these things, the human reason has no idea. (p. 690)¹²

By rejecting a philosophical approach¹³ to theological knowledge and the mere reciting of the insights of the church fathers as an adequate theological effort, he insists on a thorough study of the books of the Bible.

The Word as the basis of evangelic¹⁴ teaching

One has to rely on the Holy Scriptures for knowledge about the gospel, and the gospel has to do with what Jesus Christ

7. There is only space here for a selection of his arguments. For a more comprehensive overview, look at Bayer (1994:127–155), Hauschild (1999:316–324) and Axt-Piscalar (2013:95–107).

8. In the Germanic languages, one distinguishes between faith (*geloof*), teaching (*leer*) and doctrine (*dogma*). The English language seldom distinguishes between 'teaching' and 'dogma'. Often when we refer to 'doctrine', we would rather have used *leer* (Afrikaans) or *Lehre* (German).

9. We do not refer to the charismatic or evangelical movement, but to the 'Protestant' movement that brought Paul back into the heart of theology.

10. *Nimium enim philosophatur Damascenus, Longobardus congerere hominum opiniones quam scripturae sententiam referre maluit* (Melanchthon [1521] 1997:18).

11. Melanchthon [1521] 1997:14) talks about the *forma christianismi* the 'Wesensgestalt des Christentums' / 'wesensgaard van die Christendom'.

12. *Evangelium non est philosophia aut lex, sed est remissio peccatorum et promissio reconciliationis et vitae aeternae propter Christum, de quibus rebus nihil potest humana ratio per se suspicari.*

13. Melanchthon's rejection of the philosophical approach to theology has inter alia to do with his conviction that the doctrine of justification by faith cannot be explained by philosophical arguments (cf. [1524] 2012a:142).

14. 'Evangelic' theology is the translation of the German 'evangelische Theologie'. This is not 'evangelical' theology, meaning charismatic theology. One could also use the words 'Protestant theology' or 'Reformation theology' (*Reformatoerise teologie*),

has done for us. Only from Scripture can one get true knowledge about God and man. Because of sin, natural man, cannot know God as God wants to be known. Only Scripture, through the working of the Holy Spirit, reveals the true nature of God. Only through Scripture we could discover the true nature of man and God. Theology, therefore, has to read and study Scripture – the primary task of the church. By carefully reading, studying and explaining the content of the Bible, Melanchthon ([1521] 2014) claims that he could present (in his *Loci Communes*):

... the chief topics of Christian doctrine, so that the youth may know what they should especially look for in the Scriptures and so that they may realize how obscenely those have strayed in all things theological who have handed down to us Aristotelian sophistries instead of the teaching of Christ. (p. 20)¹⁵

Melanchthon also argues the same point the other way around. According to him, people would eagerly read and study the Bible when they know what the main points are – those that make up the essence of Christianity. When people already know what the important issues of the Bible are, they would read the Bible with greater understanding. But again, these main points could only be found in the Bible.¹⁶ In the first edition of his *Loci* in 1521, he ([1521] 2014) listed the following themes as the main aspects of biblical teaching:

God, His unity, His Trinity, Creation, Man, Human Powers, Sin, The Fruits of Sin, Vices, Punishments, The Law, The Promises, Renewal through Christ, Grace, The Fruits of Grace, Faith, Hope, Love, Predestination, The Sacramental Signs, Human Estates, Magistrates, Bishops, Damnation, Blessedness. (p. 23)¹⁷

The reason why we read the Bible has to do with our search of knowledge of God. Certainty about God cannot be achieved through philosophy or reason, but only through God's self-revelation that is recorded in Scripture. Melanchthon ([1559] 2011) says:

For the teaching of the church is not derived or drawn from demonstrations [*philosophy*], but from those statements which God has given to the human race in sure and clear testimonies through which in His great kindness He has revealed Himself and His will ... yet we know that the doctrine given to the church by God is certain ... but the cause of this certainty is the revelation of God, who is truthful. (pp. 6–7)

The aim of Christian teaching (or theology) is to thoroughly verse all Christians in divine Scripture (*'christianos omnes in solis divinis literis liberrime versari'* ([1521] 1997:14) so that all of them, as free and educated human beings, could for

.....
(footnote 14 continues...)

but these words are products of later generations. I, therefore, want to stick to the terminology used by Melanchthon himself.

