

## Chapter 6

### *Philip Melanchthon*

Now we turn to another major figure in the reforming of the Church, closely associated with Martin Luther, but also important in his own right – Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560). His first name appears in a variety of spellings (Philipp and Philippe are commonly found), and his original surname was not actually Melanchthon, but Schwarzerd, which literally means “black earth”. He was born in Baden in Germany on 16 February, 1497, the son of an armourer. His mother was Barbara Reuter, the niece of a famous Humanist philosopher and Hebrew scholar, Johann Reuchlin. It was Reuchlin who took responsibility for Melanchthon’s early education, first employing a private tutor and then sending the young Philip to the highly-respected Latin school in Pforzheim – a school in which Reuchlin’s personal influence and ideas were powerfully evident. It was almost certainly Reuchlin who persuaded Philip to change his name to Melanchthon, which is simply the Greek form of his original name.

When he was only fourteen years old Melanchthon was awarded the degree of Bachelor of Arts in the University of Heidelberg, and three years later he gained the degree of Master of Arts in the University of Tubingen. But these qualifications were not in the field of theology – that was to come later. His range of learning was remarkable, especially in one so young. He was well-versed in mathematics, the sciences, philosophy and ancient Greek. Under his great-uncle’s influence he also studied the Hebrew Scriptures, and it was as a result of his wide learning that he began to develop a strongly critical attitude towards the conventional philosophy of his day. He also built up a strong interest in education, and later in his life he worked out a much-admired school plan. He trained teachers and was closely involved in the work of establishing universities. Even before he was twenty-one years of age he had written translations of the Greek classics and a text-book of the Greek language which continued in wide use for more than half a century.

#### ***Melanchthon and Luther***

In 1518, when he was still only twenty-one years old, Melanchthon was offered the post of Professor of Greek at the University of Wittenberg, and four days after his arrival he delivered his inaugural address, which he entitled *The Improvement of Studies*. This was in effect a proposal to inaugurate a new educational programme, aimed at the reforming of morals in society as

a whole, by dropping the traditional methods of teaching and going back to basic principles. In the audience was none other than Martin Luther, who listened with delight and admiration to what Melanchthon had to say. The two men became personal friends and collaborators, even though Luther was some fourteen years older than Melanchthon and very different in temperament. Despite his many talents, Luther was at heart always a rough and sometimes crude peasant, while Melanchthon was a refined intellectual. Luther was prepared to engage in face-to-face controversy (and even appeared to enjoy it), while Melanchthon was mild-mannered, courteous and generally unwilling to participate in quarrelsome disputes. Some of his critics even went so far as to label him a coward, but the reality was that he was able to appreciate truth on both sides of an argument, and he never wanted to take part in the slanderous and abusive squabbles which were so characteristic of much of Luther's activities. Each had qualities which the other lacked. They balanced one another out, and never allowed their differences to destroy their deep personal affection. It was only after Luther's death in 1546 that the distinctions between them became clearly evident.

### ***Melanchthon and the Reformation***

In 1519 Melanchthon began studying theology, and Wittenberg University awarded him the degree of Bachelor of Divinity. This was the first and only theological qualification that he ever received, but from that point on he came to regard himself as a theologian, rather than as a philosopher, and made a clear break from the influence of his great-uncle Johann Reuchlin. In his early years he tended to over-state his rejection of philosophy, and in his *Theological Introduction to Paul's Letter to the Romans* he wrote: "All philosophy is darkness and untruth . . ." though later in his career he modified that view and in reality he never fully broke away from his early training in Heidelberg and Tübingen.

He was drawn directly into the Reformation controversies at the Leipzig Disputation in June and July 1519, where Luther faced the impressive John Eck – the dispute that was to end so indecisively. Eck reprimanded Melanchthon for giving support to Luther during that debate, and Melanchthon replied in a very polite treatise setting out Luther's views on the supremacy of Scripture in matters of religion. In so doing he was publicly aligning himself with the Reformation cause, and showing his clear agreement with Luther – even though he never really liked the manner in which Luther presented his case.

When Luther was confined for his own safety in the Wartburg Castle from 1521 to 1522, the leadership of the German Reformation fell upon Melanchthon's shoulders, but he was not cut out for that kind of responsibility, and in any case he was still very young. So it was the radical Andrew Carlstadt who effectively took over, causing Luther much anxiety and provoking his return to Wittenberg. He later expressed his wish that Melanchthon's moderation might have been more evident during this period.

