

MELANCHTHON'S APPROACH TO SCRIPTURE IN THE APOLOGY

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Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560) is the great enigma of the Lutheran Reformation. He is the author of two of the Lutheran confessions gathered in the *Book of Concord* of 1580. The presentation of his *Augsburg Confession* at the Diet of Augsburg on June 25, 1530, can be considered the birthday of the Lutheran Church. This confession served as a rallying standard for the evangelical territories and subsequently gave official status to the Lutheran Church in Europe. On the other hand, Melanchthon's later revisions of the Augsburg Confession (known as the *Variata*) gave rise to theological controversies after Luther's death. Because of these controversies confessional Lutherans to this day make a point of subscribing to the *ungeänderte Augsburgerische Konfession* (the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession* or U.A.C.). Melanchthon's doctrinal vacillations spawned other controversies which were not settled until the writing of the *Formula of Concord* nearly two decades after his death.

Melanchthon's relationship to Luther is also an enigma. He and Luther were not only colleagues at the University of Wittenberg but also close friends. They admired each other even though they were quite different in personality, temperament, education, and background.¹ Melanchthon was trained as a humanist. In fact, he was the only humanist with whom Luther ever really came to terms.² While Luther broke sharply with Erasmus, Melanchthon remained a friend of Erasmus and continued an unbroken correspondence with him.³ Luther reacted sharply to doctrinal deviation or dangerous tendencies in others, but seemed to ignore Melanchthon's vacillations which were coming to the fore by the early 1540s.

¹John R. Schneider, *Philip Melanchthon's Rhetorical Construal of Biblical Authority: Oration Sacra*. (Queenston, Ontario: The Edwin Mellon Press, 1990) p. 65-66. Schneider writes, "The two men were as dissimilar as night and day in disposition, temperament, and style. Luther was still very much a medieval 'Doctor' and out of the methodological tradition, and he was volatile, as capable of extreme rage as of tenderest sentiments, as aesthetically gifted as he was honed of mind. Philip, by way of contrast, was the classical pedagogue, a school master, as properly ordered as the world which he viewed through his humanism."

²Franz Hildebrandt, *Melanchthon: Alien or Ally?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1946) p. xii.

³*Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

Since Melanchthon was a humanist and Luther was not, some questions naturally come to mind. Is Melanchthon's humanism evident in his approach to Scripture? If it is evident, is it hostile to Luther's approach? Or has Melanchthon modified his humanism in a way that serves the Lutheran Reformation?

In an attempt to answer the last question, this study will focus on Melanchthon's approach to Scripture in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*.⁴ There are three reasons for focusing on this one theological work. First of all it is a major work. It is nearly seven times the length of the *Augsburg Confession*. Secondly, it is an important work. The *Apology* not only served as the official defense of the *Augsburg Confession*, it also received confessional status itself and was included in the Lutheran *Book of Concord* in 1580. Finally, the *Apology* has not received the scholarly attention that it deserves.

Early Life and Education

Philipp Melanchthon was born on February 16, 1497, to George and Barbara Schwarzerd. According to the humanist custom of the day Philipp later changed his name to Melanchthon, the Greek equivalent of his German name. Philipp's father was an armament maker in the service of Philipp, Prince of Baden. When his father died in 1508, Melanchthon's mother took him and his four siblings to live with her parents. Philipp's maternal grandmother was a sister of the great Hebraist John Reuchlin. Reuchlin made the education of Melanchthon and his brother George his personal responsibility.⁵

In 1509 Melanchthon entered the University of Heidelberg at the age of twelve. He stayed in the home of Pallas Spangel, a professor of theology, and studied philosophy, astronomy, rhetoric, and Greek. His ability in the latter was recognized by his fellow students who called him "the Greek." During his days at Heidelberg, he even wrote a Greek

⁴We will be using the text of the *Apology* contained in the *Concordia Triglotta*, ed. by F. Bente (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1921). The Latin text in the *Concordia Triglotta* is the text known as the *Editio Princeps* published by Melanchthon in April 1531 (the quarto edition). Melanchthon issued a slightly shorter version in September 1531 (octavo edition). Justus Jonas translated this edition into German. The shorter octavo edition was the standard edition until 1584. After that the quarto edition became standard (see Kolb-Wengert, *The Book of Concord* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000] p. 107-109). The *Concordia Triglotta* includes the Latin of the quarto edition, the German translation by Luther's colleague Justus Jonas, and an English translation in parallel columns. Citations to the *Apology* will be according to the article and paragraph number of the Latin version contained in the *Triglotta*. Kolb-Wengert uses the shorter octavo edition. There are no significant differences between the two. Nevertheless the numbering of the articles and paragraphs in the *Triglotta* will not always correspond to the article and paragraph numbers in other English editions.