15. *'Porro, quod ad argumenti summam attinet, indicantur hic christianae disciplinae praecipui loci, ut intelligat iuventus, et quae sint in scripturis potissimum requirenda et quam foede hallucinati sint ubique in re theologica, qui nobis pro Christi doctrina Aristotelicas argutias prodidere'* (Melanchthon [1521] 1997:12).

16. *'Fallitur, quisquis aliunde christianismi formam petit qua me scriptura canonica'* ['Whoever seeks the nature of Christianity from a source other than canonical Scripture deceives himself'] (Melanchthon [1521] 1997:14, [1521] 2014:21).

17. *'Deus, Unus, Trinus, Creatio, Homo, Hominis vires, Peccatum, Fructus peccati, Vitia, Poenae, Lex, Promissiones, Instauratio per Christum, Gratia, Gratia fructus, Fides, Spes, Caritas, Praedestinatio, Signa sacramentalis, Hominum status, Magistratus, Episcopi, Condemnatio, Beatitudo'* (Melanchthon [1521] 1997:18).

themselves, discover the knowledge about Christ (*'christiana cognitio'*) ([1521] 1997:22). To know (*notitia*) about Christ is, however, one aspect of faith. According to Melanchthon one should also assent (*assensus*) to God's way with Christ and to trust (*fiducia*) him with your whole life (cf. Axt-Piscalar 2013:101). In this article, we can concentrate on one aspect of faith, namely, what does it mean to 'know Christ'?

Knowing Christ is to know his benefits

Melanchthon's theology could be summarised in one short sentence, namely '... to know Christ is to know his benefits'¹⁸ ([1521] 2014:24). To understand this sentence, it is, however, necessary to read this longer quotation from his *Loci* ([1521] 2014):

For through these topics Christ is properly known, if it is true that 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 knowing historical facts about him? Or is it enough for a doctor to know the shapes, colours, and features of herbs, no matter that he does not know their inherent power? Just so, we must come to know Christ, who has been given to us as our remedy, and to use a scriptural word, our salvific remedy, in some way other than that which the Scholastics urge. This, finally is Christian knowledge – to know what the Law demands, where to find the power to fulfil 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. (pp. 24–25)¹⁹

The 'benefits of Christ' only make sense after listening to the expectations set by God's law. The 'gospel' can therefore never be without the 'law'. Melanchthon, by following Luther, teaches that the gospel is not law and that the law is not the gospel. The distinction between law and gospel, in spite of the fact that they should not be totally separated, is one of Melanchthon's important contributions to Reformation theology.

Distinction between law and gospel

Melanchthon, as 'Lutheran theologian', distinguishes clearly between law and gospel. Law is not gospel, and the gospel is not a law. What is the law, according to Melanchthon? He ([1559] 2011a:88) says: 'The law is a teaching given by God, which directs what we are to be like, what we are to do, what we must omit'. The law requires perfect obedience towards

18. *'hoc est Christum cognoscere beneficia eius cognoscere'* ([1521] 1997:220). In his lecture on Paul in 1520, he has given a more comprehensive formulation: '*Christum novisse ... est ... beneficium complecti, quo per ipsum coelestis pater in universum terrarum orbem effudit*' ['To know Christ ... is to embrace his benefits that the heavenly Father has poured out on the whole earth']. Melanchthon found the idea in Luther's Heidelberg Disputation of 1518: '*In Christo crucifix est vera theologia et cognitio Dei*' [In the crucified Christ is true theology and knowledge of God to be found] (footnote 27 of Pöhlmann in [1521] 1997:22).

