

Bearing Christ as Melanchthon's Contribution to The Book of Concord

by TIMOTHY J. WENGERT

WHAT DO YOU SAY to someone who is about to go to Augsburg and pen what to some is the most important Christian confession of the last five hundred years? We do not need to speculate; the historical record offers us an important clue to the answer. As the Elector John of Saxony and his entourage headed for Augsburg to obey the summons of Emperor Charles V convening an imperial diet in that city, they halted at the Castle Coburg, the southernmost of the elector's fortresses. The party arrived on Good Friday 1530 and departed on the First Sunday after Easter, April 24. The day after their arrival, Martin Luther, who as an outlaw of the empire could not safely venture out of the elector's lands, preached a sermon on the Passion of our Lord. Unlike his sermons delivered at St. Mary's in Wittenberg the year before, where he described Christ's saving death,¹ here Luther emphasized for his soon-to-be departing and confessing colleagues and lords the bearing of one's own cross. Perhaps he recalled the Augsburg Cathedral where, to our own day, a forty-foot fresco of St. Christopher graces a wall near the main entrance. In any event, he included the following words in his sermon—at which Philip Melanchthon was also in attendance.

In order that you may better understand this, I will give you a fine example in which the Christian's suffering is depicted. All of you are doubtless familiar with the way in which St. Christopher has at times been portrayed. But you should not think that there ever was a man who was called by that name or who actually did what is said about St. Christopher. Rather the person who devised this legend or fable was without a doubt a fine intelligent man, who wanted to portray this picture for the simple people so that they would have an example and image of a Christian life and how it should be lived. And actually he did hit it off very well; for a Christian is like a great giant, he has great strong legs and arms, as Christopher is painted, for he bears a burden which the whole world, which no emperor, king or prince could carry. Therefore every Christian is a Christopher, that is, a Christ-bearer, because he accepts the faith. . . .

So in Christopher we have an example and a picture that can strengthen us in our suffering and teach us that fear and trembling is not as great as the comfort and promise, and that we should therefore know that in this life we shall have no rest if we are bearing Christ, but rather that in affliction we should turn our eyes away from the present suffering to the consolation and promise. Then we will learn that what Christ says is true: 'In me you shall have peace' [John 16:33].²

With these words Luther correctly described Melanchthon's contribution to *The Book of Concord*. More to the point, Luther's words influenced the entire Saxon delegation and encouraged Melanchthon in particular to confess. Whatever one makes of the later correspondence between the two while the younger man attended the diet, here we have the true reflection of Luther's expectations against which to measure Melanchthon's actions. Indeed, in his own way Melanchthon saw himself as bearing Christ and the cross in a hostile world, that is, he saw himself as bearing the full brunt of the gospel.

Literary and Methodological Contributions

Bearing Christ was not Melanchthon's only contribution to *The Book of Concord*. In fact, paying some attention to certain literary and methodological contributions may help set in sharper relief Melanchthon's pivotal role in *The Book of Concord* as a whole.

Take, as a first example, the shape of this book. Whose idea was it to put three ancient creeds, a contemporary public confession, a defense of that confession, a theological last testament, an appendix, two catechisms and a formula in a single book and to promote it as theologically normative for Lutherans? That, after all, is what *The Book of Concord* contains and how it functions. In a fine essay first presented at a conference in Bretten commemorating the five-hundredth anniversary of the birth of their famous native son, Irene Dingel investigated this very topic.³ Sometime in 1559 Melanchthon himself conceived the notion of assembling his most important theological writings, along with the ecumenical creeds, into a single book called a *corpus doctrinae*, or body of doc-

trine. The Leipzig printer, Ernst Vögelin, published it with Melanchthon's preface around the time of the reformer's death in April 1560. It included the Augsburg Confession (both the *invariata* and *variata*) and the Apology, along with the creeds and several other writings of Melanchthon, such as his textbook for systematic theology, the *Loci communes theologici*. In short order, this book, often called the *Corpus doctrinae Philippicum*, became the textbook for theology students at the University of Wittenberg and the standard of doctrine for a host of principalities including Electoral Saxony. To be sure, the so-called Weimar *Book of Confutation*, produced by Flacian theologians in ducal Saxony in 1559, slightly preceded Melanchthon's own collection and functioned as a doctrinal norm for the principality. However, the *Corpus doctrinae Philippicum* was the first conceived as a collection of documents and enjoyed a far greater influence in the period between Melanchthon's death and the writing of the Formula itself. Even the title "*Corpus doctrinae*" itself, as Dingel has so convincingly shown, goes back to development in Melanchthon's own usage from the Wittenberg University statutes of 1533 to the Frankfurt Recess of 1558 and beyond. What had first denoted "chief doctrine" or *analogia fidei* now came to refer to the documents themselves. Melanchthon wished both to provide a set of documents that would unify confession of faith and teaching of doctrine and also to give, as a kind of last testament, his final word on contemporary theological controversies. Of the documents that comprised the *Corpus doctrinae*, the creeds, the Augsburg Confession *invariata* and the Apology formed the basic texts by which to judge and understand the others. Thus, he even called the Saxon Confession of 1551 a *repetitio* of the Augsburg Confession—the same word used in *The Book of Concord* itself for the Formula. Whereas the *Corpus doctrinae* arose out of Melanchthon's concern for unity, its equivalent Flacian production, with its heavy emphasis upon antitheses and rejection, emphasized exclusion of false doctrine.

