

## **PHILIP MELANCTHON: SCHOLAR AND REFORMER**

**Eric Frank**

The sixteenth century reformation has given the Protestant Church a rich heritage and many examples of faith and courage. The writings and preaching of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Knox were so voluminous that they put many ministers in this 20th century computer age to shame. However, when reflecting on these important figures, it is easy to allow their accomplishments to overshadow the labors of other men who humbly worked side-by-side with the “Super-Reformers,” and in many cases, were a stabilizing factor for their stormy personalities.

One of these “other” reformers was Philip Melancthon. By the providence of God he was groomed to stimulate and establish the reformation in Germany with Martin Luther. Although Melancthon died in 1560 at the age of sixty-three, his activities for the Kingdom of Heaven were so numerous and important that only the first part of his life is sketched out in this article.

### ***His Birth and Childhood***

On February 14, 1497, Melancthon was born Philip Schwartzerd. George Schwartzerd, his father, was a master armorer in the town of Bretten in the Palatinate (southern Germany). He was a pious man who had gained the respect of the princes in the Palatinate, Bavaria, and Saxony. Philip’s sensitive and compassionate mother also impacted him greatly.

Truly, Melancthon was blessed with godly parents who instilled in him the importance of prayer, piety, and the fear of God. However, before Philip’s eleventh birthday his father, on his deathbed, called his young son to his side. After a blessing he sent Philip to his Grandfather Reuter’s home; two days later George Schwartzerd died. Although the youngster left his dying father with great sorrow, this event proved to be beneficial for the spiritual awakening that would soon come.

### ***Melancthon’s Education***

During a short stay with his grandfather, Melancthon’s thirst for learning began to be quenched and his God-given abilities became evident. Reuter blessed Philip, Philip’s brother, and his own son with an excellent tutor, John Hungarus. Hungarus was hard on Melancthon, both, in and out of the classroom, but as the reformer put into perspective much later, “He made a scholar of me. He loved me as a son, I loved him as a father; and we shall meet, I hope, in heaven.”

Shortly after this time Philip’s grandfather also passed away, and the three boys were sent to stay with a grand aunt, the sister of the famous Hebrew scholar Reuchlin. At the school in Pforzheim Philip continued to excel in his studies, and especially in Greek. When Reuchlin came

for a visit he was so impressed with the youth's aptitude that he presented Philip with two precious gifts: the Bible and a Greek grammar.

On a second visit Philip proved himself competent, not only in Greek, but also in Latin (in fact, by the age of seventeen Melancthon was more proficient in Greek and Latin than in his native German). It was at this second visit that Reuchlin, following the habit of many scholars of the time, changed Philip's last name from Schwartzerd to the Greek name Melancthon (both names mean *black earth*).

In 1509, at the ripe age of twelve, Melancthon left Pforzheim and attended the University of Heidelberg. He continued his classical education, including philosophy, and graduated two years later with his Bachelor's degree. At the invitation of Reuchlin Philip, then, continued his training at Tübingen. After pouring all his energies into his studies, a seventeen year old Melancthon graduated with a well deserved Master of Arts degree in 1514; this young man was truly a Master in the ancient languages.

During these years Melancthon did not neglect his study of the sacred Scriptures either. In between church services he was seen enjoying a book, and because his volume was thicker than the prayer books, he was accused of reading secular literature on the Lord's Day. However, the book that commanded his attention was the Bible, something he carried with him always.

After his graduation, and before his call to Wittenburg, Melancthon busied himself at the University of Tübingen, lecturing on ancient literature and translating the works of the Greek philosophers. In 1518, when he was just twenty-one years old, Melancthon published his own Greek grammar. Not only did this future reformer have the knowledge, he also possessed the ability to communicate his lessons in a thoughtful and stimulating fashion.

Melancthon, like Reuchlin and Erasmus, was influenced by humanism. Many aspects of Renaissance humanism prevailed at the time: trade, industry, ideas, observation, study of the classics: literature, philosophy, art and architecture, ethics, freedom, and a new outlook on the individual were all emphasized. Purity in the Church was also a concern, and it was the hope that knowledge would check the corruption and hypocrisy.

