Did Melanchthon Become a Synergist? (*CTQ* Apr. 1976)

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PHILIP MELANCHTHON (1497-1560) was one of the most important men in the Lutheran Reformation. After arriving at Wittenberg University in 1518 as a professor of Greek and the classics, he began to devote himself increasingly to the evangelical theological task and was encouraged in his endeavors by Luther himself. He authored numerous lectures and commentaries on classical works and Biblical books and wrote textbooks on many subjects. His *Loci* was Lutheranism's first systematic theology. He drafted the Augsburg Confession (1530) and was the author of the Apology of the Confession (1531). His treatise *Of the Power and Primacy of the Pope* (1537) was also included in the Book of Concord. His work in reforming education at all levels throughout much of Germany earned him the title "the teacher of Germany." He represented Lutheranism at a great many theological conferences.

Melanchthon was second only to Luther as a spokesman for the German Reformation, yet his last years were embittered by controversies within Lutheranism, and he still has a dubious reputation in many Lutheran circles. He has been criticized for his altered edition of the Augsburg Confession, the *Variata* of 1540, which he seems to have prepared with innocent intent. He has also been harshly criticized for compromising with the Roman Catholic victors when the military cause seemed lost for the Protestants in 1548. He acquiesced in an ecclesiastical settlement, the Leipzig Interim, which, he thought, preserved the doctrine of justification by faith and tolerated only the imposition of certain indifferent things *(adiaphora)*. Between Luther's death (1546) and the production of the Formula of Concord (1577) controversies wracked the Lutheran Church, and Melanchthon was charged with errors on good works, original sin, the Lord's Supper, and the doctrine of conversion.

This paper is concerned with the doctrine of conversion. Synergism is any doctrine of conversion that attributes to man any ability to contribute something to his own conversion. Monergism, the Lutheran position, holds that God alone brings about the whole of conversion. Synergists differ from one another, and a particular synergist may attribute most or almost all of conversion to God, but something is left up to the human being. God's role

may be predominant, but the human factor is decisive.

Melanchthon was charged with this error during the last decade of his life, and it is traditional among many confessional Lutherans to agree that he was guilty of it, perhaps secretly during Luther's later years but openly after that reformer's death.[1] Certain modern scholars however, see Melanchthon in fairly close agreement with Luther on conversion.[2] If these men are correct, Melanchthon may have been guilty of nothing more than being misunderstood.

This paper is an attempt to understand Melanchthon's teaching

on conversion as it developed through his career. Of major importance is his *Loci (Topics),* which was published in numerous editions from 1521 to 1559. It underwent major revisions in 1533-1535 and in 1544, and a study of its growth and change is the most straightforward way to study Melanchthon's own theological development. It will be necessary to discuss his views on conversion in terms of predestination and free will since he included no specific section on conversion.

THE EARLY MELANCHTHON

In 1520, in the preliminary notes to the first edition of the *Loci,* Melanchthon denied to the human will any freedom at all.[3] In the *Loci* of 1521 he wrote: "Since all things which occur occur necessarily according to divine predestination, the liberty of the human will is nothing."[4] This statement may seem close to determinism, but Melanchthon was not speaking of the whole of life. He referred primarily to man before God, whose law is concerned with the internal purity of the heart.[5] Melanchthon admitted a certain amount of freedom in external matters, such as whether or not to wear a coat.[6] Even this freedom, however, he called only "a sort of freedom" *(quaedam libertas).*[7] In a summary Melanchthon insisted again that there is no liberty at all in matters subject to divine predestination,[8] which included conversion and all things spiritual. He maintained this position for several years, and it was taught in his commentaries on John (1523) and Proverbs (1524) and in the doctrinal summary he wrote for Philip of Hesse in 1524.[9]

It has been suggested that Melanchthon began to alter his concept of conversion during the controversy between Luther and Erasmus on the freedom of the will. He was glad when Erasmus asserted the freedom of the will in his *Diatribe* (1524), but only because the humanist's position was so clearly expressed and the issues would be publicly discussed.[10] Luther's reply, *On the Bondage of the Will* (1525), was as strenuous as the early *Loci* in denying to the human will any freedom in spiritual matters. Melanchthon did not contribute a separate treatise on the topic, but in the 1525 edition of the *Loci* he strengthened some of the statements on predestination.[11] He would certainly not have done so if he had been inclining towards Erasmus' opinion. Two years later, in a commentary on Colossians, he again denied that the human will could contribute anything to conversion. Conversion was entirely God's doing.[12] Natural man was free only in natural matters.[13]

