

“What Can We Learn from Philip Melanchthon?”

Liturgical Date: Commemoration of Philip Melanchthon (February 16)

Primary Texts: Psalm 119:1-8, Deuteronomy 30:15-30, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9, St. Luke 24:44-48

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The sermon draws on biographical information and references our Bible texts for today. The title for the sermon asks “What Can We Learn from Philip Melanchthon?”

If you have been a Lutheran for a while you probably have at least heard of Philip Melanchthon. You certainly have heard of his work, as his theological contributions to Lutheranism are only second to Luther himself. You know the name “Augsburg” as it holds a special place in the history of the Reformation, where the German princes made a bold and united stand against the Emperor and Pope on June 25, 1530. They presented a Confession of 28 Articles outlining what they believed, based on the Bible. This was a watershed moment as the Protestants refused to kneel, figuratively and literally, to Rome. Even if it brought them ruin and death, they would not back down nor stop the preaching of the truth. As our Old Testament Lesson from Deuteronomy 30 teaches us it is in God that we find true life, even if the world takes our physical life away.

The *Augsburg Confession* was penned by none other than Philip Melanchthon. He later would write a much longer defense, in the common term of the time an “apology” (not what most people think of with the word “apology” today) further explaining true Christian

doctrine and refuting Roman criticism of the original document. Additionally, in 1537 Melanchthon composed the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, which was a strong rebuke to Rome's claims of absolute authority over the Church. There are 11 documents in the *Book of Concord*, our Lutheran Confessions, that explain to us what the Bible teaches. Three of them existed before the Reformation, the three creeds: Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian. Lutheran theologians after Luther contributed the final two documents of the Formula of Concord. Martin Luther wrote 3: the Small and Large Catechisms and the Smalcald Articles. So this means Philip Melanchthon contributed the same number of documents to our Confessions of faith, 3, as our namesake, Martin Luther.

Melanchthon was Luther's closest co-worker and a dear friend. It can be accurately said that he was Luther's "right hand man." When Luther could not, for safety reasons, go to Augsburg it was Melanchthon that he picked to put to print and present the Augsburg Confession. He led in times when Luther was absent and became the de-facto leader of the Lutherans after Luther's death in 1546. When Melanchthon died in 1560, he was buried right next to Luther in Wittenberg.

So when we consider all of this, it may cause us to wonder why Philip Melanchthon does not get more notoriety than he does. I mean, many people have not even heard of him. Anyone who has taken a world history or Western Civilization class knows something about Luther, but Melanchthon not so much. Even among Lutherans we don't really talk about him that much or know many of the details of his life. Much of this is because when you put the "sidekick" next to the "main

character” they can be overshadowed pretty easily. There is a reason that there are lots of “Batman” movies, but not one “Robin” movie, after all. And Luther was certainly a towering figure that cast a long shadow, and he was a powerful preacher, big, bold, outspoken-even caustic to his opponents. Melanchthon, on the other hand, was very much an academic scholar. His university lectures were attended by hundreds, but he didn’t preach in the pulpit of the city churches. He was soft-spoken and slight of build. He disliked conflict and sought to smooth over division. When Luther read the Augsburg Confession he approved, but remarked that, “he could have never have treaded so lightly” as Melanchthon had.

So who exactly was Philip Melanchthon? He was born in the German town of Bretten on February 16, 1497. His birth name was not even “Melanchton” but “Schwartzzerdt”. He later changed his name to the Greek translation of his last name, which was a fashionable thing for scholars of the time to do. He was educated at Heidelberg and Tübingen. He was an expert in both Latin and Greek. In 1518, he accepted a call to the faculty of the University of Wittenberg. In 1521 he published the first edition of *Loci Communes* (Commonplaces), a thorough exposition of Biblical theology. Melanchthon was a devoted family man. Just like his mentor Luther, his wife’s name was also Katharina. His Katie was the daughter of Wittenberg’s mayor. They had four children.

And now that we have seen the huge impact that Melanchthon had on the Reformation and know a little bit about him, we want to turn our attention to the title of the sermon, “What Can We Learn from Philip

Melanchthon?” Briefly, I will present four lessons that I pray that we can take to heart this morning.

First of all, he was a man of action. Jesus tells His disciples in Luke 24:47, “*And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.*” After Jesus’ Ascension, they did have to wait for the Holy Spirit to descend-but not for long, only 10 days. Then they got busy. Likewise, St. Paul commends and encourages his protégé Timothy in 1 Timothy 4 that although he is young, this should not stop him from serving the Lord. You may have picked this up from what I have presented so far. Philip Melanchthon was born in 1497, making him 14 years younger than Martin Luther. This means that in 1518 when he became a professor at the University of Wittenberg, he was only 21 years old! In fact, Melanchthon himself was only 12 when he was a university student! He is 24 when *Loci Communes* is published and 33 for the Augsburg Confession.