⁵Schneider, *op. cit.*, p. 13-14.

grammar which was later published. He was awarded the Bachelor of Arts in 1511.⁶ Because of his age he was not admitted to the master's program at Heidelberg. He subsequently transferred to the University of Tuebingen where "a more lively academic life prevailed."⁷

Melanchthon responded well to the academic life at Tuebingen and imbibed the spirit of humanism which was beginning to pervade the university. He studied dialectics, rhetoric, jurisprudence, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and theology. He received his Master of Arts in 1514 and began lecturing on various Latin authors at the age of seventeen.⁸ His linguistic ability and classical background are evident particularly in his commentaries on the Pauline letters.⁹

Melanchthon's fame as a scholar grew. Erasmus took note of him early on. He wrote a glowing tribute to the young professor in 1516.¹⁰ It was only natural that Philipp's great-uncle Reuchlin would recommend him to Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony who was looking for a Greek teacher for his newly founded university in Wittenberg.

Melanchthon accepted Frederick's offer and arrived in Wittenberg in August of 1518. Philipp's inaugural speech was so impressive that he won over Luther who had recommended another candidate for the position.¹¹ In that speech he urged the study of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew so that the original sources could be studied and the classics and Christianity could be recovered.¹²

Historical Background and Setting of the Apology

Melanchthon soon became a close friend of Luther and a scholarly advocate of Luther's theology. His keen mind, his ability to summarize and organize complex thought, his linguistic abilities, and the clarity of his writing style won him Luther's praise and respect.¹³ When the

⁶G. A. Westerhaus, "Melanchthon's Doctrinal Compromises." *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* vol. 62, #4 (October 1965) p. 276-277.

⁷Robert Stupperich, *Melanchthon*, trans. by Robert H. Fischer (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1965) p. 27.

⁸Westerhaus, *op. cit.*, p. 277-278.

⁹His classical background led him to a "rhetorical approach" to the Pauline letters. See Timothy J. Wengert, "Philip Melanchthon's 1522 Annotations and the Lutheran Origins of Rhetorical Criticism," in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation*, ed. by Richard A. Muller & John L. Thompson (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996) p. 118-140. For a fuller treatment see Schneider, *op. cit.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 279.

¹¹Stupperich, *op. cit.*, p. 32-33.

¹²Clyde L. Manschreck, *Melanchthon, the Quiet Reformer*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1958) p. 23.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 88.

evangelicals (as they called themselves at this time) were summoned before Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg to give an account of the religious reforms in their lands, Melanchthon was selected as the author of their defense. Since Luther was still under the imperial ban, he had to remain at the Coburg in Saxony where he was under the protection of the Elector of Saxony. Elector John of Saxony and his theologians had originally planned a defense of the reform measures he had allowed in his territory. On their arrival in Augsburg it became evident that their defense would have to be a full confession of their faith. John Eck had published his *404 Propositions* which attempted to identify Luther and his colleagues with ancient and contemporary heretics. Eck unwittingly forced the evangelicals to write and present the confession which would become the foundation document for Lutheranism.¹⁴

Charles V asked the Roman Catholic theologians to give an official written response to the *Augsburg Confession*. After revising their document several times they presented the *Confutation Pontifica* or *Confutation* on August 3.¹⁵ The *Confutation* was presented under the emperor's name and read to the assembly, but the document was not published until 1573. The evangelicals were refused a copy unless they would agree to three conditions: (1) that they would not publish it, (2) that they would not reply to it, and (3) that they would accept its conclusions. Although they could not accept a copy under those conditions, some in the evangelical party had taken notes during its reading. A delegate from Nuremberg recorded the *Confutation* in shorthand and made a copy available to Melanchthon after the Diet of Augsburg closed.

Melanchthon was authorized by the evangelical rulers to draft a reply. They attempted to present this *Apology* or defense of their confession to the emperor on September 22, 1530. He refused to receive it and gave the evangelicals until April 15, 1531 to submit. Melanchthon continued to revise and expand the *Apology* on the trip back to Wittenberg and during the months which followed. He published the *Apology* under his own name together with an official edition of the *Augsburg Confession* in April of 1531. This was the Lutheran answer to the emperor's demand that they must accept the *Confutation* by April 15, 1531. Although the *Apology* was published under Melanchthon's sig-

¹⁴For the background of the Augsburg Confession see Willard D. Allbeck, *Studies in the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1968) p. 42-54; and F. Bente, "Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church," *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1921) p. 15-23.