With the continuing disputes over doctrine between Philippists and the Flacians or Gnesio-Lutherans (especially on the Lord's Supper), it became clear that the book so dominated by Melanchthon's theology could not serve as the basis for rapprochement

among the various sides. Instead, other collections developed that included documents penned by Luther. However, the idea of collecting important theological documents into a single book and allowing it to serve as a theological standard and means for unification, in large part goes back to Melanchthon.

A second feature goes back to Melanchthon: the name of the book, *Concordia*. When one reads the many letters written by Melanchthon in the 1550s or important doctrinal statements such as the Saxon Confession or the Frankfurt Recess, one hears over and over again his prayers and pleas for peace and even, on occasion, his suggestions for concord. Only if we dismiss such calls as disingenuous, which his opponents sometimes did, can we ignore their impact. Melanchthon believed that the way to achieve lasting harmony was for a meeting of all evangelical theologians. His successors in this quest used a different tact. They worked several years on a single text to which many principalities and theologians, pastors and teachers, subscribed. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that the framers of the Formula of Concord took seriously Melanchthon's own efforts on behalf of harmony and peace among evangelicals. At least three important authors of the Formula trained at Wittenberg and were influenced directly by Melanchthon. Martin Chemnitz began lectures on Melanchthon's *Loci communes* while at the University of Wittenberg. Nicholas Selnecker later became a professor of theology at Wittenberg. David Chytraeus studied and taught at the University of Wittenberg before moving on to Rostock. He was by far the closest to Melanchthon. On the occasion of Chytraeus' wedding, Melanchthon even sent an epithalmium, a Latin poem honoring the occasion.⁴ The correspondence between the two men overflows with expressions of their hopes for concord in the church.⁵

From this arises a third preliminary point. Melanchthon molded not only the shape and name of *The Book of Concord* but also the method employed in the Formula itself. After all, Melanchthon's nickname already in the sixteenth century was "*Praeceptor Germaniae*," preceptor of Germany. Friends and enemies alike were influenced by his very peculiar method of organizing ideas and clarifying them through logical argument. Just how important was

he? In 1557, from 28 August to 6 December, Melanchthon was in the city of Worms, site of Luther's famous first stand thirty-six years earlier. With the exception of a week in Heidelberg, where he was received as the University's most famous alumnus and where he also learned of his wife's death, Melanchthon remained in Worms for discussions with the Roman Catholics over possibilities for reunification. These talks ended in failure, in large measure because the Roman party exploited divisions among the evangelicals. After the abrupt departure of some Gnesio-Lutheran theologians, talks collapsed. This did not mean, however, that Melanchthon had no respect—in fact, to a man, evangelical theologians recognized him as their teacher. At least, that was the report from one of the participants. Basilius Monner, a zealous Gnesio-Lutheran,⁶ wrote that on the day after Melanchthon's arrival in Worms, on 29 August 1557, as people left church after Sunday worship, "All greeted him—now sixty years old—as their preceptor. They honor him almost as a divine creature."⁷

In fact, the method used in the Formula matched perfectly Melanchthon's own. Small wonder! From the 1520s, nearly every Latin school in Evangelical territories (and many outside them) used his primers on grammar, rhetoric and logic. Using Melanchthon's method became as obvious as speaking or writing in German or Latin. In the Formula, the authors divided the issues according to—using Melanchthon's own term—*loci communes*, commonplaces or major topics and general themes of theology: original sin, free will, justification, good works, law and gospel, third use of the law, the Lord's Supper, and Christology. Moreover, with the possible exception of articles eleven and twelve, they organized the topics basically according to Melanchthon's own order, employed in his *Loci communes theologici* itself. More than that, they constructed individual *loci* and their arguments using Scripture, the Church Fathers, and experience as Melanchthon had taught, especially in the *Loci communes*. Finally, they also prosecuted their arguments using the very logical syllogisms in which Melanchthon himself had trained them. Unwillingness to admit to Melanchthon's influence remains one of the chief blind spots in modern

discussions of confessionalization among late sixteenth-century theologians.⁸

Take, for example, the argumentation in article one of the Solid Declaration. As Melanchthon had outlined in his handbook on dialectics, the Concordists began (SD I:1–2) by fixing the limits of the dispute as a disagreement in the *finitio* (definition) of original sin and setting out the *contraria* (contrary definitions). Then, after insisting that this was not just an idle quarrel,⁹ they derive the correct teaching from Melanchthon himself (SD I:3, referring to Ap II:33 and IV:45–46, 156–58) and distinguish it from both Pelagian and Manichaean errors (SD I:16–33). Then, having already shown that their teaching corresponded to the normative documents in *The Book of Concord*, they then list and, in part, explain a host of Bible passages (SD I:34–38), assembled in ways reminiscent of the *Loci communes theologici*. After recounting how this article influenced teaching in a host of other (mostly creedal) articles (SD I:40–49), the Concordists turn to the definition of terms (SD I:50–62), the hallmark of Melanchthon's theological method. Throughout they employed syllogisms to propel and secure their arguments. It is not so much Philippist theology as Melanchthonian method that triumphed in the Formula.

