

Original Sin

A Comparison of Luther and Melancthon

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This seminar concentrates on the investigation of the relationship of theology and piety in the teaching of Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon. It raises the question “how doctrinal content relates to Christian conduct”. Does doctrinal clarity affects pastoral certainty, and if so, can it also be stated, that the need for pastoral certainty leads to doctrinal clarity? To show how doctrine is used and how doctrinal differences shape the practical approaches of the reformers I decided to compare two representative treatises and to concentrate on the question of original sin.

The reason for this is the doctrinal importance of this topic for reformation theology. The development of reformation theology is most closely related to the shifts in understanding original sin. This can be traced very well in the development of Luther’s theology.¹ It can be noticed that the theological debates with catholic theologians and with Eck very early reflected this question.² For example, the question if original sin remains after baptism - has caused major disagreements between evangelical and Roman Catholic Churches until today – depends precisely on the understanding of “peccatum originale”. Looking at this topic, we deal with a distinct doctrinal locus.

Far more, the teaching on original sin is the central point of Lutheran theology because it is indivisibly connected with the understanding of justification.³ According to Luther’s remarkable definition of the “subiectum theologiae” during his lecture on Psalm 51 in 1532 it can be said, that: “The proper subject of theology is man guilty of sin and condemned, and

¹ I can refer to my study *Peccatum radicale, Eine Studie zu Luthers Erbsündenverständnis in Psalm 51*, Univ. Diss. Tübingen 2004.

² An excellent study offers R. Schwarz, *Johann Ecks Disputationsthesen vom Mai 1519 über die erbsündliche „concupiscentia“*. Ein Angriff auf Luthers Sündenverständnis, in: *Im Schatten der Confessio Augustana* hg. v. H. Immenkötter u. G. Wenz, Münster 1997, S. 127 - 168.

³ It is apparent already in the structure of the Augsburg Confession. The second article deals with the topic of Original Sin, the third is concerned with the Son of God, and the fourth article discusses Justification. Similarly, later in the Augsburg Confession, the 18th article speaks about Free will, the 19th about the Cause of Sin, and the 20th about Faith and Good Works. This formal observation indicates the importance of the correct understanding of the relationship between God and man.

God the Justifier and Saviour of man the sinner.”⁴ For Luther, this „principalis locus“⁵ of theology is necessary for the proper understanding of the Bible and the successful study of theology.⁶ Already here becomes clear also the practical impact of doctrinal thinking. Weak teaching on original sin not only leads to weak teaching on justification, but it also makes impossible the understanding of Scripture.

Similarly for Melanchthon, the whole of Scripture consists of two parts – the Law and the Gospel. The Law reveals the sin of man and the Gospel the mercy of God; the Law shows human sickness, the Gospel the divine medicine. The Law is the servant of death and the Gospel the servant of life.⁷ For Melanchthon, doctrine is based on the understanding of the Bible. This is, in his eyes, very different from scholastic teaching. Nevertheless it offers a decent foundation for the life of a Christian, as it later shall be shown. His “Loci Communes” are nothing else than a summary of Biblical exegesis.

For our inquiry we find a very close coincidence of doctrinal themes and biblical texts by Luther and Melanchthon in the early 1520. In the summer of 1519 Philip Melanchthon began with his exegesis of the Epistle to the Romans, and came back to it in April of 1520. Several treatises are based on the comments to the epistle, i.e. his “Theologica Institutio”, “Rerum Theologicorum capita seu Loci”, “Artifitium Epistolae Pauli ad Romanos”. In the introduction to the “Loci” Melanchthon complains about an unauthorized edition of his introduction to Paul’s Epistle called “Lucubratiuncula” from 1520. The publication of the “Loci Communes” from 1521 shall step in and explain the main points of Christian teaching.

⁴ LW, 12, 311, Cf. WA 40 II, 328,1f.: “subiectum Theologiae homo reus et perditus et deus iustificans vel salvator.”