Melanchthon included an article on free will in the Augsburg

Confession (1530). He again admitted only a qualified freedom *(aliquae libertas,* "liberty to some extent") in external matters subject to reason. Man can do something in the area of this "civil righteousness" but nothing in "spiritual righteousness."[14] He explained:

For, although nature is able in a manner to do the outward work (for it is able to keep the hands from theft and murder), yet it cannot produce the inward motions, such as fear of God, trust in God, chastity, patience, etc.[15]

At this time Melanchthon clearly rejected absolute necessity by saying, "The cause of sin is the will of the wicked, that is, of the devil and ungodly men."[16] He had reached this position on the strength of the Bible's testimony that God neither wills nor does evil.[17] This same doctrine was taught in the Apology of the Confessions.[18]

Melanchthon was definitely not a synergist in the early days of the Reformation. From the earliest editions of the *Loci* one would have thought it more likely that he would develop in the direction of double predestination. By the time he wrote the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, however, he had clearly avoided that error. Fallen man, he taught, had no freedom in spiritual matters to do or be good. Melanchthon had not so much as hinted that man could contribute to his own conversion. Man's will, however, was to blame for spiritual evil. Melanchthon delineated a certain freedom to perform external works in keeping with civil law and natural law, but he did not speak of this freedom without qualification.

The Middle Melanchthon

Shortly after the Apology was written, Melanchthon made some unfortunate statements. In his 1532 commentary on Romans he designated man's non-rejection of God's grace as a cause in conversion.[19] For an understanding of this developing idea it is necessary to turn to the second generation of the *Loci.*

Melanchthon began the first major revision of the *Loci* in 1533, and it was published in 1535. He altered the presentation on necessity and freedom to include the idea that men and devils were free to oppose God and the Gospel.[20] God was in no way the author of sin.[21] Melanchthon still allowed the same limited freedom to do external works. These external abilities had nothing to do with a real keeping of God's law, for that law required internal purity and perfect obedience, of which natural man was quite incapable. Even civil righteousness was necessarily imperfect due to man's weakness. Melanchthon showed no trace of Pelagianism, for he specifically denied to the human will any and all spiritual activity without the Holy Spirit?[22]

It follows that no dignity or merit in man can be a cause of election. Melanchthon said that the sole cause of election was God's mercy *(misericordia).* Predestination was to be understood only in terms of the Gospel. Melanchthon rejected double predestination in an emphasis on universal grace.[23] He insisted on universal grace for the comfort of consciences. A doctrine of particular grace would yield the Gospel promise

uncertain and would thus destroy faith.[24] But only individuals were saved; not all men were saved. Melanchthon concluded that election could be known only *a posteriori*.[25] He provided no solution to the question why some are saved and not others.

Melanchthon had clearly avoided both the Calvinist and Pelagian answers to this question. He neither blamed God for the damnation of some nor credited man with his own salvation. The question remains whether or not Melanchthon attributed to man any active role in his own conversion. It was in these early second generation editions of the *Loci* that he first published one of his well-known

statements about the three causes: "In this example [conversion] we see these causes to be joined together: the Word, the Holy Spirit, and the will, not at all idle but fighting against its infirmity."[26]

Melanchthon has been accused of synergism on the basis of such statements, and he has been defended in different ways. Richard remarked, "Of the three concurring causes, the will is placed third, and becomes a cause only when preceded and quickened into activity by the other two."[27] Melanchthon did not believe that the will was active at the start of conversion, but this is merely to say that he was no Pelagian. The question is whether or not he taught that the will cooperated at a later stage of conversion.

Haendler claimed that Melanchthon meant nothing but the *sola fide* because the three causes were causes in different senses.[28] The idea was that the will was a cause in some sense which would leave it passive in conversion. The problem is that Melanchthon did not analyze the causes. Any qualification to his statement must be sought in his own words in the context.