Melanchthon's Own Contributions to The Book of Concord

The most important contribution by Philip Melanchthon to *The Book of Concord* was, of course, the three documents he himself wrote. They reveal the heart of Melanchthon's own theology under three general rubrics: Confessing the Gospel (the Augsburg Confession), Defending the Faith (the Apology), and Appending a Primer in Evangelical Ecclesiology (the Treatise).

The Augsburg Confession: Confessing the Gospel

The Augsburg Confession was a result of intense negotiations and labor by a variety of theologians at Augsburg, working with a va-

riety of documents—some even prepared by the absent Luther or at least drafted with his consent. The bulk of the writing, however, fell to Melanchthon. It is his method, his language, and—to a great degree—his theology that permeated the entire document, save for the preface.

Scholars have long debated the question of Melanchthon's contribution to the Augsburg Confession. Already in the sixteenth century, suspicions about his theology that developed after the Smalcald War made it difficult to admit his role in the origin of the Confession. Some have even argued that Luther, not Melanchthon, was the chief author. Even a recent article by Helmar Junghans has more muddied the waters than provided clarification.¹⁰ Junghans rightly emphasizes the degree of collaboration between the two leaders of Wittenberg's reformation.¹¹ However, he failed to use one of the most convincing methods of showing just how deeply Melanchthon shaped the document, namely, by comparing its language to that of Melanchthon's own publications from the time. In that light, certain articles (notably XVI, XVIII, and XX) bear the unmistakable imprint of Melanchthon's own hand. Moreover, certain transitional passages, especially between articles XXI and XXII, also evince linguistic and methodological characteristics of Wittenberg's chief theologian in Augsburg.

When Melanchthon came to Augsburg, he had at hand two kinds of documents. On the one hand, he had confessions and testimonies of faith, including the so-called Schwabach Articles, which had served as an official statement of doctrine for the Saxons since 1529. He also had a loose collection of documents, explaining and defending the reasons certain practices had changed, generally called the Torgau Articles after the elector's castle where some of the theological discussions took place. These two chief sources continue to reflect themselves in the division of the Confession itself. CA I-XXI had to do with doctrine; CA XXII-XXVIII with changes in practice, such as communion in both kinds, marriage of priests, and the authority of bishops.¹²

Therefore, one of the most important passages that Melanchthon wrote for the Augsburg Confession comes in the transition

from the first section to the second. Here the reader catches the sense, in Melanchthon's own words, of what is at stake and how he would argue his case for the Reformation.

This is nearly a complete summary of what is preached and taught in our churches for proper Christian instruction and the comfort of consciences, as well as for the improvement of believers. For we certainly wish neither to expose our own souls and consciences to grave danger before God by misusing the divine name or Word nor to pass on or bequeath to our children and descendants any other teaching than that which accords with the pure Word of God and Christian truth. Since, then, this teaching is clearly grounded in Holy Scripture and is, moreover, neither against nor contrary to the universal Christian church—or even the Roman church—so far as can be observed in the writings of the Fathers, we think that our opponents cannot disagree with us in the articles set forth above. That is why those who undertake to isolate, reject, and avoid our people as heretics, without having themselves any solid basis in divine command or Scripture, act in a very unfriendly and hasty manner, contrary to all Christian unity and love. For the dissension and quarrel are chiefly over some traditions and abuses.¹³ Since, then, there is nothing unfounded or deficient in the principal articles and since this our confession is godly and Christian, the bishops should in all fairness act more leniently even if there were a deficiency in regard to tradition—although we hope to offer solid grounds and reasons why some traditions and abuses have been changed among us.¹⁴

The first sentence defines the gospel in terms of content and effect. The first twenty-one articles do not simply define a pure doctrine detached from the everyday life of the believer but function to comfort and improve the believer with the truth. Here Melanchthon puts the gospel and its teaching into motion. As with Luther, knowledge of correct teaching is never enough; it must finally reach its proper goal of comforting and improving. Only on this basis can anyone interpret the CA properly. Ignoring this basis, as the second sentence points out, would put the individual confessor's conscience in jeopardy and would threaten future generations.

To be sure, Melanchthon's conscience and his prince's are bound to the gospel. However, in Melanchthon's view this very gospel, as Wittenberg understands it, finds support in the ancient church. As Peter Fraenkel has shown in his unsurpassed work on Me-

lanchthon's hermeneutic, there is no break between the church of Wittenberg and the church of all ages, stretching back to the Garden and especially Cain and Abel.¹⁵ "Grounded in Scripture . . . nor against the universal church." These words put the onus of breaking church unity squarely on the shoulders of the opponents, whose insistence on a (mythical) grand unity of tradition undermined the Scripture and thereby destroyed the catholicity of their doctrine.¹⁶ It is not tradition itself or even the church that is the object of unity but the Word of God and its effect. This is the import of the word *einträchtiglich* (with one accord) in CA I, 1 and CA VII, 2. The church and the Fathers bear witness to that very unity; they do not constitute it.