⁵ WA 40 II, 385,8 – 10: „Iste fere fuit locus difficilis et obscurus in hoc psalmo et est principalis locus nostrae Theologiae, sine quo impossibile est, Sacram scripturam intelligere.“

⁶ During the Lecture on Book Genesis (1535/45) rel. to verses 42, 29 – 34 did Luther say: „Nemo enim putet se fore Theologum vel lectorem vel auditorem scripturae sanctae, qui malum illud originale extenuat, aut non recte intelligit, [...]“; and right away added a note about the difficulty of this locus: „[...] imo nemo hominum vim eius satis cogitare aut assequi potest.“ (WA 44, 506,4 – 7).

⁷ P. Melanchthon, Loci Communes 1521, transl. H.G. Pöhlmann, 2nd. Ed., Gütersloh 1997, p. 158f.: „Duae in universum scripturae partes sunt, lex et evangelium. Lex peccatum ostendit, evangelium gratiam. Lex morbum indicat, evangelium remedium. Lex mortis ministra est, ..., evangelium vitae ac pacis.“

However, those “loci” conform to the main terms of Paul’s theology, as found in his letters.⁸ A year later Luther published – again without approval of Melanchthon – an important treatise called “Annotationes Philippi Melanchthonis in epistolas Pauli ad Romanos et Corinthios”. Luther wasn’t patient with the reluctance of Melanchthon to publish the work and acted on his own, with the intention to spread the fundamental understanding of Biblical theology. In the foreword Luther praised Melanchthon’s work and said that “nobody wrote better on Saint Paul”⁹ as doctor Philipus. Inspired by Melanchthon Luther himself wrote an “Introduction to the Epistle of Romans” in 1522. In the first part of this treatise he followed the example of his colleague and explained the fundamental terms of Paul’s vocabulary. One could say, it was a shorter version of the “Loci Communes” from Luther’s pen. In the second part of the treatise he went on and described the content of each single chapter of the epistle. According to Kurt Aland, this is the most important introduction of all introductions to Biblical books written by Luther and it stands as a programmatic writing of the Reformation.¹⁰

The intention of this paper is therefore to compare Luther’s “Introduction” and Melanchthon’s “Loci”. They not only have originated at the same time but also used the same Biblical source for their theological argumentation. Additionally there is another common element – the goal of the reformers is to point back to the Scripture and lead the people to read, understand and use the Bible.¹¹ By comparing these two treatises we might be able to get answer to the question about how doctrinal content relates to Christian conduct.

⁸ More explicit see W. H. Neuser, *Der Ansatz der Theologie Philipp Melanchthons*, p. 45. He shows Melanchthon’s „paulinische Lehrmethode“ in the *Lucubratiuncula XXI 11/12* and later in the *Loci Communes*. For a systematical inquiry of Melanchthon’s theology see esp. *Ibid.*, p. 71 - 90.

⁹ WA 10 II, 309,13f.: “Scilicet neminem scripsisse melius in S. Paulum, tibi vere tribuo.”

¹⁰ K. Aland, *Luther Deutsch*, Bd. 5, Berlin 1951, p. 340.

¹¹ Cf. Melanchthon’s dedication: „Porro, quod ad argumenti summam attinet, indicantur hic christianae disciplinae praecipui loci, ut intelligat iuventus, et quae sint in scripturis potissimum requirenda ...“ *Ibid.*, W 4. See as well Luther’s Introduction to the *Annotationes Philippi Melanchthonis in epistolas Pauli ad Romanos et Corinthios*: „Tuas annotations nemo commentarium appellet sed indicem dumtaxat legendae scripturae et cognoscendi Christi, id quod nullus hactenus praestitit commentariorum, qui saltem extet.“ WA 10 II, 310,15 - 17.

Martin Luther: Introduction to the Epistle of Romans (1522)

Luther develops his argument in distinction to all preceding commentaries on this epistle, since by his time he did not have a high opinion about them.¹² Furthermore, his approach is based on the hermeneutical conviction, that only if one understands the meaning of the terms used – law, sin, mercy, faith, justice, flesh, spirit - only then the content of the whole becomes clear.¹³ In this paper I will concentrate especially on terms related to the topic of sin.