19. His original words ([1521] 1997): *Nam ex his proprie Christum cognoscitur, siquidem hoc est Christum cognoscere beneficia eius cognoscere, non quod isti docent, eius naturas, modos incarnationis contueri. Ni scias, in quem usum carnem induerit et cruci affixus sit Christus, quid proderit eius historiam novisse? An vero medico satis est novisse herbarum figuras, colores, liniamenta, vimscire nativam nihil refert? Ita Christum, qui nobis remedii et, ut scripturae verbo utar, salutaris, vice donatus est, oportet alio quodam modo cognoscimus, quam exhibent scholastici. Haec demum christiana cognitio est scire quid lex poscat, unde faciendae legis vim, unde peccati gratiam petas, quomodo labescentem animum adversus daemones, carnem et mundum erigas, quomodo afflictam conscientiam consoleris* (pp. 22–24).

God, because people demonstrate their love towards God by obeying his law. People, however, are sinners and for that reason they fear the judgement of God. It is at this point that the gospel becomes important. Melanchthon ([1521] 2014) says:

Just as the Law is that by which correct living is commanded and sin is revealed, so the Gospel is the promise of God's grace or mercy, that is, the forgiveness of sin and the testimony of God's kindness toward us. By this testimony our souls are assured of God's kindness. By it, we believe that all our guilt has been pardoned, we are strengthened to love and praise God, to be happy and to rejoice in him ... (p. 92)²⁰

By distinguishing between law and gospel, Melanchthon prevents Christian faith falling into moralism. Self-evidently this is not all Melanchthon has to say about the 'law'. He made a substantial contribution in explaining the three functions of the law (cf. [1521] 2014:61–89, [1559] 2011a:88–137). This is a topic for another article.

Melanchthon on Christian prayer

Philipp Melanchthon is known as the 'dogmatist of the Reformation', 'thinker of the Reformation', 'theologian of the confession', 'teacher of Germany' (*praeceptor Germaniae*) and even as 'teacher of Europe' (*praeceptor Europae*) (Jung 2010a:148). One title is however not well-known, namely 'theologian of prayer'. Jung (2010a:102) is therefore correct by describing him as 'the theologian of passionate and learned piety'. The word 'piety' (*Frömmigkeit*) refers especially to prayer. Melanchthon has written thousands of prayers that have been preserved; according to Treu (2016:30), it is more than 5000. Ten thousand letters written by Melanchthon have been preserved. In most of the letters a prayer, directed to the recipient of the letter, is taken up (Jung 2010a:104). His academic writings are also often littered with long prayers. The older he became, the longer and more abstruse the prayers became. Whether he worked on a lecture, an article or church order, he attached a newly written prayer to it. The reason: He believed that academic work is closely knitted together with a life of orderly prayer. It was especially 1 Thessalonians 5:17 that convinced him to combine prayer with academic writing.

Melanchthon was also a gifted poet. He wrote prayers in Latin and Greek for the learned inner-circle (cf. [1560] 2011c for some examples). He was of the opinion that one could teach students these languages by teaching them to pray in Latin and Greek. Many of his longer prayers (in prose-style) remained known (at least in academic circles) because they were originally written for church orders. His aim was to constantly remind office-bearers that church discipline is in the deepest sense of the word discipline in prayer practices (Jung 2010b:105).