Finally, based upon the twenty-one catholic articles, Melanchthon can now plead for leniency from the bishops regarding matters of practice. This distinction between teaching and practice, first proposed publicly by Luther in his famous "Invocavit" sermons of March 1522, had become the centerpiece of Melanchthon's theology and, now, of the CA itself. It also marked the Saxon diplomacy at the diet—whether prosecuted by Luther, Melanchthon, or the court.¹⁷ In sum, for Melanchthon in this transitional passage, bearing Christ meant confessing the gospel alone, not mythical unity of tradition nor a papally imposed unity of praxis. This flexibility in practical matters found its limits only in the gospel. Moreover, such flexibility meant that the Lutherans are free to discuss any practical matter on the basis of the gospel and doctrine. We can never use such shallow arguments as "We've always (or: never) done it this way," or "It's the newest (or: oldest) way to do things." As long as any practice new or old does not harm the gospel itself—the free forgiveness of sins by faith in Christ Jesus alone—we can do whatever serves that very gospel and the good order of our church.

Having said that Melanchthon divides doctrine and practice according to the documents he had, I must now admit that there are two exceptions to that rule: preaching and prayer. The former we will examine here. For Melanchthon, these practices are so closely related to what we teach that they finally are a part of that teaching itself.

Leaving aside the question of prayer and CA XXI, let us turn to one of the most exciting articles in the Augsburg Confession: article twenty. Despite its name—or perhaps because of it—readers often misunderstand it. It played a peculiar role in the development of the *Augustana*, because it clearly was not in Melanchthon's briefcase when he unpacked in Augsburg. The reason? Soon after Melanchthon and the Saxon entourage arrived, a pamphlet published in Augsburg by John Eck—the Lutherans' archenemy—hit the local bookstores. *Four Hundred Four Articles*, its title proudly boasted.¹⁸ And, indeed, in it the reader found 386 statements—gleaned from the writings of Lutherans, Zwinglians, and Anabaptists alike and deemed by Eck to be heretical. Excluding for a moment the material taken from Zwinglian and Anabaptist writers, one of the most serious charges Eck laid on the Lutheran doorstep was that their preaching prohibited good works. This was not simply a theological objection. It had serious political implications, since, to the emperor's ears, the opposite of preaching good works was fomenting sedition.

Melanchthon and the Saxon party had to respond. Their reply turned into the longest doctrinal article in the Confession. And yet, Melanchthon's concern was defending and defining not simply pure doctrine but, as becomes immediately clear, right practice: namely, the central event in Christian worship—the public proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. No wonder both the rhetoric and the scope of this article put the reader on notice that everything the Reformation stood for was at stake.

Just so the reader would not think that this article simply followed upon the others, Melanchthon graced it with a title, "Concerning Faith and Good Works," the first heading in the Augsburg Confession. Yet the title belied the fact that what article twenty actually represented was something far more profound: the Confession's only defense of evangelical preaching itself.

"Our people are falsely accused of prohibiting good works." (CA XX:1 [German and Latin]) The tone of this article varied so much from the preceding nineteen that even the Roman party's *Confutatio* noticed. It "does not so much contain a confession of the princes and cities but more a defense of their preachers,"¹⁹ they

wrote. By dividing confession and defense of preaching, the Roman confutators demonstrated how remarkably different their theological presuppositions were.

In the highly polished rhetoric that marks CA XX, Melanchthon begins with a contrast between present-day evangelical preaching and what had passed for preaching in the past. The good works espoused by the former arise from the Ten Commandments—here Melanchthon may have had especially Luther's recently published catechisms in mind, to say nothing of his own. The "childish, unnecessary works" emphasized by past preaching sounded like a synopsis of many a late-medieval preaching manual: including rosaries, cult of the saints, religious orders, pilgrimages, fasts, and holy days.²⁰ With biting irony, Melanchthon noted that now such works were not so highly praised and that the opponents had taken to mentioning faith, a smidgen better than preaching that we "become righteous before God by works alone."

His conclusion, "Such talk may offer a little more comfort than the teaching that one should rely on works alone" (CA XX:7), pointed immediately to the *effect* of proper gospel preaching: the comfort of terrified consciences. Without this push from the definition of the gospel (which follows in the next paragraphs) to effect, the Evangelical party had no gospel to bear to the world. Thus, Melanchthon again mentioned comfort in CA XX:15 ("it is very comforting and beneficial for timid and terrified consciences") and 19 ("In former times people did not emphasize this comfort in sermons"). Later, he would center his entire argument in Ap XII upon this understanding of the gospel as comfort.