For Luther, sin does not mean only the external act of the body, but first of all the internal movement of the heart. In its depth it is like a root, that nourishes the whole tree – a clear allusion to Mt. 17,7 appears here. According to Luther, there is only one real sin, and that is the “original sin”, as the root sin of the “heart”. According to Luther clearly this sin is “unbelief”.¹⁴ Without hesitation Luther stated that there is a connection between sin and justification – as only faith justifies, so sin has to be disbelief. Further, faith makes the heart willing to bring good fruits, and disbelief produces a lust for evil, carnal deeds.¹⁵ It is apparent that this approach to sin reveals a deep break with the nominalistic hamartiology, the teaching about the “meritum de congruo” and meritorious grace.¹⁶ Such sin is not just a “carentia” of human powers, but it is a “corruption” of the highest human power, reason and will.

Luther’s criticism of all kinds of hypocrisy is based precisely on this deepened understanding of original sin. Since there is for man no possibility to achieve justice according to the Law of God. Justice according to the Law means a willing and free love to the Law of God. A person can bring forth all kinds of “actibus elicti” – from the Gods point

¹² Cf. WA 10 II, 310,13 - 15: „Recte de Hieronymo et Origene et Thoma hisque similibus dicis. Commentaria enim scripserunt, in quibus sua potius quam Paulina aut Christiana tradiderunt.“

¹³ WA DB 7, 2 - 27: „Auffs erst müssen wyr der sprach kundig werden, und wissen, was sanct. Paulus meynet, durch dise wort, Gesetz, Sund, Gnad, Glawb, Gerechtigkeyt, Fleysch, Geyst, und der gleychen, sonst ist keyn lesen nutz daran [...]“. (Ibid. 2,17 - 19) See as well Ibid. 26,6 - 8. According to Jörg Armbruster, Studien zu Luthers Bibelvorreden, p. 107f., it can be shown „even to the point of order of the terms [...], that Luther here follows the pattern of Melanchthon.“ See as well Ibid. p. 108, Fn. 355. According to Armbruster is the Introduction the Book of Psalm 1524 also „[...] formally comparable to the first part of the Letter of Romans [...]“, Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁴ WA DB 7, 6,33.

¹⁵ WA DB 7, 8,5 - 9.

¹⁶ WA DB 7, 6,7f.

of view – who sees into the depth of human hearts – they are full of animosity to the law of God and full of deceit (Ps 116,11). Luther distinguishes between the deeds of the law and the fulfillment of the law.¹⁷ To fulfill the law is more than just doing what the letter says. Here is the origin of Luther’s critical attitude towards all religious self-righteousness.

However, Luther does not maintain an understanding original sin only as a “peccatum omissionis”. Sin is an active drive and power towards evil: Luther speaks in his “Introduction” in an Augustinian manner about the “lust toward evil.”¹⁸ Practically this leads to the abandonment of the notion of “free will”¹⁹ in the relationship to God. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to raise faith in the sinful heart. According to Paul’s witness the reality of original sin impacts universally every human being.²⁰ Luther accepted the notion of inheritance of sin through Adam by all human beings. The medium of being inflicted by original sin is, according to Luther, the “fleshly birth”²¹. Even though this appears to be very close to Augustine’s notion of the inheritance of sin, Luther does here not touch on the issue of sexual conception. His concern is on the universal anthropological dimension of birth – since no one can avoid being born in the flesh in a natural manner, so nobody can escape the actuality of original sin. His interest points to the lineage of generations where people are always the same. Finally the universality of sin means the universal necessity of salvation in Christ: “that nobody can help himself out of sins to justice with works, ...”²²

Consequently, at this time, Luther clearly accepts the Pauline teaching concerning the foreknowledge of God. Dogmatically it can not be otherwise since a sinful man can not save himself and, in the question of salvation totally depends on God. It is only in God’s hand, that we become pious.²³ However the question of predestination is not raised in the “Introduction”. Luther leaves the matter on the level of a question of faith.

As for the practical implication of this position, following can be stated. The starting sentence of the “Introduction” makes clear, how in Luther’s eyes the doctrine holds together with piety. Since we encounter in Paul’s epistle the “pure Gospel” a Christian should learn

¹⁷ WA DB 7, 4, 3 - 8.

¹⁸ WA DB 7, 4,4.