Galle said that the activity which Melanchthon attributed to the will in conversion was only an external action over against the Word, reading it or hearing it preached.[29] In the context Melanchthon did attribute great significance to the work of the Spirit through the Word. But he also described the activity of the will in terms which quite clearly referred to an internal action of the human will.

The statement about the three causes was the last sentence in a paragraph in which Melanchthon described the work of the will in some detail.[30] He wanted man to put some effort into obeying and believing *(studium, conari)*. When he said that "the Word of God certainly must not be opposed," he seemed to leave the choice of whether or not to oppose it up to man. That man is to comply with *(obtemperare)* the Gospel promise refers to an internal human accomplishment as does the statement that man is to stir himself up *(se erigere)* to concentrate on the promise. Melanchthon left it up to the will to struggle *(luctari)* with its own weakness and to sustain itself *(se sustenare)* by the Word. Thus already in 1535 Melanchthon was speaking of an actual contribution of the human will in the process of conversion. For Melanchthon there was a crucial point in the later stages of conversion when the role of God became that of helping, and it was up to man diligently not to reject the Word: "God precedes us, calls, moves, helps, but we are to see that we do not fight back *(sed nos*

viderimus, ne repugnemus).”[31]

Melanchthon was not accused of synergism at this time or for more than a decade, even though statements similar to these were published elsewhere. Luther, who uncompromisingly stressed divine monergism, never objected to Melanchthon’s doctrine of conversion.[32] Luther would certainly have spoken out against error in anyone, even in such a close friend.[33] It is puzzling that Luther did not speak out on this developing idea. Melanchthon himself may not have been aware of the implications of the direction he was following, but in this period he was already making statements that heavily favored the error of synergism.

The Late Melanchthon

The third generation of Melanchthon's *Loci* can be dated from 1544, though there were not as many changes as in the production of the second generation. Luther had the opportunity to examine the first editions and did not speak out against them. Late in 1544 he wrote, "I have absolutely no suspicion in regard to Philip."[34] Flacius and Hesshusius, who became bitter opponents of synergism once the controversy arose, highly praised the 1548 edition of the *Loci.* Calvin was the only major Protestant figure who then spoke out against Melanchthon's doctrines of predestination and free will. It was only after the Leipzig Interim, later in 1548, that some Lutherans began to criticize him on these points.

Unfortunately not much work has been done on Melanchthon's development in the 1540's, and the *Loci* editions from that decade are not easily available. The *Corpus Reformatorum* contains only the 1559 edition as representative of the third generation. But that edition does provide the opportunity to see Melanchthon's thought in its basically final form, since he died the next year.

On predestination the *Loci* of 1559 did not differ substantially from the *Loci* of 1535. Firstly, election was to be dealt with only as a matter of the Gospel. The law and reason shed no light on it. Secondly, the number of those who were saved for Christ's sake was the number of the elect. Thirdly, justification and election had one and the same cause, God's grace in Christ. The cause of rejection was man's rejection of God's Word.[35] Melanchthon still emphasized universal grace. As the preaching of repentance was to be universal, so was the promise of grace.[36] He again rejected all Pelagian notions. In fact, he never taught that any merit was to be ascribed to any work but that of Christ,[37] and always insisted that without the Holy Spirit man could do absolutely nothing towards the true spiritual righteousness that the law of God demanded. Only external works were to some extent free.[38]

In the *Loci* of 1559 Melanchthon again wrote of "three causes": "the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, and the human will assenting to, not opposing the Word of God."[39] He wrote:

> God begins and draws by His Word and the Holy Spirit, but we should hear and learn, that is, apprehend the promise and assent to it, not oppose it, not give way to mistrust and doubt.[40]

Melanchthon did not see man as beginning his own conversion, nor did he reject the idea that the Holy Spirit worked through the Word. But he apparently did not see the power thus applied as sufficient to complete conversion. Some human action was needed because in conversion there was a struggle in the soul. The Spirit was efficacious in man only then

when the mind embraced the promise and man fought against his lack of faith and his other corrupt emotions.[41] Melanchthon even accepted the idea of a faculty of applying oneself to grace *(facultas se applicandi ad gratiam)* in terms of hearing the promise, trying to assent, and rejecting sins against the conscience.[42] Though man assented weakly *(languide),*[43] Melanchthon still left it up to man

to assent. He finally answered the question "Why some and not others?" by locating the difference in man:

> ... it is necessary that there be in us some cause of the discrimination, why Saul is rejected, David accepted, that is, it is necessary that there be some dissimilar action in these two.[44]

Melanchthon definitely did become a synergist. In the early days of the Reformation he taught divine monergism in strong terms. He sided with Luther during the controversy with Erasmus and his confessional writings taught monergism. By the middle 1530's, however, he was already leaning heavily in the direction of synergism. In the later period of his life, he definitely taught this error.