Melanchthon divided the explanation of the gospel into three parts. First, he summarized the gospel in terms of justification by faith alone without works (par. 9–10). Then he defined faith (par. 23–26). Finally, he described the purpose of good works in the Christian life (par. 27–34). The summary of the gospel discloses the heart of Melanchthon's own confession of faith. More than any other article, this section reflected his own eleven-year odyssey on behalf of Wittenberg's gospel that now brought him to Augsburg as it had brought Luther there in 1518. He wrote:

Our works cannot reconcile us with God or obtain grace. Instead, this happens through faith alone when a person believes that our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who alone is the mediator to reconcile the Father. Now all who imagine that they can accomplish this by works and can merit grace despise Christ and seek their own way to God contrary to the gospel. (CA XX:9–10)

What is that gospel? First, “justification” excludes all works. The Reformation's gospel is not merely about God's grace—something everyone in that age and our own loves to repeat—but also, at the same time, about the exclusion of merit and works as the basis of our relation to God. Second, it is a matter of faith alone. The *sola fide* first makes its appearance in the Confession here. In CA IV, as some have noted, it is missing—although for the reformers the exclusion of all works implies its opposite, namely, faith alone. In CA VI, where the phrase first appears, it comes in a quotation ascribed to Ambrose although actually the work of an unknown fifth-century author of a magnificent commentary on Paul, whom we commonly call Ambrosiaster. It is in preaching not simply in doctrine that the phrase makes sense and brings comfort. Third, it is also Christ alone, whose work Melanchthon described as “mediator” in the German text but as “mediator and atoning sacrifice” (actually, propitiator—the one who makes the atoning sacrifice) in the Latin.²¹ Finally, any other gospel leads to christological and soteriological disaster. The crux of the church's comments on christological heresies has always been that they despise Christ and his merit and grace.²² To reject Christ's merit and grace is to reject Christ himself. At the same time, such a rejection places the individual at the center of salvation, seeking his or her own way to God. The Latin pointedly adds a reference to John 14: 6—“I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” Christ is this way, and we are not.

Before defining faith, Melanchthon first offered proof for his definition of the gospel. He quoted Ephesians 2:8–9 (CA IV cited Romans 3 and 4). However, because, as we have seen, he held to the unity of the church and the catholicity of this gospel, he also referred to Augustine's *On the Spirit and the Letter*. Almost as if another text had occurred to him, his Latin version

also quoted Prosper of Aquitaine's *De vocatione omnium gentium*, a tract Melanchthon ascribed to Ambrose. Melanchthon's authorities, however, included not simply Scripture and the Fathers but also experience. The gospel actually comforts people, save for those addicted to their own strength, works and decisions.

Now although untested people despise this teaching completely, it is nevertheless the case that it is very comforting and beneficial for timid and terrified consciences. For the conscience cannot find rest and peace through works but by faith alone, when it concludes on its own with certainty that it has a gracious God for Christ's sake, as Paul says (Rom. 5[:1]): "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God." (CA XX:15)

The premier interpreter of Romans in the sixteenth century here provided a small harvest from his work. Romans 5 makes the application of the gospel to our own experience. The indicative ("We have peace") rather than the subjunctive ("Let us have peace") triumphs and protects the gospel from all forms of pietism. The gospel does not simply promise forgiveness and leave the driving and attaining to us. Instead, it delivers on its promises by consoling us. Once that happens nothing can ever be the same: we have peace with God.

Only having defined the gospel and its effect, can Melanchthon turn to another false claim in Eck's *Four Hundred Four Articles*: that faith alone implies that the devils, too, will be saved. This consistent objection to the Reformation simply rejected the biblical language and thought in favor of Aristotelian equation of faith with a virtue and with assent to the truth of doctrine. Instead, Melanchthon, building off the effect of the gospel, defined faith as confidence that God is gracious to us or, in the Latin version, as "trust that consoles and encourages terrified minds" (CA XX:26).

Only after this did Melanchthon finally turn to the question of good works. As in CA VI, however, even here in CA XX he spent less time praising good works (done for God's sake and praise) than making sure to distinguish them from faith. "Faith alone always takes hold of grace and forgiveness of sin" (CA XX:28). Good works themselves are gifts of the Holy Spirit, not something in

which to boast. "Because the Holy Spirit is given through faith, the heart is also moved to do good works" (CA XX:29). His criticism of philosophers, who tried to live blamelessly but failed without the Holy Spirit, reflected similar comments in his 1527–1528 commentaries on Colossians, where he indirectly was attacking Erasmus.²³ Perhaps Erasmus's complete unwillingness to take any stand (let alone confess the gospel) at Augsburg led Melanchthon to include this jab at the prince of humanists.

The peroration, or summary, of this tightly constructed piece of rhetoric demonstrated how completely false Eck's charge was. It reached a final crescendo in the very last line. "Such lofty and genuine works [prayer, patience, love of neighbor, engagement in legitimate callings, obedience] cannot be done without the help of Christ, as he himself says in John 15[:5]: 'Apart from me you can do nothing.'" This text, fought over by Luther and Erasmus in 1524–1528 during their debate over the free will, now provided a fitting confession to Melanchthon's testimony of faith. The Latin version even included a gloss on this biblical text by referring to the hymn, "Veni, Sancte Spiritus": "Without your will divine, naught is in humankind, all innocence is gone."

