

PHILIP MELANCHTHON

Teacher of Germany

If you happen to enjoy visiting Lutheran Churches you might have noticed that some Lutheran Churches include the abbreviation U.A.C. in their official church name. This abbreviation stands for “Unaltered Augsburg Confession” and it is the key to understanding the career of Philip Melanchthon. When it comes to Philip Melanchthon most of us have at least heard his name, but could scarcely tell you anything more about him. That’s because his name is so often associated with Martin Luther that we fail to make a distinction. In fact, Martin Luther’s legacy so eclipses that of Melanchthon’s that he is almost forgotten except in name only. It is true the two shared a very close bond of friendship and worked side-by-side during some of the most turbulent years of the Lutheran Reformation. Melanchthon played Robin to Luther’s Batman. He was the voice of reason calming the storm of Luther’s hot temper. The two were indeed an odd match, but perfectly suited for each other. Consider how Luther himself described their differing personalities: “I am rough, boisterous, stormy and altogether warlike. I am born to fight against innumerable monsters and devils. I must remove stumps and stones, cut away thistles and thorns and clear the wild forests; but Master Philip comes along softly and gently, sowing and watering with joy.” As long as Melanchthon was tucked under the protection of Luther, the two played to each other’s strengths. Melanchthon was a man who desired the background never the spotlight. He was timid, reserved and shy. His personality matched his physical appearance as he was lean and wispy and less than five feet in stature. He was not a leader by nature, but a thinker. Hence why he is called the “Teacher of Germany”. Luther was the Reformer, but Melanchthon preferred the classroom quietly hammering out intellectual minutia. And yet, as soon as Luther began to decline in health, the mantle of responsibility passed to Melanchthon. He was forced to take center stage, but this was to have negative consequences. The image on the bulletin captures all of this in a glance. Notice how Melanchthon looks a bit unsure of himself; he looks shifty and lost. Notice also how his coat is way too big for him. It absolutely swamps him. He was not equipped to fill the shoes (or should we say the coat?) of Luther, and when he was thrust into the limelight, his timidity got the best of him. But let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves.

On August 25, 1518, ten months after Luther had posted his 95 theses, and when Luther needed a friend and helper the most, a young gifted scholar arrived in Wittenberg. Melanchthon was only 21 years of age when he accepted the post to be a professor of Hebrew and Greek. By all accounts he was brilliant, entering the

University of Heidelberg at the age of 12 and holding a degree by the time he was 14 years old! He had been trained in the school of Humanism, which set great emphasis on the Classics and Language. This gave him a unique edge when it came to wrestling with the Bible in its original languages. From the moment he arrived in Wittenberg, Luther was impressed with the young genius and often relied on him to assist him in biblical interpretation. Melanchthon was Luther's closest advisor and friend. He counseled Luther through the many ups and downs of his hectic life. Being a scholar, Melanchthon was a gifted writer. He took the chaotic ideas of Luther, which were haphazardly thrown about, and organized them into a coherent, systemized body of doctrine. Melanchthon was the principal author of the *Augsburg Confession*, the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* and the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, all of which are included in the Book of Concord and form our confessional stance as Lutherans. For this alone, he is worthy of our admiration and thanks.

But this was all to change when Luther was forced to step aside and let others lead in his stead. Luther had a razor sharp tongue, which matched his razor sharp mind. Once he set himself to something he never wavered. Such was not the case with Melanchthon for he was more conciliatory in nature. He tried to see all sides, understand all sides, and accommodate all sides. Seeing how the burden of leadership passed to him, he was terrified of ruining everything. Instead of charging head-first, he preferred to tiptoe, testing the waters before taking the plunge. Luther was concerned with the overall outcome, the end-goal, but Melanchthon was concerned more with the means needed to attain the goal. He was more ecumenical in spirit and believed he could find the balance, which would appease everyone. And so beginning in the late 1530s he began to revise the Augsburg Confession, again and again. He never intended to change the meaning only clarify certain points to reach a consensus with his opponents. The small changes that he made to the confessional document became known as the *Variata*, and these variations opened the door to much internal conflict. For example, he modified some of the strong language concerning the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. While this pleased John Calvin and the Calvinist movement, who rejected the "real presence" doctrine of the Lutherans, it enraged the confessional Lutheran movement. These small changes were rejected by many conservative Lutherans. They preferred the original to Melanchthon's newer editions. And so from thence forward, there was a distinction made between the Unaltered Augsburg Confession (UAC) of 1530 and the *Variata* of 1540.

All that's left I suppose is to think about what we can learn from this great thinker. Melanchthon once said, "In essentials, unity; in differences, liberty; in all things, charity" and he was absolutely right in saying such. With Melanchthon, we should learn to be gentle in our approach, to be calm thinkers, and practice charity toward those with whom we disagree. We should embody an ecumenical heart desiring above all to unite God's Church into a single voice and confession. God's Church is One, and we should do all that we can to find common ground with our brothers and sisters in Christ who happen to hold a faith, which differs from ours. But let us also learn from Melanchthon's mistakes. For the essentials of faith require unity, and do not permit individual interpretation. When it comes to the essentials concerning Christ (His work, His person, His sacramental gifts), we dare not give an inch lest they take a mile. With Luther, we must hold the confessional line and fight till the end to preserve God's sacred Word. God's treasures must be safeguarded, and if we give them up a piece at a time eventually there is nothing left in the treasury. So let us remember Melanchthon-the good, the bad, the ugly. For God employs all kinds, and in the end we are all sinful humans in need of God's grace. We can do no better than to conclude with Melanchthon's own words: "You contribute nothing to your salvation except the sin that made it necessary."

Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Jeremy H. Mills