¹⁵An English translation of the *Confutation* is included in the reprint of J. Michael Reu, *The Augsburg Confession: A Collection of Resources* (Fort Wayne, IN: Concordia Theological Press) p. 348-383, and in *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and James A. Nestigen (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001) p. 106-139.

nature alone, it soon gained confessional status among Lutherans. Already at a meeting in Schweinfurt in 1532 the Lutherans appealed to the *Apology* together with the *Augsburg Confession*. The theologians gathered at Smalcald in 1537 subscribed to it and it was included in the *Book of Concord* in 1580.¹⁶

Arrangement and Structure

The outline of the *Apology* follows the basic outline of the *Augsburg Confession* with the exception that Melanchthon combines like articles in the *Apology*. Those articles with which the *Confutation* expressed agreement are treated briefly. The articles which the *Confutation* rejected or raised objections to are treated in much greater length. For example, the article on justification is rather brief in the *Augsburg Confession* (although almost every article is presented in its relationship to justification). Fully one fourth to one third of the entire *Apology* is devoted to a discussion of justification by faith. Melanchthon answers the *Confutation* by addressing many of the passages of Scripture and the fathers which the *Confutation* used in an attempt to refute the *Augsburg Confession*. He also explains and supports the confession with many additional citations of Scripture. In the *Apology* everything springs from the Lutheran principles of law and gospel, sin and grace, faith and justification. The tone and language of the *Apology* are much sharper than the tone and language of the *Augsburg Confession*. Melanchthon's language, however, is always much more reserved than Luther's.

We will examine Melanchthon's approach to Scripture by looking at Melanchthon's understanding of the authorship and attributes of the Holy Scriptures, his guiding principles for understanding the Scriptures, and his attitude toward tradition and the church fathers.

Authorship and Attributes of Holy Scripture

Throughout the *Apology* it is evident that Melanchthon believes that God is the author of the Holy Scriptures. In fact, he often uses the terms Scripture and the Word of God interchangeably. In describing the spiritual depravity which is the result of original sin Melanchthon writes

Yet of these, Scripture everywhere admonishes us, and the prophets constantly complain, namely of carnal security, of the contempt of God, of hatred toward God, and of similar faults born with us. But after the scholastics mingled with Christian doctrine philosophy concerning the perfection of nature, and ascribed to

¹⁶For information on the historical background and subsequent acceptance of the *Apology* see Allbeck, p. 139-146, and Bente, p. 37-47.

free will and the acts springing therefrom more than was sufficient, and taught that men are justified before God by philosophic or civil righteousness, they could not see the inner uncleanness of the nature of men. For this cannot be judged except from the word of God, of which the scholastics in their discussions, do not frequently treat.¹⁷

Melanchthon does not set out to argue that the Holy Spirit is the author of the Scriptures. That was not a point of controversy in 1531. Melanchthon simply assumes the divine authorship of Scripture. He complains that the authors of the *Confutation* "have condemned several articles contrary to the manifest Scripture of the Holy Ghost."¹⁸ He writes, "Truly it is amazing that the adversaries are in no way moved by so many passages of Scripture, which clearly ascribe justification to faith, and indeed, deny it to works. Do they think that the same is repeated so often for no purpose? Do they think that these words fell inconsiderately from the Holy Ghost?"¹⁹

Since the Holy Spirit is the author of Scripture, Scripture alone determines doctrine and practice. Melanchthon always bases his argument on Scripture. He declares that he has shown that remission of sins for Christ's sake is received by faith alone "both from testimonies of Scripture, and arguments derived from Scripture."²⁰

Truths established by Scripture are binding by divine right and command. If something cannot be established by Scripture it is not binding on God's people. Against auricular confession the *Apology* states, "But in the enumeration of offenses in confession, we have said that it is not necessary by divine right."²¹ In private confession pastors are to pronounce absolution and not investigate secret sins or act as judges handing down sentence. "Therefore ministers in the church have the command to remit sin; they have not the command to investigate secret sins. And indeed, they absolve from those that

¹⁷Ap II, 12-13. In this context it should also be noted that Melanchthon is at odds with Erasmus and the humanists on original sin and free will. Taking note of specific wording in the German version of the *Augsburg Confession*, Melanchthon explains, "This passage testifies that we deny to those propagated according to carnal nature not only the acts, but also the power or gifts of producing fear and trust in God. For we say that those thus born have concupiscence, and cannot produce true fear and trust in God." Ap II, 3. "Although we concede to free will the liberty and power to perform the outward works of the law, yet we do not ascribe to free will these spiritual matters, namely, truly to fear God, truly to believe God, truly to be confident and hold that God regards us, hears us, forgives us, etc. These are the true works of the First Table, which the heart cannot render without the Holy Ghost." Ap XVIII, 73.