The Apology: Defending the Faith

After the public reading of the Augsburg Confession on 25 June 1530, there was a lull, a calm before the storm. Attempts at negotiations finally failed; private audiences between Melanchthon and the papal legate, Cardinal Campeggio, came to naught; the Emperor Charles V even rejected a first draft of the Roman party's response as too harsh. First in early August 1530 was the response, called the *Confutatio*, ready for the public and for the emperor's approval. To head off more discussion, the emperor refused to allow its publication. A stenographer from the evangelical side, Melanchthon's friend Joachim Camerarius, a teacher at Nuremberg, took extensive notes during the public reading. Lutherans turned to Melanchthon to ready a reply—what he called in a letter to Luther by the Greek term an ἀπολογία, or defense. The emperor refused to hear any Evangelical reply and instead simply accepted the

Confutatio as the law of the land—giving the Protestants six months to comply with it.

This rejection simply fueled Melanchthon's zeal to respond. In the coming months he continued to work on his reply. Even on the way home from Augsburg to Wittenberg, he labored over it during every spare moment—causing Luther at one point to accuse him in jest of breaking the sabbath because he even worked on it during their common meals. When a purloined copy of the *Confutatio* came into Melanchthon's possession, he redoubled his efforts. In part forced by Luther to stop tinkering with it, in May 1531 Melanchthon finally published a first edition along with the Augsburg Confession. By September a completely reworked edition appeared, on which the German translation was based. This second edition served as the first line of defense against the Roman party until 1584, when the first edition once again gained priority.

What did Melanchthon intend to accomplish with this document? He stated it clearly in the preface, written to grace the first edition and untouched in the second.

I have not taken up all of their [the Confutators'] sophistries since this would be an endless task. I have instead assembled their principal arguments in order to bear witness to the entire world that we hold to the gospel of Christ correctly and faithfully. We take no pleasure in discord, nor are we unaware of our danger, the extent of which is evident from the bitter hatred inflaming the opponents. But we cannot surrender truth that is so clear and necessary for the church. (Ap, Preface, 15–16)

The point of refuting the opponents was not simply to gain debating points with the emperor and support the Saxon legal case. It directly related to confessing the gospel before the entire world. The “danger” and “bitter hatred” were not simply fantasies of a sensitive soul, as some mistakenly portray Melanchthon. Instead, they came to fulfillment during the Smalcald War of 1546–1547. These well-founded fears could not lead Melanchthon to surrender, especially given “the need” of the church. This category—often rendered *die Not* in German—had ecclesiological and eschatological implications.

The Apology comprises the longest document in *The Book of Concord*. In many ways—with its detailed interpretation of Scripture passages, its logical arguments, and its insistence on following the opponents' articles and contentions—it is hard to put one's finger on the heart of this work. Although there are other possibilities, it seems to me that the actual center of the Apology lies in Melanchthon's insistence on using the distinction between law and gospel as the best way to approach crucial theological issues.

One of the most thorough expositions of this doctrine comes in Apology XII, where Melanchthon is discussing the oldest conflict between Wittenberg and Rome: the meaning of penance, *poenitentia*. Here is how he summed up the distinction between law and gospel in a section of Apology XII, where he argued that repentance and faith, not contrition, confession and satisfaction, best defined *poenitentia*.

For these are the two chief works of God in human beings, to terrify and to justify the terrified or make them alive. The entire Scripture is divided into these two works. One part is the law, which reveals, denounces, and condemns sin. The second part is the gospel, that is, the promise of grace given in Christ. This promise is constantly repeated throughout the entire Scripture: first it was given to Adam, later to the patriarchs, then illuminated by the prophets, and finally proclaimed by Christ among the Jews, and spread throughout the entire world by the apostles. For all the saints have been justified by faith in this promise and not on account of their own attrition or contrition. (Ap XII:53–54)

Note what Melanchthon accomplished here. First, he made law and gospel not a hermeneutical category by which we interpret Scripture so much as a soteriological one by which God and God alone interprets and saves us. God, not human beings, uses the law and gospel on us—not the other way around—and uses them not just to inform us about sin and grace but to terrify and comfort. Second, Melanchthon did not content himself with a static definition but insisted on a functional one. God terrifies and justifies, puts to death and makes alive—and does it through the Word. This Word “reveals, denounces, and condemns sin” and promises grace. Third, this promising implies that God is after human hearts and

out to make believers. The examples that Melanchthon adduced in the following paragraphs were *not* definitions of law and gospel. After all, he could have cited 2 Corinthians 3:6 or Galatians 3:13. Instead, he pointed to the experience of believers: Adam in Genesis 3 (Ap XII:55), David in 2 Samuel 12 (Ap XII:56), the woman who anointed Jesus' feet in Luke 7 (Ap XII:57–58). Finally, the promise of God provided Melanchthon with the single most important source of unity in the church: it formed an unbroken chain from Adam through the patriarchs and prophets to Christ and the Apostles. It is not the *article* about justification that is the doctrine on which the church stands or falls but the justifying, faith-creating promise of God (that is, the Word of God) on which the church stands or falls. Moreover, that Word alone creates church.

