

Righteousness According to Melanchthon and the Humanist Reformation

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Melanchthon as Theological Ethicist

Philip Melanchthon spearheaded the movement that viewed theology not as a speculative but as a practical science, less concerned with Trinity, Christology and metaphysics, and more with soteriology. His study in the humanities meant that he believed that ideas (beloved of scholars) were shaped to inspire people to live and to change. Already in his *Loci communi* of 1521 he declares, “affectus affectum vincitur”—“affection conquers affection”—a motto of practical theology, and in a letter to Camerarius of July 9, 1526, he confesses, “I am an Aristotelian,” by which he appears to have meant principally that he saw great value in Aristotle’s *Ethics* for action, although as Risto Saarinen has demonstrated, not in the *Metaphysics* for theory.¹ Thus, in 1529 he produced a commentary *In Ethica Aristotelis* that was really just some select texts with some interpretation, but with no dedicatory forward—as though he was hesitant to show too much respect to the Stagirite, as an introduction would imply. But later he would write that the goal of the *Nicomachean Ethics* was to draw minds of students from barbarism to humanity (“animos discentium

¹ Risto Saarinen, “Ethics in Luther’s Theology,” in *Moral Philosophy on the Threshold of Modernity*, ed. J. Kraye (Berlin: Springer, 2006), 195–212.

a barbarie ad humanitatem traducit”), and in later editions—in 1545 and then 1548, in *Ethicae doctrinae elementa*—he would speak of ethics as that part of the divine law that deals with civil morality.² One can speak of the norms which Aristotle bequeathed (but not those of Stoics, Epicureans or Platonists—he saw Erasmus as too Platonizing) when reliably enunciated to be divine gifts in their own way, although they would need elevating (not destroying) by grace. “Melanchthon’s judgement on the morality of external acts coincides with the doctrine of scholastic philosophy on human voluntary acts.”³ There is more than a faint echo of Thomas Aquinas with his *prima pars* of the *Summa theologiae* giving way to the *secunda pars*. Or perhaps more like Albert the Great, at least according to Saarinen.

Not many theologians took time also to study and discuss Aristotle. Out of the forty-six commentators on Aristotle from 1500 up to 1682, only Hyperius, Vermigli, and Melanchthon can be considered as theologians.⁴ It must be made clear that Melanchthon’s ethics and politics, as summarized in his moral philosophy textbook of 1538 (*Ethicae doctrinae elementa*), are based on resolutely theological, not philosophical, arguments.⁵ So in considering the final objective of this discipline, he argues as theologian, maintaining that it is the explanation of the law of nature, in other words, that the disciplines of ethics and politics are part of the *lex divina* which governs the external actions of men. Moreover, his essentially theological perspective can be seen in his discussion of man’s “final objective.” For Aristotelians, it was always the explanation of and inner-worldly happiness.⁶ But for Melanchthon, moral questions are to be considered in the

² So, Heinz Scheible, *Melanchthon: Vermittler der Reformation* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2016), 112.

³ D. Bellucci, “Natural Philosophy and Ethics in Melanchthon,” in Kraye, *Moral Philosophy*, 235–54.

⁴ Manfred Svensson, “Aristotelian Practical Philosophy from Melanchthon to Eisenhart: Protestant Commentaries on the *Nicomachean Ethics* 1529–1682,” *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 21 (2019): 218–38.

⁵ Philipp Melanchthon, *Ethicae doctrinae elementa et enarratio libri quinti ethicorum*, ed. Günter Frank (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2008; also *Corpus Reformatorum* [CR], 16:175–276). See Henning Ziebritzki, “Tugend und Affekt: Ansatz und Problematik von Melanchthons Tugendethik, dargestellt anhand der *Ethicae doctrinae elementa* von 1550,” in *Der Theologe Melanchthon*, ed. Günter Frank (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2000), 357–73.