Throughout Melancthon's life he stressed the importance of scholarship, education, and a devout Christian testimony. Although Melancthon sided with Luther and Carlstadt on the issue of free will at the Leipzig disputation, this Renaissance mind-set led him later on to reject Luther's teaching on the bondage of the human will. Instead, he adopted a more humanistic approach. Philip Schaff described Melancthon's position aptly: "Human nature is radically, but not absolutely and hopelessly, corrupt; it can not without the aid of the Holy Spirit produce spiritual affections such as the fear and love of God, and true obedience; but it can accept or reject divine grace."

Melancthon did not allow his personal struggles with theology to shade his duty to the Church. The Augsburg Confession, which Melancthon composed, is faithful to Luther's teaching on the bondage of the will.

### ***His Call to Wittenburg***

In 1518, upon the recommendation of Reuchlin, the elector Frederick invited Melancthon to teach in Wittenburg. After an exhortation from Reuchlin, Melancthon accepted the call and set out for the university. Upon Philip's arrival, Martin Luther and the rest of the faculty were unimpressed with the twenty-one year old, passing quick judgment upon his small frame and timid personality. However, when Melancthon delivered his inaugural address four days later their skepticism was answered. All those who were present were amazed and Martin Luther was overjoyed.

It was at this time that Luther received much needed encouragement. Throughout his years at Wittenburg Luther had followed his conscience as it was instructed by the Word of God. Ten months earlier he had nailed his ninety-five theses upon the door of the Wittenburg Church, and shortly he would have to appear before Cardinal Cajetan to answer for his actions. From the start Luther was unsure of the direction to take and a split with Rome was the furthest thing from his mind; but God, knowing the pressures that awaited him, raised up the perfect friend and fellow-laborer in Philip Melancthon. The two were different in temperament and personality, and yet had the same devotion and zeal for the truth. The boldness and insight of Luther and the gentleness and scholarship of Melancthon were a perfect compliment. Although Melancthon wavered in some areas at the Diet of Augsburg and at the end of his life, while Luther was alive they combined for a dynamic team of reformers.

After filling the Greek chair at the University, Melancthon immediately began lecturing on Homer, the epistle to Titus, and then, other biblical books. He taught both Greek and Hebrew grammar and stimulated the whole student body to study the ancient languages with vigor. His classes were constantly full, and soon he became the school's most popular professor. The University's reputation became so great that students from all over Europe flocked to attend. Melancthon was never ordained, and yet he interpreted the German sermons for the foreigners after the services were over.

In 1519 Melancthon, along with many others, escorted Luther and Carlstadt to the Leipzig disputation. There, he proved to be extremely helpful during and in-between the debates. He listened intently to the speakers and found the weaknesses in the Catholic argumentation. During intermissions he discussed possible strategies with Luther and Carlstadt. At one point during the disputation a frustrated Dr. Eck told him to stop helping the Wittenburg speaker.

### ***Melancthon's Marriage and Family***

Melancthon had great resolve to stay at Wittenburg, and yet other universities also coveted his talents. Because of this, many of Melancthon's peers desired that he solidify his commitments by marrying the daughter of the city's burgo-master. Philip, at first, was hesitant, not willing to give up any of his study time, but in the summer of 1520 he married Catharina Krapp. Soon domestic life began to grow on the reformer, and he understood and rejoiced over the virtues of marriage. His pious and affectionate wife gave him many blessings, but most of all,

his four children. Melancthon's original fears were unwarranted; his work was never compromised because of his family. He went to bed shortly after supper and greeted the next day at 2 o'clock in the morning. He would use one hand to rock his infant's cradle and in the other he held a book of his choice.

### ***Melancthon's Common Places***

The next year, while Luther was penned-up at the Wartburg Castle working diligently on his German translation, Melancthon was back in Wittenburg producing the first systematic theology based solely on the Word of God. This document was called *On the Common Places of Theology*. Melancthon's goal was to set forth the major teachings of the Bible in a systematic and simplistic fashion.

His own lectures on the book of Romans were the source for *Common Places*. The doctrines of grace, faith, original sin, and repentance were plainly set forth. In these early days Melancthon's position on free will was fatalistic, i.e., man's will is not free in any respects. Later he tilted to an opposite stance, believing that man can receive or reject the Gospel after the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

Melancthon's treatise became the theological textbook of the movement and its many editions were well received by all the major Protestant scholars, including Calvin. The Reformation in Germany now had more than biblical preaching. The movement had a solid confession and, in a few months, would have a German Bible. The Word of God was the foundation of the work in Wittenburg, because of this the gates of Rome could not prevail against it.

