



Philip Melanchthon – Bridge-Builder of the Reformation

With his principle of “unity in reconciled diversity” Melanchthon was the first protestant ecumenist and by it he stamped present-day Europe. By Martin Friedrich.

Protestants do not have any saints. Yet we too have teachers and forerunners in faith whom we should remember. To these belongs Philip Melanchthon, the 450th anniversary of whose death was celebrated on 19th April. As Luther’s closest theological associate he was at the same time an independent thinker with a European reputation who also has things to say to the present time.

It is part of his distinctive character that he was a humanist before he came into contact with the Reformation. He combined his humanist inheritance with the impulses of the Reformation and by this stamped Reformation theology. That was already shown in his Wittenberg inaugural lecture of 1518 with its challenge to hold together humanist education and Christian piety. Throughout his life he saw it as a special responsibility to prepare beginning students for the encounter with the Gospel. A tutorial system and regular discussion exercises were part of his programme for study reform. Yet it is not only the professional model of the protestant minister as an educated all-rounder on the high ground of contemporary education and culture that goes back to Melanchthon. Just as important for him was the second mark of Protestantism: mature laypeople who can assess and independently apply what they have heard. Alongside the training of the elite, education in breadth must not come too short. So he carried out visitations of schools and encouraged numerous school reforms.

Melanchthon made Protestantism an educational movement. Not that he regarded education as an end in itself or hoped to educate people to goodness. They can only become good by receiving God’s gift of grace by faith. However, he saw the mediation of faith as itself an educational event. The Bible is the highest educational good. For the recognition of the Law reveals to me my dependence on God’s grace, the recognition of the Gospel opens the way to a new life and acting in discipleship. These thoughts, developed by Luther, were systematised by Melanchthon as one of his truest pupils.

Melanchthon’s chief theological work alongside the *Loci Communes Rerum Theologicarum*, the Augsburg Confession of 1529, also shows him as a bridge-builder between the confessions. In order to prove that the Reformation drew on Christian tradition he presented a comprehensive defence of the new understanding of faith and the church reforms based on it. Luther distanced himself slightly ironically from Melanchthon’s diplomatic tone but testified that he had correctly reproduced the theological concerns of the Reformation. The new

understanding of grace as justification solely by grace through faith is the foundation for preaching and teaching. Here the other side too ought to reflect afresh on the doctrine of the Bible. The innovations introduced in the life of the church must not be seen as divisive, for it is not necessary “that everywhere uniform ceremonies instituted by men be observed”, thus the renowned article 7. With this Melanchthon laid the foundations of the protestant understanding of ecumenism. The Leuenberg Agreement, and with it our contemporary model of church fellowship, rests on his formulations.

Melanchthon still remained true to these principles when he widened his efforts from 1530 to reconciliation with the Upper Germans and the Swiss. By interpreting Lutheran teachings in such a way as to make clear their fundamental agreement with the other Reformers he made it possible for south-western cities like Strasbourg, Constance and Ulm to be integrated in the alliance of the Protestant estates. Later he aimed further for an understanding with the Roman Catholics – often now under attack in his own camp but still in accordance with his fundamental principle of willingness to compromise if only the Gospel remained intact.

Melanchthon’s impact in Europe was enormous. Yet with his principle of allowing unity to be described in reconciled diversity he is not only the first Protestant ecumenist but also a great European. It was one of his convictions that diversity as such is not harmful. Diversity must admittedly be combined with the effort to seek for principles of unity. Yet that unity is not already given but has first to be reached in conversation. We are born to speak with each other – this axiom of Melanchthon’s is also a European axiom.

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