¹⁹ WA DB 7, 6,8 - 11.

²⁰ WA DB 7, 14,22f.

²¹ WA DB 7, 18,10.

²² WA DB 7, 18,9f.

²³ WA DB 7,22,29f.

the whole letter word by word and use it as “nourishment for the soul”.²⁴ As a daily reading, it wants to be used, turned around, looked at from different perspectives, as if one would hold in his hand a very precious diamond. This kind of use of the Scriptures is what Luther later identified with the notion of “meditatio”, the second form of the trio of evangelical piety: oratio, mediatio, tentatio.²⁵ For Luther, the whole of theology and the spirituality connected with theology is bound to the word of God: „A doctor of theology is he, who is explained by the Scripture, who allows to be explained by the Scripture and who explains it for others.”²⁶ The more one burnishes the word of God, the more it glitters and the more precious it becomes. This orientation on the word of God, as the only nourishment formed evangelical piety for centuries. As one example from many, we can mention the hymn of Paul Gerhardt “Wach auf mein Herz und Singe”: “Bless me, keep me, my heart be Your abode, your Word my nourishment until I step toward heaven.”²⁷

This is not an “internal word”, but the preached word of the Gospel; it is not the word about Christ, but the preaching of Christ.²⁸ This word creates faith that is “living and firm” in its trust in God’s mercy - so that it could die thousand times.²⁹ As the word of God is a living thing, so faith too – lives for active righteousness in love: “to do good to everybody without pressure, willingly and freely, to serve everybody, and to suffer everything.”³⁰

The notion of foreknowledge of God is for Luther also a matter of comfort and consolation. He explicitly prohibits to talk about this topic at the beginning of all “Loci”. He sees its proper place only in the pastoral comfort for those who struggle with the “Anfechtungen”

²⁴ WA DB 7, 2,7f.

²⁵ In his explanation of Psalm 119 in 1539 Luther described three moments of true spiritual life: prayer, meditation, and the experience of spiritual trials.

²⁶ O. Bayer, *Theologie*, HST 1, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, Gütersloh 1994, p. 61.

²⁷ *Evangelisches Gesangbuch*, 25th. edition, Stuttgart 1976, Nr. 348 verse 9: „Mich segne, mich behüte, mein Herz sei deine Hütte, dein Wort sei meine Speise, bis ich gen Himmel reise.“ This morning hymn is based on a distinctively Lutheran understanding of the Word of God. Through God’s word was the new day made, my life renewed – as the motif of raising from bed resembles the resurrection from death – the attacks of the devil destroyed. Therefore I may wake up, and start to sing to the Creator of all things.

²⁸ WA DB 7, 6,18.

²⁹ WA DB 7, 10,17f.

³⁰ WA DB 7, 10,17 - 20.

and questions about God's power, faithfulness and mercy.³¹ After somebody really struggled with the power of Law, his own sin, and the notion of God's mercy in Christ, he will find true comfort and peace in chapters 9, 10 and 11 of Romans. Again – this is not a dogmatic topic to be dealt with without the Word of God – but rather after “meditating” chapters one through eight, one will see chapters nine to eleven as dealing with spiritual man in different light.

Philip Melanchthon - Loci Communes

Melanchthon's “Loci” differ from the speculative scholastic theology. To know Christ means to know His benefits for me (“beneficia Christi”)³². But to know the work of Christ one, has to know, why is this necessary. Therefore Melanchthon puts chapters about the powers of man and his sinfulness in the beginning of his doctrinal inquiry.

Melanchthon speaks about sin, but what he means is the original sin. This is the proper theological distinction. “Peccatum originale” is the “inborn propensity, inherited drive”, an active energy toward sinning.³³ It can be compared to the power of fire or a magnet – from its very beginning the propensity to sin belongs indivisibly to the human nature. Melanchthon's picture is vivid – as the power of fire to burn upward or the power of a magnet to attract things – to the power of sinful nature is not static, but something active – an active movement of the heart against the law of God, towards sin.³⁴

In this active understanding of sin – as a power (“energia”) and not only possibility (“potentia”) – Melanchthon steps into the Augustinian tradition. Since fallen man lost the eyes for the light of God, he lives in the darkness of “amor sui”.³⁵ As such he has no power not to sin.

