

Luther and Melancthon

by Dr. Jack L. Arnold

Reformation Men and Theology, Lesson 5 of 11

I. LUTHER'S THEOLOGY

- A. **The Bible:** Luther had great convictions about Christianity and they were founded upon the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice. Luther, being raised in the Roman Church, was never able to shed completely his background. Some ignorance and superstition can be seen in his theology.
- B. **Justification:** Luther brought back the concept of justification by faith alone and opposed any works in salvation, for he believed that salvation was completely and totally of God.
- C. **Grace:** Luther was very strong on sovereign grace in salvation, and taught the doctrines of unconditional election and predestination with power. Luther learned the doctrines of grace from the Bible and from his own experience.
- D. **Priesthood:** Luther believed in the universal priesthood of all believers and rejected the Roman Church and its ecclesiastical priesthood.
- E. **Lord's Table:** He believed in the sacrament of the Lord's Table. Luther rejected the idea of transubstantiation (actual body and blood of Christ in the elements) and held to consubstantiation. He believed that Christ was in the elements (in, under and above), but did not believe that a miracle took place so that the bread and wine actually became the blood and body of Christ.
- F. **Government:** Luther was not very interested in what the Bible taught on church government, and adopted a form that was expedient for his own situation. Lutheranism was for all practical purposes a modified congregational form of government, and the leaders were called superintendents. But the whole of the Lutheran church was run by the state. Luther, to a great extent, adopted the principle that the state should be above the church. He did this largely under the influences of circumstances because he needed the state to make the Reformation in Germany a success. His own personal safety he owed, humanly speaking, entirely to the protection of his prince, the Elector of Saxony. It was possible for the Protestant Church to exist only in those German lands which were ruled by leaders who had accepted Protestantism. Due to these circumstances, Luther gave these Protestant princes a great deal of authority in the affairs of the church.
- G. **Baptism:** Luther practiced infant baptism even to the point of thinking this had something to do with salvation. He also used the mode of sprinkling for adult converts to Christianity.

II. ANOTHER SIDE OF LUTHER

- A. His Religious Life: He was a man of deep devotion and had a heart for God. His passion for Christ can be seen in the beautiful songs he wrote, the most famous being, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” He was a man of courage and strong conviction. Nothing could crush this man. God knew his man, he had made him, he had prepared him, and he had filled him with his Spirit. Luther was God’s man for the hour. He came under frequent attacks by the devil, and tradition tells us that once he threw an inkwell at the devil.
- B. His Personal Life: Sometimes we forget that great men are also human and fallible. Genius, brilliant brain that he was, he was subject to terrible bouts of depression. Not only did he suffer from attacks of depression, he was a notorious hypochondriac. Also, he was often crude and tactless in his dealings with men. People either loved him or hated him, but this is true of many great leaders.
- C. His Marriage: Luther had to struggle with the idea of marriage, for he had taken an oath of celibacy. He soon realized, however, that this was not scriptural. On June 13, 1525, Luther received a very special helper, for on that day he married Catherine von Bora. She had been a nun.
- D. His Mistakes and Weaknesses:
 - 1. Luther had been criticized, and rightly so, for his mistakes. He did not go far enough in his reform. He retained the crucifix, candles and other elements of Romanism.
 - 2. He also placed the church under the control of civil authority, which led to corruption.
 - 3. He is most criticized because he failed to cooperate with the Swiss Reformers and thus to present a solid block of Protestants against Catholic power in Europe. At Marburg, the Swiss Reformers drew up fifteen points of doctrine on which they wanted the German Reformers to agree. Luther agreed on fourteen points wholeheartedly, but disagreed on the single issue of the sacrament of the Lord’s Table. Zwingli, a Swiss Reformer, held that the elements were symbols and there was nothing mystical in the elements at all. Luther disagreed and the Reformation stayed a splintered movement, losing much of its effectiveness.

III. MELANCHTHON, LUTHER’S COMPANION IN THE GOSPEL

- A. His Person: Phillip Melancthon was Luther’s co-laborer, companion and successor in the German Reformation. He was the mildest of the Reformers, but a genius. He was a superior Greek scholar who studied under the famed Catholic humanist Erasmus. A Catholic historian said of Melancthon, “The most brilliant phenomenon which proceeded from the Erasmian school,

equal to his master Erasmus in many respects, superior to him in others.” He became the professor of ancient languages at the University of Wittenberg, and this is where he met Luther. Melanchthon had a quiet conversion, and his moral and religious character were above suspicion. He was a master of ancient languages.

“He taught two or three times every day a variety of topics, including ethics, Greek and Hebrew grammar; he explained Homer, Plato, Plutarch, Titus, Matthew, Romans, the Psalms. In the later period of his life, he devoted himself exclusive to sacred learning” (Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*).

Melanchthon was never seminary trained or ordained to the ministry. He never ascended the pulpit, but he did much private teaching of the Bible outside the classroom.