¹⁸Ap Preface, 9.

¹⁹Ap IV, 107-108.

²⁰Ap IV, 117.

²¹Ap VI, 5.

we do not remember; for which reason absolution, which is the voice of the Gospel remitting sins and consoling consciences, does not require judicial examination.”²² Celibacy is not to be exalted over marriage because marriage is sanctioned by Scripture. “In believers marriage is pure because it has been sanctified by the Word of God, *i.e.*, it is a matter that is permitted and approved by the Word of God as Scripture abundantly testifies.”²³ Without a statement of Scripture, a Christian cannot be sure of God’s will. “But as these services have no testimony of God’s Word, consciences must be in doubt as to whether they please God.”²⁴ “Since invocation [of the saints] does not have a testimony from God’s Word, it cannot be affirmed that the saints understand our invocation, or, even if they did understand it, that God approves it.”²⁵

Scripture constitutes a higher authority than the church. “The consensus of the prophets is assuredly to be judged as the consensus of the Church universal. We concede neither to the pope nor the church the power to make decrees against this consensus of the prophets.”²⁶ If bishops teach contrary to God’s Word, they are not to be listened to or obeyed.²⁷

Since the Holy Spirit is the author of the Scriptures, there is a basic unity in Scripture. Its teaching remains consistent throughout. The message of salvation in Christ is central. In respect to the promise of grace given in Christ he writes, “This promise is constantly repeated in the whole of Scripture, first having been delivered to Adam, afterwards to the patriarchs; then, still more clearly proclaimed by the prophets; lastly preached and set forth among the Jews by Christ, and disseminated over the entire world by the Apostles.”²⁸

Melanchthon’s use of Scripture in the *Apology* demonstrates his belief in the basic clarity of Scripture. He often cites passage after passage with little or no explanation or comment. He believes that the passages are so clear that their meaning ought to be obvious to all.²⁹ In a study of Melanchthon’s approach to Scripture this fact should not be overlooked. His use of Scripture may seem to be “proof-texting,” but

²²Ap VI, 7-8.

²³Ap XXIII, 28.

²⁴Ap XV, 17.

²⁵Ap XXI, 12.

²⁶Ap XII, 66.

²⁷Ap XXVIII, 20-21.

²⁸Ap XII, 53.

²⁹Ralph A. Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1983) p. 56-57. Bohlmann notes that this belief in the clarity of Scripture can be seen throughout the Lutheran Confessions.

in reality demonstrates his fundamental belief that the message and meaning of Scripture are clear.

Melanchthon repeatedly uses the word *clear* or *manifest* in his citations of Scripture. For instance, after quoting several passages he states, "These testimonies are so manifest that, to use the words of Augustine which he employed in this case, they do not need an acute understanding, but only an attentive hearer."³⁰ Melanchthon reproves his opponents, "They dare to affirm that the law of perpetual celibacy has been divinely revealed, although it is contrary to manifest testimonies of Scripture, which command that to avoid fornication, each one should have his own wife, 1 Cor 7:2; which likewise forbid to dissolve marriages that have been contracted; cf. Matt 5:32; 19: 6; 1 Cor 7:27."³¹

Melanchthon's high regard for Scripture can be seen in his understanding of the efficacy of Scripture. God reveals himself in his Word and calls people to faith through his Word. In fact, it is only through God's Word that God is apprehended and faith is created. He rejects the idea that the Holy Spirit will illumine people apart from the Word and the ministry of the gospel.

And it is of advantage, so far as can be done, to adorn the ministry of the Word with every kind of praise against fanatical men, who dream that the Holy Spirit is given not through the Word, but because of certain preparations of their own, if they sit unoccupied and silent in obscure places, waiting for illumination, as the Enthusiasts formerly taught, and the Anabaptists now teach.³²

Since faith is created through God's Word, it follows that justification also comes through the Word. Melanchthon writes,

But God cannot be treated with, cannot be apprehended except through the Word. Accordingly justification comes through the Word, just as Paul says, Rom 1:16: *The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth*. Likewise 10:17: *Faith cometh by hearing*. And a proof can be derived even from this that faith justifies, because, if justification occurs only through the Word, and the Word is apprehended only by faith, it follows that faith justifies.³³

Faith is created by the Holy Spirit working through God's Word. Since the Sacraments have God's Word and promise connected to them, they are also the means through which faith is created and sustained. The Sacraments are the visible Word.³⁴

³⁰Ap IV, 33.

³¹Ap XXIII, 63.

³²AP XIII, 13.

³³Ap IV, 67.

³⁴Ap XIII, 5.