It is easy to deal harshly with the memory of Melanchthon, and many Lutherans have done so. Bente's view is more balanced: "Melanchthon belongs to the class of men that have greatly benefited our church, but have also greatly harmed it."[45] Melanchthon belonged to the creative period of the Reformation when Christian theology had to be resurrected on the basis of the Scriptures, but he failed to settle down with the orthodoxy achieved in his confessional writings. He did become a synergist.

FOOTNOTES

1. ^ F. Bente, "Historical Introduction to the Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church," *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), pp. 128-129.
2. ^ Hans Engelland, "Introduction," *Melanchthon on Christian Doctrine.: The Loci Communes of 1555,* trans, and ed. Clyde L. Manschreck (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. xii.
3. ^ CR XXI, 14.
4. ^ CR XXI, 88-89.
5. ^ CR XXI, 92.
6. ^ CR XXI, 90.
7. ^ CR XXI, 93.
8. ^ CR XXI, 93.
9. ^ Wilhelm Maurer, *Der Junge Melanchthon: Zwischen Humanismus und Reformation,* Band 2, "Der Theologe" (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 1969), pp. 482-483.
10. ^ Friedrich Galle, *Versuch einer Charakteristik Melanchthons als Theologen und einer Entwicklung seines Lehrbegriffs* (Halle: Johann Friedrich Lippert, 1840), pp. 274-275.
11. ^ James William Richard, *Philip Melanchthon: The Protestant Preceptor of Germany, 1497-1560* (New York: Burt Franklin Reprints, 1974 [original: Putnam, 1898]), p. 119.
12. ^ Galle, *op. cit.,* pp. 280-281.
13. ^ Richard, *op. cit.,* p. 234.

14. ^ A. C. XVIII, *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 51.
15. ^ A. C. XVIII, *Triglot Concordia,* p. 53.
16. ^ A. C. XIX, *Triglot Concordia,* p. 53.
17. ^ Galle, *op. cit.,* p. 279.
18. ^ Ap. Conf. XVIII.
19. ^ Clyde L. Manschreck, *Melanchthon: The Quiet Reformer* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958), p. 295. Cf. Galle, *op. cit.,* p. 292.

20. ^ CR XXI, 274, 372.
21. ^ CR XXI, 371-372.
22. ^ CR XXI, 374-375.
23. ^ CR XXI, 331-332.
24. ^ CR XXI, 451-452.
25. ^ CR XXI, 332.
26. ^ CR XXI, 376.
27. ^ Richard, *op. cit.,* p. 237.
28. ^ Klaus Haendler, *Wort und Glaube bei Melanchthon: Eine Untersuchung lieber die Voraussetzungen und Grundlagen des melanchthonischen Kirchenbegriffs* (Guetersloh: Guetersloher Verlagshaus, 1968), pp. 553-554.
29. ^ Galle, *op. cit.,* pp. 313, 321.
30. ^ CR XXI, 376.
31. ^ *Ibid.*
32. ^ Manschreck, *op. cit.,* pp. 299-300.
33. ^ WA 34, II, 387.
34. ^ Richard, *op. cit.,* p. 301, referring to DeW. 5:645.
35. ^ CR XXI, 914-915.
36. ^ *Ibid.*
37. ^ Carl Schmidt, *Philipp Melanchthon: Leben und ausgewaehlte Schriften* (Ebberfeld: Verlag von R. L. Friedrichs, 1861), p. 572.
38. ^ CR XXI, 654-656.
39. ^ CR XXI, 258, cf. CR XXIII, 15, 280.
40. ^ CR XXI, 916.
41. ^ CR XXI, 659.
42. ^ CR XXI, 659.
43. ^ CR XXI, 658.
44. ^ CR XXI, 659-660.
45. ^ Bente, *op. cit.,* p. 25.