- B. His Contrast With Luther: There was great love between these two men. Melanchthon was over-awed with Luther’s courage for God, and Luther sat at Melanchthon’s feet and learned Greek. Melanchthon said he would “rather die than be separated from Luther,” and, “Martin’s welfare is dearer to me than my own life.” He had great loyalty to Martin Luther. This relationship was somewhat impaired in the later years of Luther because of doctrinal differences, but the relationship was never destroyed. However, there was a great contrast in personalities. Luther was a man of war. Melanchthon a man of peace; he was gentle, pious and conscientious. These two complemented one another, but Luther was the stronger of the two. Luther animated Melanchthon; Melanchthon moderated Luther. Luther said of Melanchthon,

“I am rough, boisterous, stormy, and altogether warlike. I am born to fight against innumerable monsters and devils. I must remove stumps and stones, cut away thistles and thorns, and clear the wild forests; but Master Philippus comes along softly and gently, sowing and watering with joy, according to the gifts God has abundantly bestowed upon him” (Schaff).

Melanchthon’s strength was also his weakness. He was a man of moderation and amiability, and was always seeking compromise and peace as far as his honest conviction would allow. He opposed the controversies among the Christians of the Reformation, and grieved over the “fury of theologians.” Sometimes he went too far in his compromise.

- C. His Importance: Melanchthon was the founder of systematized German theology, not Luther, and he was the primary author of the Augsburg Confession. Melanchthon was a great complement to Luther.

“Had Luther been without Melanchthon, the torment might have overflowed its banks; when Melanchthon missed Luther, he hesitated and yielded, even when he ought not to have yielded” (D’aubigne).

“Without Luther the Reformation would never have taken hold of the common people: without Melanchthon it would never have succeeded among the scholars of Germany. Without Luther, Melanchthon would have become a second Erasmus, though with a profounder interest in religion; and the Reformation would have resulted in a liberal theological school, instead of giving birth to a Church. However much the humble and unostentatious labors and merits of Melanchthon are overshadowed by the more striking and brilliant deeds of the heroic Luther, they were, in their own way, quite as useful and indispensable” (Schaff).

D. His Theology

1. In his later years, Melanchthon modified his position on predestination and free will. In the beginning he held to the convictions of Luther, but later changed. He made this change to appease Rome and to find common ground with the papal system, for Rome was violently opposed to election and predestination. Melanchthon had many conferences with Reformed and Roman divines, and wanted peace at all costs. It was the influence of Erasmus, the humanist, that caused him to abandon what he thought was fatalistic theology. He taught a cooperation (synergism) of the divine and human wills in the work of conversion. He went back to semi-Pelagianism and laid the ground for Arminianism in Lutheran theology. He believed that God had to take the initiative to convict of sin, but man could accept or reject divine grace. Thus he said, “God draws the willing” to salvation. He would not, however, condemn the doctrines of unconditional election, predestination and total depravity of the human will because Luther had always held to these so tenaciously. He tolerated Augustinianism as a theological opinion, but rejected it himself. The Augsburg Confession, which is the basis for all Lutheran theology, is a product of Melanchthon and not of Luther.
2. Melanchthon also gave up the corporal presence of Christ in the elements of the Lord’s Table (consubstantiation) for a spiritually real presence view. This was to compromise with Calvin who held this position. Melanchthon never accepted the Zwinglian view of a mere commemoration.
3. Melanchthon never gave up the teaching of justification by faith in Christ alone for salvation, but he added a form of works to justification to prove one’s salvation. He reacted to the antinomian (against law) tendencies of some Lutherans who felt belief in the gospel was enough and a changed life was optional.
4. Melanchthon was very willing to compromise with Rome. He was willing to admit a certain supremacy of the Pope, providing he would tolerate the free preaching of the gospel.

IV. GERMANY AFTER THE DEATH OF LUTHER

- A. After Luther's death in 1546, the leadership of the German Reformation fell into the hands of Melanchthon. He is often called the teacher of Germany, for he was interested in establishing Christian education at the primary and secondary level. He did all he could to train the German clergy. He was a scholar, but not the leader or thinker that Luther was. Melanchthon was not a man of passion or conviction like Martin Luther, but he was a tremendous organizer.
- B. Schmalkald League: Roman Catholics and Protestants lived side by side in Germany, and this led to great unrest. The first Diet of Speier (1526), called to solve this problem, came up with a toleration act — each state in Germany was to be allowed to hold the religion of its ruling prince. The second Diet of Speier (1529) concluded that Protestant States must stay Protestant with no Roman Catholic teaching and that Roman states should stay Catholic with no Protestant teaching at all. The evangelical minority in the Diet protested against the finding, because no Diet had the right to bind the consciences of men in matters of religion. Because of their protest, they were called "Protestants" (the origin of the term). Thus, the Catholics formed the Catholic League and the Protestants formed the Schmalkald League, which was a necessity for protection against the Catholics who were out to destroy Protestantism in Germany. This was the time when Lutheranism needed the help of the Swiss Reformers and Luther could not agree with one point out of fifteen. War broke out in 1546, the year Luther died. After initial victories by the Catholics, the Protestants finally pushed the imperial forces out of Germany. The Diet of Augsburg in 1555 ended the struggle and provided for a recognition of Catholicism and Lutheranism as legal religions in Germany.
- C. Spread of Lutheranism: Lutheranism spread from Germany into Denmark, Norway and Sweden, and was eventually recognized as the state religion in these countries.