### ***The German Bible***

After Luther returned from Wartburg Castle, both he and Melancthon spent hours with the Greek preparing the final draft of Luther's German New Testament (Luther's first draft produced at Wartburg only took him eleven weeks to complete!). In 1522 the NT was published; because of its readability and affordability thousands of copies were sold.

### ***Melancthon's Struggles and Disappointments***

These years for Melancthon were filled with blessings and abundant labors for the Kingdom of God. At the same time there were many assaults launched from the enemies of the Reformation and a multitude of struggles and fears for Philip Melancthon. The edict of Worms had put a ban upon Martin Luther, and many people used the Reformation for their own gains and advantage.

If these things weren't bad enough, there was disharmony among the different parties seeking reform. At Marburg, in 1529, Melancthon sought unity between the Luther and Zwingli. Articles of faith were drawn up and the two sides found common ground on fourteen out of

fifteen propositions; this was not good enough for Luther; there would be no unity. All these things brought great sorrow to the heart the reformer Melancthon. His impulse to unify against a common enemy was not stimulated out of fear, but rather, that the Church of Christ be whole.

### ***The Diet of Augsburg***

In 1530 the emperor Charles V convened the Diet of Augsburg. The threat of the Turks was great and the situation between Rome and those seeking reform was bringing disunity and weakness to Europe. Melancthon and the German princes wanted Charles and the Diet to grant them freedom to preach biblical doctrines and to worship with legal status. Melancthon drew up the famous Augsburg confession, and on June 25, 1530, the document was read aloud at the Diet. Many from the opposition were astonished when they heard the graceful way Melancthon had set forth the propositions (most of the statements were positive affirmations of faith; only a few were directed against the Roman Church and the papacy).

The electors who signed the document did not shrink back from confirming their faith. They esteemed the cross of Christ of greater worth than their positions of authority. Although the reformers did not receive what they had desired from Charles, they did have biblical articles of faith that remain the standard confession for conservative Lutheran Churches to this day. The events at Augsburg laid the groundwork for Protestant victories in the future.

### ***Melancthon's Compromise***

The pressures of the Diet of Augsburg were great upon Melancthon. When the papal legate Campeggi counseled the emperor to crush the movement with great persecutions, Melancthon assured him that the Protestants did not differ in doctrine from Rome and that minor changes in worship and ecclesiastical order should be tolerated (the Roman Church did not officially condemn the doctrines of the reformers until the Council of Trent over a decade later).

In the weeks that followed Melancthon continued pursuing negotiations with the legate, but Rome would not compromise. Several electors who had boldly confessed Christ blasted Melancthon for his weakness, but they were princes and not theologians. The man who knew him best, Martin Luther, never treated his friend with contempt. Instead, he exhorted Melancthon as a father and encouraged him to remain true to the teachings of the Bible no matter what the cost. Luther knew that his friend was a true soldier of Christ. He never whitewashed Melancthon's actions, but he did understand the strain that his friend was under and wrote to him in the appropriate fashion (Luther himself could not attend the Diet of Augsburg because he was under the ban. He continually corresponded from nearby Coburg). Philip Schaff put Melancthon's compromises in proper perspective:

Melancthon may be charged with moral weakness and mistake of judgment, but not with unfaithfulness. Luther remained true to his invaluable friend, who was indispensable to the evangelical cause, and did it the greatest service at Augsburg. He

comforted him in his letters from Coburg.

### ***Conclusion***

Because of Melancthon's actions at Augsburg, some people, since that time, have viewed him as a traitor or a compromiser. These are strong adjectives to use for someone who did so much for the Reformation and, ultimately, for our own religious freedom.

Without excusing Melancthon's compromise, we do not know all the things that were running through his mind and heart. One thing we do know, at that time not many men were Philip Melancthon. No one could match him in scholarship except, possibly, Erasmus, and few had his sensitivity and devotion to Christ. Although he wavered under these incredible circumstances, he loved the Church of Christ with all his affections. No one should be hasty in passing sentence; many of us today have difficulty just knocking on our neighbor's door to bear witness, let alone testifying before true enemies of Christ.

Was Philip Melancthon a scholar? Yes, in every sense of the word. Was he a reformer? Martin Luther never doubted it, and neither should we. God, grant us more men like Philip Melancthon, and by your grace keep us from compromise. Amen.