Many of Melanchthon's longer prayers look like pieces of 'praying dogmatics' (Jung 2010b:106). He wanted to fill prayers

20. Melanchthon ([1521] 1997) states: *Sicut lex est, qua recta mandantur, qua peccatum ostenditur, ita evangelium est promissio gratiae seu misericordiae dei adeoque condonatio peccati et testimonium benevolentiae dei erga nos, quo testimonio certi animi nostri de benevolentia dei credant sibi condonatum omnem culpam et erecti ament, laudent deum, exilarentur et exultent in deo* (p. 162)

with dogmatic content – just as he wanted dogmatics to sound like prayer. He was convinced that the two central confessions of the church, the trinity and the two natures of Christ, could best be taught through prayers. In spite of this, his prayers are not primarily intended to be teaching documents, but to praise and invoke God in *certainty*. A comprehensive exposition of Melanchthon's understanding of prayer is found in his later works, namely a treatise on prayer [1552] (2011b), the German version ([1553] 2010:418–425), as well as the final Latin version of his *Loci Theologici* ([1559] 1856:147–160 = [1559] 2011:371–400) under the heading '*De invocatione Dei, seu de precatione*' ['The invocation of God, or prayer'].

In the last Latin version of his *Loci Theologici*, Melanchthon ([1559] 1856:147–148 = [1559] 2011a:371), calls prayer the 'highest of all virtues' (*mirum est de hac virtute omnium summa*). In spite of this, not many books have been written about this virtue. In the few publications on prayer to his disposal, not many dealt with the theme from the perspective of the 'doctrine of faith' (*doctrinam de Fide*). They also did not distinguish clearly between the 'promise of grace' (*promissionis gratiae*) and the 'promise of physical goods' (*promissionis bonorum corporaliu*), and therefore missed the central arguments of the biblical message. Before starting with his exposition, he ([1559] 1856:148 = [1559] 2011:371) makes the following strong statement: 'But invocation belongs only to the church, and indeed is the chief bastion of the church' (*Sed invocatio tantum est Ecclesiae et quidem praecipuus est Ecclesiae murus*). With this statement he claims that prayer is the subject-matter of the church – the church that teaches the gospel according to the biblical witness.

Melanchthon distinguishes between two kinds of prayers: (1) When something is asked from God the words petition (*petitio*) or prayer (*oratio*) could be used. (2) The second aspect of prayer has to do with thanksgiving (*Danksagung*). The important question for Melanchthon is what makes a prayer Christian? – because a Christian prayer differs from the prayers of Gentiles (*Ethnicam*), Mohammedans (*Mohameticam*) and Jews (*Judaicam*)? He ([1559] 1856:148 = [1559] 2011a:372–373) recognises two distinctions: (1) The first distinction has to do with the understanding of God. Christians pray to the Father of Jesus Christ who has revealed himself in the giving of his Word. (2) The second distinction has to do with the fact that the Father of Christ listens to and answers prayers. Melanchthon refers to Jupiter who does not listen to prayers and does not provide anything to anyone. Christian prayer is directed to the 'God of mercy' and his will is revealed in the Mediator, his Son, and this perspective sets Christian prayer apart from the prayers of other religions and philosophies. After showing the distinctions, Melanchthon ([1559] 2011a:273–390) explains the 'doctrine of invocation' ['*doctrinam invocatione*'] in five points.

Firstly: One should only invoke the Father of Jesus Christ. Christ is our Mediator and the Word of God. Through him alone²¹ should God be approached in prayer. Only by reading

21. Melanchthon ([1558] 2012b:249–261) totally rejects the idea that the saints could act as mediators between people and God.

his Word could one compile the reasons why one should be eager to approach God through his Son:

Secondly: There is the precept regarding invocation. It is a sin not to render worship to God, not to seek help from him and not to give thanks to him for his benefits. He demands us to invoke him. In this sense, invocation is the work of the Second Commandment.

Thirdly: One should now consider the promises relating to invocation. The first promise relates to the remission of sins. By trusting this promise, one should also trust his promises concerning physical blessings. The God of mercy and forgiveness is also the God of our earthly well-being.