*The Loci Communes*

It was in 1521, the very year of Luther's incarceration in the Wartburg Castle, that Melanchthon's most famous book appeared. A year earlier, some of his over-enthusiastic students in the University had secretly arranged for the publication of the notes which Melanchthon had prepared for teaching purposes in class. He knew nothing of this until it was too late, and he was justifiably angry (though probably secretly flattered, too). However, as it was impossible to withdraw the publication, he decided that he would produce a new and revised edition, because the first had in any case been incomplete. This new version was called the *Loci Communes Rerum Theologicarum*, and it was structured on the lines of earlier writers' attempts to provide a kind of digest of religious principles for everyday use. Erasmus of Rotterdam had himself advocated a similar approach to theological study:

*Organise for yourselves collections of loci theologici. You can find in the Bible two or three hundred such ideas . . . loci are little nests in which you place the fruit of your reading. . . .*

Luther himself admired Melanchthon's book enormously and commented in his *Table Talk*:

*You cannot find anywhere a book which covers the whole of theology as fully as the Loci Communes do . . . next to Holy Scripture there is no finer book.*

In the introduction to the book, Melanchthon explained its purpose. He hoped that those who used it would discover two things. First, he expected them to find out what they ought to look for in the Bible, and, second, he wanted them to recognise that the Roman Church had been offering a theology based upon the philosophical ideas of Aristotle and not upon the teachings of Christ. He listed the topics that one would usually find in conventional books on theology, then added that most of them were useless because they merely provoked empty and pointless discussion. In particular he was scornful of those philosophers who wasted time speculating about the nature of God: in his view, God had already revealed all that human beings could ever hope to know, and the human processes of reason could not take that revelation any further. So, instead of the usual themes, Melanchthon dealt with the issues of human sinfulness, the nature of sin itself, the place of the law, the Gospel, justification by faith alone, Christian love, and the Sacraments (which he preferred to call "signs"). All of these themes, and the way in which they were arranged, were derived directly from St Paul's letters to the Romans and the Galatians in the New Testament. Indeed, Melanchthon actually described the letter to the Romans as a "compendium of Christian doctrine", thus agreeing totally with Luther's evaluation of it as the clearest of all expositions of the Christian Gospel.

The *Loci Communes* was revised by Melanchthon at intervals, and gradually increased in size until it was about four times longer than the original version. The alterations also revealed the extent to which his mind was changing on

certain issues. Gradually, instead of rejecting philosophy altogether, he came to accept that it did have a part to play in the systematising of theological insights, and he also began to allow that there was room for human reason in religious faith. The existence of God – a topic which at first he was unwilling even to discuss because he said it was a revealed truth – was later said to be evidenced within the world of nature, and thus open to rational consideration. Further, although he never gave up his view that the ultimate authority for faith is the Bible, he did acknowledge that the Roman Church had preserved something of the true tradition:

*In the true faith I include the whole doctrine handed down in the books of the prophets and the apostles, and brought together in the Apostles', the Nicene and the Athanasian creeds. . . .*

Here was an excellent example of his readiness to allow that both sides in the dispute had some truth in their position.

There was always a strong note of predestination in Melanchthon's teachings, and we can see this expressed plainly in the version of the *Loci Communes* published in 1521:

*Since all things that happen, happen necessarily according to divine predestination, our will has no liberty . . . the Scriptures teach that all things happen by necessity . . . the fact that the idea of predestination commonly seems rather harsh we owe to that godless theology of the Sophist philosophers, which has deeply impressed upon us the contingency of things and the freedom of the will that our tender little ears revolt at the truth of Scripture.*

This outlook appears to place Melanchthon rather closer in some respects to the ideas of John Calvin than those of Luther, but by 1535 he had evidently modified his view, and was prepared to accept that human beings are responsible for their own destiny in that they are free to accept or reject God's free gift of salvation. By 1540 he was able to write: "*God draws, but he draws him who is willing. . . .*"

This was clearly something of a departure from the strictly Lutheran position, and Melanchthon was showing signs that he did, after all, regard human good works as having some part to play in winning favour with God. In the *Loci Communes* of 1535, he tried to demonstrate that the two concepts of justification by faith *and* of good works within the believer must co-exist, and even added that good works are necessary to the attainment of eternal life. However, eight years later, in yet another revision of the *Loci Communes*, this discussion was omitted, and it appears from some of his other writings that what he meant to say was that good works are the necessary expressions of faith because they flow from it, and not that they are a necessary *condition* of faith. Melanchthon also moved away from Luther's teaching about the sacrament of the Mass, and did not accept the notion of "consubstantiation" which Luther had put forward.

### *The Augsburg Confession*

In 1530 a Diet took place at Augsburg, in the presence of the Emperor Charles V, when the Lutheran spokesmen tried to defend themselves against the current misrepresentations. They wanted to provide a clear summary of their true theology, in a form which would prove acceptable to the Church authorities. To this end, the *Augsburg Confession* was drawn up, ostensibly written jointly by Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon, but it is generally acknowledged that the work was almost entirely that of Melanchthon, because the language was so measured and moderate that it simply could not have come from Luther's vitriolic pen. It was written in two sections. The first was made up of twenty-one articles of belief on such matters as the Trinity, Original Sin, Christ, and the forgiveness of sins. The second section comprised a further seven articles, discussing the alleged abuses which had crept into the Church during the years immediately preceding the Reformation controversies. A fuller discussion of this document can be found later in this book (*see Chapter 14*), but we can note here that it was totally rejected by the Papal party at the Diet, and produced a response from them in the form of their own *Confutation*. The Emperor then refused to accept a counter-reply which Melanchthon wrote, so it was used instead as the basis for his tract entitled *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, published in 1531, and regarded by many as one of the finest of all the confessional documents of the Reformation period.

