



PHILIPP MELANCHTHON 1497 – 1560

Five years (1497) after Columbus set sail for his first voyage, Philipp Schwarzerd was born in southern Germany. He was a brilliant boy who received his B.A. from the University of Heidelberg when only twelve and received his Master of Arts from Tübingen when only seventeen. He had a great facility with ancient languages; he could speak Latin and Greek better than his native German. His uncle called him Melanchthon, Greek for “black earth,” which was the German meaning of his name.

When he was twenty-one Melanchthon became Professor of Greek at the new University of Wittenberg. It was only ten months after Martin Luther has posted his famous theses on the church door at Wittenberg. Melanchthon became totally devoted to Luther, and a great friendship developed between the two. Both men sensed that God’s providence had a special mission for them to do together. Even so, the two reformers were quite different. While Luther was able to bring the Reformation to the common people; Melanchthon’s quiet scholarship brought the Reformation to the scholars. The Reformation would not have been the same without the two friends working closely in concert.

When Luther was hidden in the Wartburg Castle translating the New Testament into German, Melanchthon was in Wittenberg writing the first Protestant theology. In 1521, when he was only twenty-four, he presented his work *Loci Communes* or *Theological Common Places* based on exegetical sermons on Romans. It was a practical expression of Christian theology, especially developing the truth of salvation by grace in Christ as the only answer to human sinfulness. Later editions of the *Loci* included a more complete theology beginning with God and creation and culminating in the bodily resurrection. Melanchthon also emphasized the importance of works as a result and witness to faith.

Melanchthon joined Luther in the important conferences which shaped the Protestant movement of the sixteenth century – the Leipzig Disputation, the Marburg Colloquy, and the Diet of Augsburg in 1530. It was at the latter that he made his strongest mark. After refusing to listen to Luther’s ideas in earlier meetings, Emperor Charles V requested an orderly presentation of the Reformer’s position. In response, Melanchthon wrote the Augsburg Confession, which even today forms the classic doctrinal statement of the Lutheran Church.

Melanchthon and Luther did not intend to break from the Roman Church but to bring it back to the Gospel and reform it from within. In 1541 Melanchthon met Cardinal Contarini at the Colloquy of Rengensburg in an attempt to heal the breach between the Reformers and Rome. A joint statement on “Justification by Faith” was worked out, but their superiors rejected it.

Melanchthon was Luther’s natural successor at his death, but his quiet, conciliatory spirit did not have Luther’s force and power. When Melanchthon died at age 63 in 1560, he was buried beside Luther at the Castle Church in Wittenberg.