What then is the center of the Apology? Just this: we make the greatest mistake of all when we imagine that the point of Scripture or the point of Christianity is to make us better people—more moral, more law-abiding, more loving, even more doctrinally pure. When we approach Scripture and Christianity itself in this way, we make it a matter of requirements and prohibitions, of law alone. Moreover, we put the power to interpret and fulfill Scripture in our own hands. Melanchthon here says something radically different and perennially unpopular. We do not control the Scripture, God does. And God does two things to us through the Word. First, through the law God terrifies the comfortable—reveals the God-awful truth about the human condition: we are dying and insist on covering up that dying with our lust for self-promotion. But then, through the gospel, God comforts the terrified. With this key, God unlocks for us a wholly different face of Scripture and allows us, finally—finally—to hear good news, that is, to believe the promise.

The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope: A Primer in Evangelical Ecclesiology

This work found its way into *The Book of Concord* almost by accident. The Concordists had found it appended to Luther's Smalcald Articles and had assumed it somehow belonged to it. In fact,

an early, unauthorized Latin version of *The Book of Concord* produced by Nicholas Selnecker in 1580 made a new translation of the Treatise from German into Latin. Selnecker had not realized that it had originally been composed in Latin. First in the nineteenth century did scholars discover its true author and purpose.

Indeed, Melanchthon wrote the Treatise during a single week in 1537. He and the other theologians gathered at Smalcald conceived of it as an addition to the Augsburg Confession—an appendix in which the Evangelicals could now say publicly what they thought of the pope's claim to authority in the church. Pope Paul III had called for a council to meet in Mantua for resolving religious issues in the empire. Calling into question papal authority to judge such a gathering was part of the Evangelical strategy. The document received the endorsement of the theologians assembled in Smalcald, who also professed their continued allegiance to the Augsburg Confession and the Apology. The signatories included theologians as diverse as Martin Bucer of Strasbourg and Wolfgang Musculus of Augsburg on the Reformed side of the Evangelical spectrum and Johannes Brenz and Nicholas von Amsdorf among the rigorous Lutherans. It is the most ecumenical of the sixteenth-century documents in the entire book.

A word of caution is in order at this point. For all the nasty things Melanchthon says about the pope in this document, it was not simply his intent to insult people. First, it was not Paul III he was after, or any other individual pope; it was an entire system of religious and political power that had developed around the Bishop of Rome during the Middle Ages and that threatened to rob the church of its greatest treasure, the gospel. However, it is too convenient for Lutherans or others to proclaim the pope antichrist and be done with it. This document, when taken most seriously, asks us—forces us—to look at our own church and its practices (not just at others) and name as anti-Christian those things that, in the name of the gospel, rob people of the comfort of the gospel.

In fact, this document gives a great sketch of how Lutherans may view authority in the church. When tempted to reduce ecclesiology to episcopal rule or presbyteral rule or congregational rule or individual rule, Lutherans run headlong into the main ar-

gument in this document. It is all in the Word. Moreover, the Treatise does not mean the Word as a pretext to authorize some special elite—whether we define that elite as bishops, pastors, congregations or individuals. Instead, it places the Word in the hands and on the lips of the one whose Word it is: God in Christ alone. As Melanchthon wrote:

Christ gave to his apostles only spiritual authority, that is, the command to preach the gospel, to proclaim the forgiveness of sins, to administer the sacraments, and to excommunicate the ungodly without the use of physical force. He did not give them the power of the sword or the right to establish, take possession or dispose of the kingdoms of this world. . . . Thus, the fact that during his passion Christ was crowned with thorns and led forth to be mocked in royal purple signified that there would come a time when, his spiritual realm would be established on the pretext of ecclesiastical power. . . . This conviction brought horrible darkness upon the church and afterward precipitated great tumult in Europe. For the ministry of the gospel was neglected. Knowledge of faith and of the spiritual realm was destroyed. Christian righteousness was equated with that external government which the pope had created. (Tr 31–32, 34)

In our own day, when we confuse the gospel either with the achievement of unity among various church bodies or with the cry for congregational autonomy, then we have traded the Word of God and its authority for human quibbling and have exchanged secondary concerns about good order in the church for the church's lifeblood. The Treatise calls us all to repentance and to a renewed commitment to unleash the gospel of the forgiveness of sins.

Conclusion

How do we describe Melanchthon's contributions to *The Book of Concord*? Perhaps the best summary comes from his favorite verse in the Bible. In the account of Melanchthon's death, written by his son-in-law and physician, Caspar Peucer, we learn how, during his last night on earth Melanchthon was unable to sleep. According to Peucer, he found comfort by repeating, over and over again, a single line from Romans 8. "If God be for us, who can be against

us?" This gospel, sealed in the blood of Christ, not only sustained Melanchthon in his dying but also best captures how this Christopher bore Christ in his age and, by extension, how he continues to bear witness to Christ in our own.

