

Introduction

As for man, his days are like grass;
As a flower of the field, so he flourishes.
For the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
And its place remembers it no more.
—Psalm 103:15-16¹

Central Europe five hundred years ago was an entirely different place. Imperial Rome had faded a thousand years earlier in the West. German-speaking lands were divided into a patchwork of principalities—and those ostensibly under the unifying headship of the Holy Roman Emperor rarely saw much change in their daily existence. Life was short and extremely difficult in this era of dwindling feudalism and growing cities. Suffering and death were not so easily hidden as today. Infants routinely did not survive childhood. The nauseating memory of the Black Death still hung like a miasma over a continent where one in three was consumed by pestilence.

How could a society *not* have a heightened spirituality in such a context? With few economic or technological means of comfort, God becomes a very attractive option. Luther would later argue that such hard times are often God's veiled grace (or alien work), where

1. Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations come from the NKJV.

he strips people of earthly attachments so that they might turn to him in genuine faith. Of course, not every individual at this time was a pious God-fearer. Observers of the age often complained about the crassness and worldliness of their contemporaries. But as a whole, European civilization held a distinctly Christian ethos at this time, combined with the ancient memory of a Roman Empire ostensibly unified under the lordship of Christ.

The present-day reader quick to dismiss the concerns of those from the sixteenth century would be well-served to try to get inside their worldview. The main solution on offer to suffering and death was a better life to come. The abundant physical perils of life were mirrored by assumed abundant spiritual perils. Passing safely through the crisis of death and onwards to heaven, therefore, was a very serious matter. This is part of the reason why theological disputes were so heated in the early sixteenth century. Additionally, most people assumed that Christendom could and should be *one*—united around a single institution with a single agreed-upon doctrine. The theological disputes of the early Reformation were not about obscure disagreements on matters of personal spiritual preference. The participants in these struggles believed that they were either seeking a return to pure Christian doctrine (the Protestants), or were struggling to maintain it (the Roman Catholics). They thought that Christendom could be one. They thought their entire civilization, and indeed all civilizations, should embrace a unified Christian doctrine in a unified Christian church. They had in mind matters of eternal life and death, as well as what world society as a whole should look like. These are high matters.

*And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us:
The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;*

*His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.*²

To truly understand the Reformation era, the contemporary reader must see it through the eyes of the early modern denizen. The present book is just such an exercise—an attempt to see the early Reformation through the eyes of Philipp Melanchthon.

Historians in recent decades have begun to dispute the use of such a monolithic title as “*the* Reformation.” The definite article implies a single, distinct event—when the reality is that this era held a multiplicity of interconnected theological, political, economic, technological, artistic, and ecclesiastical developments. It has become popular to speak of Reformations, rather than *a* Reformation. However, I shall maintain the traditional nomenclature here, with the tacit understanding that life at any level is always more complicated than one first expected. A great movement of peoples and ideas is no different.

In its most simplistic form, the Reformation was an attempt by certain individuals to promote a reformation of the Roman Catholic Church where it had drifted from its founding principles in both theology and ethics. Martin Luther’s is always the first name mentioned on this list. However, not as well known in the English-speaking world is the name of Philipp Melanchthon. This younger colleague of Luther’s at Wittenberg was a prodigy. A tireless and talented scholar, he systematized evangelical theology while Luther polemicized. This puts it a bit too simply (for Melanchthon indeed engaged in polemic as well), but his theological textbooks, biblical commentaries, ecumenical work, and authorship of key confessions were vital in solidifying the intellectual rigor and rational consistency

2. A verse from Luther’s hymn, “A Mighty Fortress.”

of the new (or old, depending on one's perspective) evangelical theology. This alone makes Melanchthon well-worth attention.

The purpose of this book, then, is to tell something of the story of the dawn of the Reformation, chiefly from the perspective of one of its central players—Philipp Melanchthon. By tracing his family origins, childhood, education, and early career at Wittenberg, I hope to convey something of the ethos and significance of the times. By combining a sharp biographical focus with occasional broad glances at much wider geopolitical considerations, my goal is to narrate a story both rich in detail and panoramic in scope. So many accounts keep the spotlight on Luther, and relegate Melanchthon to a supporting role. This one, by contrast, keeps the spotlight on Melanchthon, and in so doing, provides a unique perspective on the dawn of the Reformation.

Of course, any study of the life of Melanchthon immediately runs into the problem of the vastness of his literary output (thousands upon thousands of letters and works) and the complexity of his thought. This book is not intended to do justice to Melanchthon's thought—neither his theology nor his philosophy. To attempt this, one usually either writes a lengthy monograph on a single doctrine (as I did in my previous work on Melanchthon³), or else one must give brief snippets on a variety of topics (as in Nicole Kuroпка's slim volume⁴). Instead, the focus of the present book is more on the man himself. It is about Melanchthon's faith, professional development, work, and family in the midst of a world undergoing radical change. This is a personal framework which can complement the specialized studies of the Melanchthon monographs.

3. Gregory B. Graybill, *Evangelical Free Will: Philipp Melanchthon's Doctrinal Journey on the Origins of Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

4. Nicole Kuroпка, *Melanchthon* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010). (This book is in German.)

I have been fortunate to spend the past year living and researching this book in Melanchthon's hometown of Bretten, Germany. This book has been written almost entirely at the exact location of Melanchthon's birth—at the European Melanchthon Academy and the Melanchthon House in Bretten. While his teaching career took him to Wittenberg, much of his heart remained in Bretten. Now the spires, woods, and fruitful green hills of Bretten are part of my life as well, and for this I am grateful to God.