The Sacraments are signs of God's will toward us, and not merely signs of men among each other; and they are right in defining that the Sacraments in the New Testament are signs of grace. And because in a sacrament there are two things, a sign and the Word, the Word, in the New Testament, is the promise of grace added. The promise of the New Testament is the promise of the remission of sins, as the text, Luke 22:19, says: *This is My body, which is given for you. This cup is the New Testament in My blood, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.* Therefore the Word offers the remission of sins. And a ceremony is, as it were, a picture or a seal, as Paul, Rom. 4:11, calls it, of the Word, making known the promise. Therefore just as the promise is useless unless it is received by faith, so a ceremony is useless unless such faith is added as is truly confident that the remission of sins is here offered. And this faith encourages contrite minds. And just as the Word has been given in order to excite this faith, so the Sacrament has been instituted in order that the outward appearance meeting the eyes might move the heart to believe. For through these, namely, through Word and Sacrament, the Holy Ghost works.³⁵

Melanchthon's understanding of the authorship and attributes of Scripture is reflected in his approach to Scripture and the principles he employs for understanding the message of Scripture.

Guiding Principles in Melanchthon's Approach to Scripture

Because the Bible is God's Word throughout it has a consistent message, a unity of purpose, and a basic clarity. Scripture, therefore, is its own interpreter.³⁶ Melanchthon assumed this principle in his approach to Scripture. For instance, he uses Ephesians 5:9 and Colossians 3:10 to help explain that man was made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27).³⁷ To explain and elaborate a passage from Romans on justification by faith he cites passages from Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, the Gospel of John, Acts, Habakkuk, and Isaiah.³⁸ Melanchthon does not choose the passages indiscriminately, but quotes passages that treat the same doctrine.

Since Scripture interprets Scripture one passage of Scripture can limit what would appear to be a general command in another.

They quote also Heb, 13:17: *Obey them that have the rule over you.* This passage requires obedience to the Gospel. For it does not establish a dominion apart from the Gospel. Neither should the

³⁵Ap XXIV, 69-70.

³⁶Bohlmann, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

³⁷Ap II, 18-20.

³⁸Ap IV, 88-101.

bishops frame traditions contrary to the Gospel, or interpret their traditions contrary to the Gospel. And when they do this, obedience is prohibited, according to Gal 1:9: *If any man preach any other gospel, let him be accursed.*

We make the same reply to Matt. 23:3: *Whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe,* because evidently a universal command is not given that we should receive all things, since Scripture elsewhere, Acts 5:29, bids us *obey God rather than men.* When, therefore, they teach wicked things, they are not to be heard.³⁹

In the same way Melanchthon explains James 2:24 (You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone) by quoting Paul. James “does not omit faith, or present love in preference to faith, but retains faith, so that in justification Christ may not be excluded as Propitiator! Just as Paul, when he treats of the sum of the Christian life, also includes faith and love, 1 Tim. 1:5: *The end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned.*”⁴⁰

Melanchthon complains because the opponents of the Augsburg Confession do not let Scripture interpret Scripture. Instead they quote selectively. “They cite passages concerning the Law and works, and omit passages concerning the promises.”⁴¹

Melanchthon saw the understanding of the relationship and distinction between law and gospel (promises) as important for a proper understanding of justification, the central teaching of Scripture. It helps to understand the relationship between faith and good works and the passages which speak of these things.⁴² This distinction is to be noted because law and gospel can be found throughout Scripture.

All Scripture ought to be distributed into these two topics (*loci*), the Law and the promises. For in some places it presents the Law, and in others the promise concerning Christ, namely, either when it promises that Christ will come, and offers, for His sake, the remission of sins, justification, and life eternal, or when, in the Gospel, Christ Himself, since He has appeared, promises the remission of sins, justification, and life eternal. Moreover, in this discussion, by Law we designate the Ten Commandments, wher-

³⁹Ap XXVIII, 20-21.

⁴⁰Ap III, 123-124.

⁴¹Ap III, 63.