³¹ WA DB 7,22, 39 – 24,5.

³² P. Melanchthon, Ibid. 0,13.

³³ Ibid. 2,3.

³⁴ Ibid. 2,6.

³⁵ Ibid. 2,8: The sinner „sese ardentissime amet“. The concept of turning away from God and turning toward lower things is the base for understanding of concupiscence. Since God is the summum bonum, every other motion misses the solemn point of orientation for human being and leads to sin. The philosophical background for his understanding of sin lays in a neoplatonist understanding of God. Cf. Augustine, Confessions, transl. By H. Chadwick, Oxford 1991, XIII,vii: „the weight of cupidity pulling us downwards into the precipitous abyss and the lifting up of love given by your Spirit ...“ Cf. Loci Communes 2,76.

The point of Melanchthon's argument runs against the hamartiology of scholastics. Although Duns Scotus, Gabriel Biel talked about the nature of sin in "crookedness" (*pravitas, curvitas*) too, still they ascribed to human will the freedom of avoiding sin. The reason for this rooted in the locus of supernatural grace bestowed on human beings at creation. This gift was lost due to the first sin. However, the nature of man remained whole.³⁶ Melanchthon is not concerned with terminology – he could accept the notion of a "status corruptions" as of being without original justice.³⁷ Nevertheless, what concerns him more is the practical implication of this notion.

Whereas for the nominalistic scholastic human will remain free to determine the direction of its movement toward God or not, Melanchthon argues that the notion of our internal affects (the motion of our will or reason) does not stand in our power.³⁸ Practically this means, that all works of man and all attempts of man are sins.³⁹ Not only the visible rude sins, but also subtle effects like spiritual pride, contempt of God, blasphemy. Even if a work appears as holy and virtuous, internally it is full of self-love and self-addiction – and thus it is a sin ("vitium")⁴⁰ Melanchthon uses again a picture inspired by the Bible – a bad tree bears bad fruits. Practically, it puts away the whole scholastic distinction between "bonum morale" and "bonum meritorium" and the system of meritorious works. All "actus elicti" are pure fiction, respectively sin.

This argument in the "Loci Communes" is pointed in two directions. The first one is doctrinal. It opens the way for clear understanding of grace, of the universal importance of the redemptory work of Christ and towards the reformation teaching of justification.

But it has also a pastoral intention. It dramatically changes the relation between man and God. If God judges the sinner according to the intention of the law, and sees nothing but the sinner – the sinner experiences only the wrath of God. For Melanchthon the place of this experience is the conscience. And once the conscience experiences the wrath of God and His

³⁶ This argument stands in the Anselmian tradition of original sin as „absentia debitae iustitiae“ or as „carrentia iustitiae originalis“.

³⁷ *Loci Communes*, 2,11.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1,59: „Fateor in externo rerum delectu esse quandam libertatem, internos vero affectus prorsus nego in potestate nostra esse.“ Cf. *Ibid.*, 1,68.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2,25. Even stronger in *ibid.*, 2,74.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2,31. Cf. 2,36: „Omnes homines per vires naturae vere semperque peccatores sunt et peccant.“

threat of eternal death it logically can not love him. This causes a circle of despair for man – the law commands man to love God, but due to his own sinfulness man hates God more and more, and finally sees Him as a cruel, punishing, and unjust hangman.⁴¹ We could note, that the effect of such a doctrine leads to the experience of despair.

However, this is not the final goal of Melanchthon's arguments. He wants to draw a realistic picture of the impossibility to find real peace with God, if a man is left alone with his own powers. Practically it means that a person either remains in despair and ends in hell. Or a person starts to struggle for mercy, but it does not really relieve the despair. The whole system of penance did not help; rather it tortured and killed many souls.⁴² Now the real point of the "Loci" becomes clear: how to "comfort broken consciences" (*quomodo afflictam conscientiam consoleris*⁴³). The aim is to free the heart of the picture of an angry God, and to offer the picture of Christ, to strengthen the desperate heart and uphold the soul against Satan.⁴⁴ Here again one can see the positive connection between the doctrine of justification and the practical life of man. The distinction between law and gospel forms the doctrine as it becomes very Christocentric and Christological. One can also observe this particular way of argumentation in the Augsburg Confession. In the 4th article of the Apology Melanchthon stated very clearly: "But since the controversy deals with the most important topic of Christian teaching which, rightly understood, illumines and magnifies the honor of Christ and brings the abundant consolation that devout consciences need, ..." ⁴⁵