So that being said, I don’t want to hear any of this, “I will be able to devote more time to God when I retire” business! I have always been a proponent of getting people involved in the Church from a young age as they have things to offer the kingdom and will often more likely remain involved if they feel they are a valued member of the community of faith. For example, here in our congregation once confirmed you are eligible to become a voting member. When we submitted the draft of our bylaws for review by District, I received some feedback that said, “you realized this wording means kids of about 14 years old could vote in meetings”, my response was “Yes, I do. If we tell them they are now adults in the Church, then they should be able to.” Of course, we do have

seasons in our life when we have more time than others-that is true. But don't keep putting off serving the Lord, serving His Church, and witnessing to the lost to some far-off day in the future. God has placed you where you are right now. And often times, opportunity knocks to serve and witness and we are to answer. We can't all be professors of theology at age 21, but God has given us all opportunities to grow in faith and serve.

Of course reaching certain levels of responsibility in the congregation means that you have obtained a certain level of spiritual instruction and maturity. This leads us to our second thing that we can learn from Philip Melanchthon-the importance of education. Germans, and if you grew up in a family of German heritage you know this all too well, have always placed an emphasis on education. Melanchthon essentially began universities at Marburg, Konigsberg, and Jena. He re-organized others including Leipzig. He created a detailed plan for children across Germany to be educated and it was implemented. He is remembered in Germany for being a founding father of the educational system.

Luther himself wrote the Small Catechism as an instructional handbook for teaching the essentials of the Christian faith. Our Missouri Synod today operates the largest Protestant school system in America and we have 10 colleges and seminaries. Why this emphasis on education? From our Psalm for today (119:4-5), *"You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently. Oh that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes."* How do we know what these are? By learning the Word of God. By teaching from a Biblical foundation and worldview.

The Old Testament Law places an emphasis on teaching the Law to future generations. When Jesus commanded His Disciples to go out and make more disciples, how were they to do it? By baptizing and teaching. Our congregational mission statement has three planks: the first is *preaching* and third is *reaching*. The second is (help me out here), teaching. We can learn from Philip Melanchthon the importance of teaching and discipling the next generation of Christians.

When we observe these days on the Church calendar that commemorate important Biblical and Christian historical figures, we must always remember that we are remembering men and women that were saints *and* sinners. So for the third point that we can learn from Philip Melanchthon we turn to an area of weakness for him-an area where we can learn from his error. Luther, by his own admission, could be too harsh-even to the point of being profane-in blazing a storm of attacks against his critics that would give Donald Trump pause before tweeting. Melanchthon, on the other hand, erred at times by being too weak and conciliatory.

He always held out hope that the Reformation could reconcile with Rome. He also hoped that the Protestants would be able to unite, rather than splintering into the many factions that they had. Of course, this is a good hope in that the Lord wants unity and love amongst His people-but in being realistic we must know that this unity is only likely to happen after Jesus returns! St. Paul admonishes the church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 3, as they had divided into factions following different teachers. Luther himself, although he eventually came to accept it, was not even fond of people calling themselves Lutherans-he

wanted the focus to be on Jesus. But St. Paul and Luther both rightly recognized that we cannot compromise the truth in our pursuit of unity.

During the time Luther was alive, Melanchthon's tendencies to bend in that direction were kept in check by Luther. But after Luther's death and he assumed leadership, he definitely had some moments that we don't want to emulate. Melanchthon remained firm in his beliefs, but was willing to alter some of the wording in Confessional documents in terms of the Lord's Supper and even justification if that wording would mean that it would be more acceptable to the Calvinists and Romanists. So basically you end up with an agreement using the same terms but each party retaining their own understanding of what those terms mean. I don't need to tell you that we face these challenges in our world today. There is much pressure in this regard. But we must hold fast to the truth-not to be mean-spirited, but to be faithful. We cannot share out pulpits and altars with those of a different faith or confession not because we don't like them as people, but because we as the Psalm proclaimed must be diligent in keeping the Lord's statutes. So if I may be so bold, perhaps we should speak a little more with the tone of Melanchthon, but behave more with the actions of Luther!

There is one more thing that to present this morning regarding what we can learn from Philip Melanchthon. It is actually something that we learn from Jesus. We hear it from the Apostles. We hear it proclaimed throughout the Bible. And that is the centrality of the doctrine of justification. Melanchthon simply echoed it, as Jesus said in Luke 24:45 that He opened their understanding that they would understand the Scriptures. We find in the writings of Melanchthon a

very clear and beautiful explanation of the doctrine on which the
“Church stands or falls.”

There is so much great stuff in the Augsburg Confession, but it is
one paragraph, Article IV on Justification, which we can never overstate.
Here is it is:

Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by
their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for
Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received
into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. By His death,
Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for
righteousness in His sight.

That is it. Short and to the point. And vitally important. And
when you get a chance you can read his much fuller and longer
treatment of this doctrine in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession.
But that one paragraph is what it all comes down to. If it is not true, we
mine as well pack up and go home. But it is true. And Philip
Melanchthon knew it and I pray that you do too. What can we learn
from Philip Melanchthon? We can learn to not look to ourselves for
salvation. We can learn to not look to the Pope or Calvin for salvation.
Not to look to Melanchthon or even Luther for salvation. But only look
to Christ. In Jesus, the one who has died for our sins and rose from the
dead in victory-this is where true righteousness and eternal salvation is
found. Justification by the grace of God, through faith in Jesus Christ.
Period.
Amen.