⁴²Holston Fagerberg, *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions (1529-1537)*, trans. by Gene L. Lund (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972) p. 35-36. Fagerberg argues that Melanchthon did not intend the distinction between law and gospel to be a fundamental explanation of the interpretation of Scripture, but to provide a background for the presentation of justification. The law/gospel distinction provides the basic rule for clarifying the scriptural view concerning faith and good works.

ever they are read in the Scriptures. Of the ceremonies and judicial laws of Moses we say nothing at present.⁴³

When Melanchthon speaks of these two principal topics or *loci*, he is using terminology which comes from his background in humanism. The technical term *loci* appears to have come from Aristotle's τοποι, translated into Latin as *loci* by Cicero. The expression *loci communes* seems to mean basic beliefs or irreducible truths.⁴⁴ According to Schneider one finds the best explanation and use of the concept of *loci communes* in Erasmus.⁴⁵ Melanchthon used the *loci communes* approach to clarify and present biblical doctrine in an organized way. The use of *loci* appears to be a pedagogical device for Melanchthon who approached theology as a teacher rather than a preacher.⁴⁶

Before discussing the use Melanchthon makes of his law/gospel distinction in his approach to Scripture, it is necessary to understand his terms. When he speaks of the distinction between law and gospel he is using those terms in the narrow sense. Law means moral law which applies to all people of all time. It does not mean the civil or ceremonial law of Israel which applied only to that nation and for a limited time. He uses the term gospel in more than one way. He can use gospel in reference to the New Testament⁴⁷ or the four Gospels. He can even use it as a synonym for all of God's Word, including the law. For instance, he can write concerning the seeking of revenge, "The Gospel forbids private redress."⁴⁸ When contrasted with law, however, in his law/gospel distinction, he uses gospel its narrow sense or proper sense. As Melanchthon explains,

For since the promise cannot be received except by faith, the Gospel, which is properly the promise of remission of sins and of justification for Christ's sake, proclaims the righteousness of faith in Christ, which the Law does not teach. Nor is this the righteousness of the Law. For the Law requires of us our works and our perfection. But the Gospel freely offers, for Christ's sake, to us, who have been vanquished by sin and death, reconciliation, which is received not by works, but by faith alone. This faith brings to God,

⁴³Ap IV, 5-6.

⁴⁴Schneider, *op. cit.*, p. 72-74.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁴⁶Michael Rogness, *Philip Melanchthon: Reformer Without Honor*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969) p. 60. Markus Wriedt, "Between Angst and Confidence: Melanchthon as a Man of the Sixteenth Century," *Concordia Journal*, vol. 23, #4 (October 1997) p. 282-284. Melanchthon was never ordained. He was an educator who was at his best when developing curricula, writing textbooks, organizing schools, and reforming universities.

⁴⁷Ap IV, 5.

⁴⁸Ap XVI, 59.

not confidence in one's own merits, but only confidence in the promise, or the mercy promised in Christ.⁴⁹

It is necessary to recognize that law and gospel have different functions in Scripture. The law convicts. That is its purpose. It "always accuses and terrifies consciences."⁵⁰ The gospel comforts and quickens. Both doctrines are necessary to bring a person to true repentance.

But He [God] terrifies, he says, for this reason, namely, that there may be a place for consolation and quickening, because hearts that are secure and do not feel the wrath of God loathe consolation. In this manner Scripture is accustomed to join these two, the terrors and the consolation, in order to teach that in repentance there are these chief members, *contrition, and faith that consoles and justifies*. Neither do we see how the nature of repentance can be presented more clearly and simply.

For the two chief works of God in men are these, to terrify, and to justify and quicken those who have been terrified. Into these two works all Scripture has been distributed. The one part is the *Law*, which shows, reprovcs, and condemns sins. The other part is the *Gospel*, i.e., the promise of grace bestowed in Christ.⁵¹

Using this principle he demonstrates that good works can be done by human beings only after they have come to faith. Good works are the fruits or the result of faith. They are not the cause of faith. The source of good works is the power of the gospel which leads people to rely on Christ. "When, therefore, the Law is preached, when works are enjoined, we should not spurn the promises concerning Christ. But the latter must first be apprehended, in order that we may be able to produce good works, and our works may please God, as Christ says, John 15:5: *Without Me ye can do nothing*."⁵² Although human beings can to some extent live according to the second table of the law, without faith they cannot have the inner attitudes which God requires. Natural man mistakes this outward obedience for the righteousness which God requires because he has a veil over his face which blinds him until the Holy Spirit leads him to faith.⁵³ Melanchthon claims that when this distinction between law and gospel is understood, it is easy to refute those who oppose the evangelical teaching.⁵⁴

Melanchthon even applies the law/gospel principle to a quotation from the Book of Tobit (4:10—Alms free from every sin and

⁴⁹Ap IV, 43-44.

⁵⁰Ap IV, 38.

⁵¹Ap XII, 51-53.

⁵²Ap III, 145.

⁵³Ap III, 11-14.