But it forms piety too – as the preacher cannot omit the preaching of law and Gospel, and as the believer has to "fear and love God" at once. As we know, this double form reappeared in Luther's Catechism – and became an important part of Lutheran piety throughout the whole world.

⁴¹ Ibid., 2,87: „Atqui ubi conscientia perculit animum, iam ita adversatur et exhortet deum ut carnificem crudelem et vindicem et, ..., iniquum.“

⁴² Ibid., I,65: „Atque utinam videbent stulti scholastici, quot animarum millia enecarint pharicaica sua deuteriosi de libero arbitrio.“

⁴³ Ibid., 0,16.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 0, 20: „Itaque nos aliquam delineabimus eorum locorum rationem, qui Christum tibi commendent, qui conscientiam confirmant, qui animum adversus Satanam erigant.“

⁴⁵ AAC IV,2., The Book of Concord, ed. R. Kolb and T. Wengert, Fortress Press 2000, p. 120f.

Summary

This short presentation concentrated on one particular aspect of the wide range of theology of Luther and Melanchthon. It is possible to summarize the main points as follows:

The distinction of External and Internal is common for both approaches in the early 1520s, but the stronger emphasis belongs to the internal. Sin is not just an external act – but an internal attitude of the heart. God does not look at the external “free acts”, but at the intention of the heart. However, both reformers put all emphasis upon the external word of God – and in this way left the traditional position of medieval mysticism. Both understand original sin as a “peccatum radicale” – something that is hidden to the eyes or even reason of man but which nourishes a bad tree, and brings forth bad fruits.

Whereas Luther clearly says – original sin is disbelief in God, Melanchthon still remained indebted to the discussion about the lack of justice and concupiscentia. However, we find both concepts in the Book of Concord: In the Formula of Concord the understanding of original sin as “Haupt und Brunquell”;⁴⁶ in the CA in the second Article the concept of missing justice and concupiscence.⁴⁷

Another common element is the anthropological place of sin – the human heart. Here again can be seen the attempt to use biblical language and omit philosophical- anthropological terms. At this stage the doctrinal positions are very close, and it is really impressive how deeply Melanchthon grasped the theology of Paul, and the theological position of the reformation.

In the question of the practical impact of their theology, and how doctrinal content relates to Christian conduct, following can be stated. Luther’s pastoral concern puts the emphasis on a close relationship to the word of God. That is the beginning and the end all of Christian conduct. All dogmatic points are relevant only in the firm conviction of the steadfastness and trustworthiness of the word of gospel. Therefore, Luther would speak about God’s foreknowledge first at the end of the book not only because Paul deals with it toward the end

⁴⁶ The Book of Concord, p. 533,5. Cf. the German text: “[...] Hauptsünde, welche ein Wurzel und Brunquell ist [...]” (BSLK, p. 846,41 - 43), resp. the Latin version : “[...] principio et capite omnium transgressiones tanquam e radice nascantur et quasi e scaturigine [...] esse.” (BSLK, p. 846,42 - 44). A thorough study of the teaching on original sin is presented by G. Wenz, *Theologie der Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 2nd vol., Berlin 1998, pp. 542 - 580, esp. pp. 543 - 545.

⁴⁷ Apol. II,15f.

of the letter, but also, because it is only a rational deduction of all proceeding what have been said about God, man Christ, and salvation.

Melanchthon on the other side, started with the concept of foreknowledge. A person has to know the “beneficia Christi” and than it can understand the whole of the Bible. One could say that from the knowledge about Christ’s redemptory work comes true comfort and peace for a person. If for Luther the word opens the system, so for Melanchthon the system opens the word. Here we find important basis for the later doctrinal development but also the distinct attitude towards the word of God in the following period of Luther orthodoxy.

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