NOTES

1. See *Luthers Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 57 vols. Eds. J.F.K. Knaake et al. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883ff.), 29:219–253 [hereafter cited as WA]; *The 1529 Holy Week and Easter Sermons of Dr. Martin Luther*, trans. Irving L. Sandberg (St. Louis: Concordia, 1999), 81–118.
2. WA 32:32,18–31, 34,3–10; *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols. Eds. Pelikan and Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.), 51:201–03 [hereafter cited as LW].
3. Irene Dingel, "Melanchthon und die Normierung des Bekenntnisses," in *Der Theologe Melanchthon*, ed. Günter Frank (Stuttgart: Thorbecke, 2000), 195–211.
4. *Corpus Reformatorum*, 28 vols. Eds. C. G. Bretschneider et al. (Brunsvigae and Halis Saxorum: C.A. Schwetschke et Filium, 1834–60), 10:618–19 [hereafter cited as CR]. Cf. *Melanchthons Briefwechsel: Regesten*, ed. Heinz Scheible, 10+ vols. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: frommann-holzboog, 1977—[hereafter, MBW]), no. 7104 (CR 8:236–37) and no. 7114 (in Otto Clemen, *Kleine Schriften zur Reformationsgeschichte*, ed. Ernst Koch, 9 vols. [Leipzig: Zentralantiquariat der DDR, 1982–1988], 7:499–500).
5. For example, MBW 7871 (CR 8:788).
6. Monner studied at Wittenberg, became a law professor at the University of Jena in 1554, and was tutor to Johann Friedrich the Elder's three sons.
7. CR 9:VIII, in a letter dated 31 August 1557.
8. Cf. Robert Kolb, "Philipp's Foes, but Followers Nonetheless: Late Humanism among the Gnesio-Lutherans," in *The Harvest of Humanism in Central Europe: Essays in Honor of Lewis W. Spitz*, ed. Manfred P. Fleischer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1992), 159–78.
9. For the importance of this notion in Reformation debates, see Wengert, *Law and Gospel: Philip Melanchthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over Poenitentia* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).
10. Helmar Junghans, "Philipp Melanchthon als theologischer Sekretär," in *Der Theologe Melanchthon*, ed. Günter Frank (Stuttgart: Thorbecke, 2000), 139–46.
11. See also, Timothy J. Wengert, "Melanchthon and Luther / Luther and Melanchthon," *Luther-Jahrbuch* 66 (1999): 55–88.
12. Wilhelm Maurer, *Historical Commentary on the Augsburg Confession*, trans. H. George Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) argues for the priority of CA XXVIII in understanding the document. However, he fails to reckon with the fact that the material in the Torgau Articles presupposed a confession of the catholic faith, as in the Schwabach Articles. Thus, for example, the "two kingdoms" that underlies CA XXVIII arises out of the doctrines reflected in such articles as CA IV, XVI and XVIII, not the other way around.
13. This sentence is lacking in the *editio princeps* of 1531.

14. CA [Conclusion of Part One] 1–2, citing the lengthier German version.
15. Peter Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum. The Function of the patristic Argument in the Theology of Philip Melanchthon* (Geneva: Droz, 1961). The title itself comes from CA XX:12 (Latin).
16. See Timothy J. Wengert, “‘Qui vigilantissimis oculis veterum omnium commentarios excusserit’: Philip Melanchthon’s Patristic Exegesis,” in: *Die Patristik in der Biblexegese des 16. Jahrhunderts*, ed. David C. Steinmetz (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), 115–34.
17. Heinz Scheible, “Melanchthon und Luther während des Augsburger Reichstags 1530,” *Melanchthon und die Reformation: Forschungsbeiträge*, ed. Gerhard May and Rolf Decot (Mainz: Zabern, 1996), 198–221.
18. *D. Johann Ecks Vierhundertundvier Artikel zum Reichstag von Augsburg 1530*, ed. Wilhelm Gussmann (Kassel: Pillardy, 1930); translated in *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord*, eds. Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).
19. See the *Book of Concord*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 235, n. 425.
20. See Ian Siggins, “Luther and the Catholic Preachers of His Youth,” in *Luther: Theologian for Catholics and Protestants*, ed. George Yule (Edinburgh: Clark, 1986).
21. The language of atonement, drawn from Romans 3, did not at this point in Melanchthon’s career presume some sort of theory about God’s wrath but excluded our sacrificing merit.
22. See, Dennis Groh and Robert C. Gregg, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).
23. See, Timothy J. Wengert, *Human Freedom, Christian Righteousness: Philip Melanchthon’s Exegetical Dispute with Erasmus of Rotterdam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Philipp Melanchthon (February 16, 1497 – April 19, 1560) German author of the Augsburg Confession of the Lutheran Church (1530), humanist, theologian, and educator. Active during the Protestant Reformation, he was a friend of Martin Luther and defended his views. In 1521 Melanchthon published the *Loci Communes*, the first systematic treatment of the new Wittenberg theology developed by Luther.