Fourthly: In our invocation, faith must be added. For the promises are given in order that faith may be kindled. In faith one should, firstly, ask for all the spiritual blessings, namely remission of sins, deliverance from godlessness and eternal death. Secondly, one should also ask for physical benefits. In this regard, three things should be remembered: (1) God is truly giver of these benefits, (2) they do not come to us by mere accident, and (3) they are not produced by only by human diligence. Melanchthon ([1559] 2011a) concludes by saying:

Therefore, in order that we may understand that these things are divinely bestowed, God wills that we ask of Him such things as our food, protection peace, tranquillity, success in the conduct of our calling, and good health. Second, we must believe that God, even if He wills that the church be in subjection under the cross, yet it shall not be destroyed ... Third, we must believe that God wills in our physical requests that faith in our reconciliation be exercised and increased. (p. 377)

Fifthly: Prayer is a sign that God is alive and busy with people. By praying to God through Christ, Christians set themselves apart from the philosophers. According to the Epicureans his name is an empty thing, and according to the Stoics it is tied to secondary causes. In the light of this, Melanchthon ([1559] 2011a) then makes the following remark:

But with this knowledge, they are not moved to love God because they do not seek any blessings from Him. Therefore prayer must be sure of the benefit in order that we may acknowledge God as not only being good in Himself but also being a benefit to us. (p. 382)²²

Melanchthon knows that most people do not know how to pray and what to pray about. He therefore concludes with an exposition of the Lord's Prayer. We do not have space to follow his arguments; we can instead look at his prayer with the content of the Lord's Prayer.

Praying an exposition of the Lord's Prayer

It has been stated above that Melanchthon wrote thousands of prayers. He (Jung 2010b:86–87) even wrote a prayer in 1527 in the form of an exposition of the Lord's Prayer. This

22. *Sed hac sua cogitatione non accenduntur ad amorem Dei, quia beneficia ab eo nulla petunt. Sit igitur petitio certi beneficii, ut agnoscamus Deum non solum sibi bonum esse, sed etiam erga nos beneficium*' ([1559] 1856:152).

prayer is therefore a summary in a nutshell²³ of his longer expositions of the Lord's Prayer in the various editions of his *Loci* (cf. [1553] 2010:426–427; [1559] 2011a:390–396):

*Our Father in heaven*²⁴

Oh, almighty, merciful and good Father,
who, on our behalf, is around and near us;
You create, keep and protect us!

Hallowed be your name

May your name be correctly known,
by correct teaching and faith,
and in this way respected and honoured.

Your kingdom come

Govern us by your Holy Spirit.
When we are left alone by you,
we fall into sin, humiliation and unhappiness.
It is written in John 15:5: *Without me you could do nothing.*

Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven

We want life to always be according to our will,
that is – a life without a cross.
Bur, Lord God, push your will through in our lives,
and give us obedience and patience.

Give us today our daily bread

O Lord, care for the body, give us food,
cleverness, a good testimonial, health,
and all that the body needs, as you promised us in Matthew 6:33:
Seek first the kingdom, and all these things will be given to you.

And lead us not into temptation

Don't let us fall when we are tempted,
because the devil certainly wants to destroy us,
as we read in 1 Peter 5:8 that he wants to destroy us like a wild lion.
We cannot protect ourselves against him. Therefore we pray:
Lord protect us!

But deliver us from the evil one

Liberate us from all kinds of anguishes and troubles,
and especially: Save us from death!

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23. This prayer is unfortunately without an exposition of the 5th petition. In the Latin version of his *Loci*, he gave a short exposition of this petition. I quote from the English translation ([1559] 2011a): For since Christ Himself commands us to seek remission, there is surely no doubt that He will grant it ... The words which are added here, "as we forgive those who trespass against us", instruct us about repentance, and that we should not continue in sins against conscience ... All men who cannot call upon God since they continue in sins contrary to conscience are in these great miseries and dangers. Therefore, let us rouse ourselves to repentance and let us amend our lives' (p. 393).

24. This is my translation of the German text. I follow the translation of the New International Version (Bible Society of South Africa [1978] 1995).

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