⁵⁴Ap III, 62ff.

death)⁵⁵ quoted by the opponents of the Reformation. Interestingly, he does not argue that this passage ought not be used because it comes from the Apocrypha. Instead he assumes that if it is going to be used as Scripture, then scriptural principles must apply to it. Arguing from the law/gospel principle and the context of the passage he shows that faith is required before alms.⁵⁶

Melanchthon opposed allegorical interpretation. He states, "The adversaries have managed well if we permit ourselves to be overcome by allegories. It is evident, however, that allegories do not produce firm proofs."⁵⁷ The simple sense of Scripture is to be found by looking at the words and grammar of Scripture. For example, he ridicules an allegorical interpretation of Proverbs 27:23. "Here to know signifies with them to hear confessions, the state, not the outward life, but the secrets of conscience; and the flocks signify men. The interpretation is assuredly neat, and is worthy of these despisers of the pursuit of eloquence."⁵⁸ The German version adds, "But it has happened aright to those who thus despise the Holy Scriptures and all fine arts that they make gross mistakes in grammar."⁵⁹

Melanchthon's intention was to derive the meaning from the text itself. He writes, "the very words of the prophet express his meaning."⁶⁰ He offers this criticism of the *Confutation*, "The adversaries corrupt very many passages, because they bring to them their own opinions, and do not derive the meaning from the passages themselves."⁶¹ He looked for the original intended meaning.

With his background in linguistics and classical studies Melanchthon recognized the importance of seeking the meanings of words and expressions according to their natural sense in the setting they are used. He makes the accusation that his opponents "most harshly interpret this not only against Scripture, but also against the usage of language."⁶² The opponents of the *Augsburg Confession* "pay the penalty for despising grammar"⁶³ because it leads them to fanciful interpretations of Scripture.

To demonstrate justification by faith *alone* Melanchthon stresses the exclusive expressions Scripture uses.

⁵⁵The *Triglotta* incorrectly lists the citation as Tobit 4:11.

⁵⁶Ap III, 156-158.

⁵⁷Ap XXIV, 35.

⁵⁸Ap VI, 9.

⁵⁹*Concordia Triglotta*, p. 282.

⁶⁰Ap XXIV, 32.

⁶¹Ap III, 103.

⁶²Ap III, 236.

⁶³Ap VI, 66.

The particle *alone* offends some, although even Paul says, Rom. 3:28: *We conclude that a man is justified by faith, without the deeds of the Law.* Again, Eph. 2:8: *It is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast.* Again Rom. 3:24: *Being justified freely.* If the exclusive *alone* displeases, let them remove from Paul also the exclusives *freely, not of works, it is the gift, etc.*⁶⁴

Melanchthon is careful to establish the meaning of individual words. He recognizes that Scripture uses the term justification in two ways. "And because 'to be justified' means that out of unjust men just men are made, or born again, it means also that they are pronounced or accounted just. For Scripture speaks in both ways."⁶⁵

To understand Scripture a person must read a passage in its given context. Melanchthon complains that the opponents of the Augsburg Confession "pick out mutilated sentences." Melanchthon suggests that entire sections of Scripture be considered because "passages, when produced in their entirety, very frequently bring the interpretation with them."⁶⁶ He argues that James 2:24 does not contradict justification by faith alone from the context of the passage in James.⁶⁷

According to Melanchthon doctrine is to be drawn from prescriptive passages of Scripture rather than from descriptive passages. "The will and advice of the apostles ought to be derived from their writings; it is not enough to mention their examples."⁶⁸ And again, "Examples ought to be interpreted according to the rule, i.e., according to certain and clear passages of Scripture, not contrary to the rule, that is contrary to Scripture."⁶⁹

Implications can be drawn from clear passages of Scripture. He argues that the right to hold private property is affirmed in the command *thou shalt not steal*. "For Scripture does not command that property be common, but the Law of the Decalog, when it says, Ex. 20,15: *Thou shalt not steal*, distinguishes rights of ownership, and commands each one to hold what is his own."⁷⁰ He argues for infant baptism on the basis of the general command in Matthew 28:19, the fact that the promise of salvation is to be offered to all, and that the Holy Spirit is given through baptism.⁷¹

⁶⁴Ap IV, 73.

⁶⁵Ap IV, 72.

⁶⁶Ap III, 159.

⁶⁷Ap III, 123-126.

⁶⁸Ap VII, 40.

⁶⁹Ap XXVII, 60.

⁷⁰Ap XVI, 63.

⁷¹Ap IX.

Yet even when drawing implications from passages of Scripture, the intended sense of Scripture cannot be violated. The logic of the text must be respected. In a discussion of the use of 2 Peter 1:10 (Be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure) in the *Confutation*, he accuses its authors of violating logic.