One of the effects of the *Augsburg Confession* was that it exposed the growing split within the ranks of Luther's supporters. Some of them considered that it was far too conciliatory, and very feeble in its presentation of the reformers' case. Again, it was Melanchthon in particular who was blamed for being weak and vacillating – a criticism very much like that which had previously been aimed at Erasmus, who was of course still alive at that time.

After the Augsburg meeting, further attempts were made (some by force) to settle the controversies in the Church, with compromises offered from both sides. Melanchthon was generally regarded by Catholics as the easiest reformer with whom to deal, because of his conciliatory spirit, but when he was seen by other reformers to be in dialogue with the Roman Church he was constantly accused of collaboration with the enemy. In reality, he never once wavered from his fundamental views about justification by faith and the ultimate authority of the Scriptures. For the sake of unity, however, he was prepared to accept Papal *government* of the Church, though he made it clear that he would never accept Papal *authority* over it. Inevitably this led to the loss of his reputation among many Lutherans, who felt that they could no longer regard him as their leader. So, instead of becoming the head of the reforming groups, he became simply the spokesman for a group of moderate theologians, contrasting strongly with a much more extreme party led by a man named Matthias Flacius Illyricus. Illyricus was a very erudite but very quarrelsome figure, Italian by background, who had never properly mastered the German language, though this did not

inhibit him from publishing violently worded pamphlets aimed at Melanchthon and his followers – who had by this time come to be known as Philippists.

Melanchthon's later years, after the death of Luther in 1546, were mainly taken up with his involvement in various minor controversies between the differing reforming parties, and with largely fruitless conferences and discussions with Church leaders. Having been deprived of the energy which Luther had provided, Melanchthon withdrew increasingly into his academic work, and eventually died on 19 April, 1560. Fittingly, he was buried beside the body of Luther in Wittenberg, having played no small part in the movement for reform and in the shaping of Lutheranism itself into a clearer and more organised system.

### **The terms “Protestant” and “Catholic”**

Before we move on to look at the next prominent figure in the story of the Continental Reformation, it will be helpful to glance at the meaning and application of the two words “Protestant” and “Catholic” in our survey. Throughout the sixteenth century there were actually two Reformations in progress. First, there was that movement which we have begun to describe, which can be said to have originated “from the bottom up” – that is to say, from the grass roots of ordinary society. Its beginnings can be traced back to a great many sources of religious and social discontent, as has been comprehensively demonstrated in recent historical studies, and this is what is commonly referred to as the Protestant Reformation. Strictly speaking, however, the word “Protestant” itself did not come into circulation until 1529, following a meeting (Diet) in the German town of Speyer, where a significant minority of aggrieved men complained strongly about the Church's failure to allow them freedom of conscience. Their complaints led to them being described as *protestatio*, or Protestants, and although at first the word was used in a derogatory way, it quickly came to be accepted as denoting almost any who held views which were critical of the traditional Church, no matter how mild or how radical their views might be.

By no means all of those who held reforming views felt it necessary to leave the traditional Church. They remained loyal to it, while at the same time acknowledging that there were some points at which they were in sympathy with what the reformers were advocating. As we shall see in later chapters, some of these reformist sympathisers actually held prominent positions in the Church's hierarchy, occasionally causing problems in the maintaining of centralised authority, and making it quite impossible to place them in neat categories.

For historians, uncritical use of the word “Protestantism” to describe positions held prior to 1529 is anachronistic, but of course it is also true to say that the Protestant *spirit* was already an existing reality before that date, and before it ever had a distinctive name. Because of its diverse origins it did not

at first have much by way of shape or coherence, but (as we shall see in greater detail in Chapter 14) it soon became clearer and more positive in its meaning, and under the hand of successive personalities it became more organised, and began to present a range of distinctive alternatives to Catholicism. All of these alternatives can properly be referred to as “Protestant” in the broadest sense, but as they each became more polarised so also it became necessary to find new words to identify them - a common practice was simply to attach to them the name of their most prominent spokesman, and to speak, for example, of “Lutheranism” or “Calvinism”, but even these terms did not always clearly demonstrate what they stood for, because they were often given different interpretations.

Second there was also another movement, sometimes misleadingly referred to as the Counter-Reformation, which came, so to speak, “from the top down”, because it was initiated and largely controlled by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. In effect it was an on-going programme of change, brought about in part by the need to respond to the Protestant threat, but more importantly by the Church’s growing awareness that all was not well within its own ranks. This Catholic Reformation will be more fully described later on, in Chapter 12, but here we can note that as it progressed it significantly changed the face of Roman Catholicism itself, so that by the close of the sixteenth century the Church had become very different from what it had been in the later Middle Ages and afterwards. Thus, like the word “Protestant”, the word “Catholic” also began to take on a broader range of applications, again making it increasingly difficult for the historian to speak in generalisations, as the character of the Church itself changed in response to pressures and influences both from inside and outside its own ranks.