Now you see, reader, that our adversaries have not wasted labor in learning logic, but have the art of inferring from the Scriptures whatever pleases them [whether it is in harmony with the Scriptures or out of harmony; whether it is correctly or incorrectly concluded. For they conclude thus:] “make your calling sure by good works.” Therefore works merit the remission of sins. A very agreeable mode of reasoning, if one would argue thus concerning a person sentenced to capital punishment, whose punishment has been remitted: “The magistrate commands that hereafter you abstain from that which belongs to another. Therefore you have merited the remission of the penalty, because you are now abstaining from what belongs to another.” Thus to argue makes a cause out of that which is not a cause. For Peter speaks of works following the remission of sins, and teaches why they should be done, namely that the calling may be sure, *i.e.*, lest they fall away again.⁷²

Scripture and the Use of Tradition and the Fathers

The word *tradition* is usually used in a negative sense by Melanchthon in the *Apology* to refer to human rites and ceremonies which are contrary to Scripture. He objects to them when they are forced on people as necessary services⁷³ or instituted to merit grace.⁷⁴ Although he notes that many traditions are kept cheerfully by the evangelical party and have value for the sake of good order,⁷⁵ he draws a sharp distinction between traditions and the things commanded by God.⁷⁶ Human traditions are not binding. “The Apostles violated traditions and are excused by Christ; for the example was to be shown the Pharisees that these services are unprofitable.”⁷⁷

Melanchthon was a classicist with a good knowledge and understanding of history. He had more than a passing acquaintance with the fathers and medieval theologians. He used the fathers in support of his understanding of Scripture. This use of the fathers was also intended to demonstrate that the evangelicals were not teaching anything new. In fact it was his purpose in writing the *Augsburg Confes-*

⁷²Ap XX, 89-90.

⁷³Ap XV, 49ff.

⁷⁴Ap XV, 21.

⁷⁵Ap XV, 20-21, 38ff.

⁷⁶Ap XIII, 3-4.

⁷⁷Ap XV, 36.

tion to demonstrate that "in doctrine and ceremonies nothing has been received on our part against Scripture or the Church Catholic. For it is manifest that we have taken most diligent care that no new and ungodly doctrines should creep into our churches."⁷⁸ The papists were the innovators, not the Lutherans.

Melanchthon, however, did not use the fathers indiscriminately or raise their opinion above Scripture. He recognized that the older fathers were closer to the truth than those who came after them. He saw a degeneration in the understanding of Scripture over the centuries.⁷⁹ But even the older fathers are to be used with caution because they sometimes built stubble upon the foundation of Scripture.⁸⁰ Understandably he quotes Augustine (354-430) more than any other theologian, but he also quotes John Gerson (1363-1429), chancellor of the University of Paris, favorably four times.⁸¹

Conclusion

The enigma of Philipp Melanchthon in his relationship to Luther and the Lutheran Reformation will probably never be satisfactorily solved. This study of his approach to Scripture in the *Apology* demonstrates his faithfulness to Lutheran principles in 1531.

Although he was a humanist by training and perhaps even by temperament, his approach to Scripture in the *Apology* is not at odds with the Lutheran Reformation. He is a *biblical* humanist in the truest sense of the word. Humanism urged scholars to go *ad fontes*, to the sources. For Melanchthon Scripture is the source of all Christian knowledge concerning God's will and salvation because Scripture is God's Word. In fact, we cannot know God's will, come to faith in him, and be justified apart from God's Word.

Those truths had important implications for his approach to Scripture. He saw justification by faith in Jesus as the central teaching of Scripture. This message is taught in both the Old and New Testaments. To understand Scripture when it speaks about faith, justification, and good works one must understand the distinction between law and gospel. Melanchthon recognizes that Scripture is its own interpreter. He uses one passage of Scripture to understand another. He believes in an essential clarity of Scripture.

Melanchthon uses his humanistic background, linguistic, and classical training to understand the clear words of Scripture. He wants to

⁷⁸AC, Conclusion, 5.

⁷⁹Ap XXI, 41.

⁸⁰Ap VII, 21.

⁸¹Ap XV, 28; XXIII, 20, XXVII, 16; XXVII, 36.

let Scripture speak for itself by understanding Scripture according to the principles of human language and grammar. He departs from humanism, however, in his evaluation of the natural human ability in things spiritual. Although he concludes that human beings have some free will in external matters subject to reason, his understanding of original sin and the distinction between law and gospel leads him along a different theological path and to different conclusions from Erasmus and the other humanists.

Melanchthon's approach to Scripture as revealed in the *Apology* shows him to be an ally of the Lutheran Reformation at this point in his career. The *Apology* is a masterpiece of evangelical Lutheran theology. The tragedy is that this man who did so much for the Reformation also did so much to undermine it with his later doctrinal deviations.