⁶ Günter Frank, “The Reason of Acting: Melanchthon’s Concept of Practical Philosophy and the Question of the Unity and Consistency of His Philosophy,” in Kraye, *Moral Philosophy*, 230.

light of theology, for which the end of humans is not virtue, but knowledge of and obedience to God. So, for this Christian theologian-Reformer, in order to emphasize the theological orientation of his practical philosophy, he introduces a distinction between the *finis principalis*, that is, recognition of and obedience to God, and *fines minus principales*, that is, virtuous actions.⁷ The latter might dovetail with the former, but they are ends in their own rights, and distinguishable as a class from those of the “obedience to God” class. Nevertheless, when it comes to “quis est finis hominis?,” the Church has the answer for that in the revealed teaching delivered to it.

Even in his moral philosophical or “ethical” works, Melanchthon offers a rather Ciceronian reading of Rom 2, where the first moral principles (*notitiae*) are the best part of human nature, and to a certain degree have survived the fall. It would seem that, for Melanchthon, ultimate happiness for individuals is theological and soteriological, but there can be a usefulness where the law shapes societies into a better humanity.⁸ Theology can inform ethics: his *Ethicae* deals with questions of usury. It also asks whether the pope can choose a king, as Samuel had a say with Saul and with David, or whether Naboth was right to refuse to sell his vineyard? (In short, biblical texts are introduced to respond to Aristotle.)

In that sense then, Wilhelm Dilthey was correct about Melanchthon: “He was the ethicist of the Reformation.”⁹ He started with an appeal to positive laws and ethical teaching of the classical world, then gradually moved to consider natural law.

Some interpreters of the Reformer believe that the separation between (1) the spiritual realm of faith and (2) the outward realm of civic and political responsibility, sometimes named “the Two Kingdoms-doctrine,” endured well into Melanchthon’s maturity. Hence, according to Mads Langballe Jensen: “At this point Melanchthon was still committed to the distinction between politics as the domain of philosophy and natural law, on which reason could judge rightly, and the spiritual, private life of the Christian in accordance with the Gospel, which lay beyond the bounds of reason. Melanchthon thus presented a view of the life of the Christian as separated into two spheres. On the one hand, the private life of faith

⁷ Frank, “Reason of Acting,” 231.

⁸ See Günter Frank, “Praktische Philosophie,” in *Melanchthon Handbuch*, ed. G. Frank (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 464–65 (see also CR, 16:31).

⁹ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Aufsätze zur Philosophie*, ed. Marion Marquardt (Berlin: W. Dausien, 1986), 263 (more broadly 226–75).

and salvation in accordance with the Gospel and the specifically Christian virtues towards God. On the other, the public life of politics and ethics.”¹⁰

Jensen suggests that there was some variation from his earlier position, in that since the late 1530s he had changed his view, such that (2) was viewed to be directed for the sake of (1) :

The purpose of human life and society as determined in accordance with natural and divine law was the same as it had been before the Fall: obedience towards God. This means the state should protect and serve to advance the gospel. This third phase was the longest, lasting until Melanchthon's death in 1560. It may be said to amount to a confessionalization of his moral philosophy and theory of natural law, in the sense that it was now orientated towards obedience to God and maintenance of true religion.¹¹

However, that is simply to see (2) as serving (1), but by no means as integrated into it. In fact, “society” as a separate realm from “faith” is reinforced by this distinction. Indeed, rather than stages, one might better speak of consistency and continuity over the decades in Melanchthon's thinking here. In fact, for the later Lutherans (Victorinus Strigel at Leipzig and Christoph Pezel in Bremen), turning to virtue ethics was perhaps one way of trying to blur the distinction, whereas the “natural law” thinking of Samuel von Pufendorf was an extension of the idea of two very separate kingdoms, the spiritual and the civil, and reinforced the clear division between (1) and (2). Only finally, at the judgement, individuals will stand before God alone and so ultimately theology and soteriology remain and ethics will have passed.

The Ethical Component in Salvation

Another way that Melanchthon can be considered to be the *theological* ethicist of the Reformation is that he seemed to value law as not merely natural or even “divine,” but even “eternal.” Already in 1535 (and repeated in the 1559 *Loci communes*) he declared that “the law of nature is the knowledge of the divine law, given to the nature of man” (“*lex naturae est notitia legis divinae, naturae hominis indita*”). As Christian Link has commented, Melanchthon elevated *lex divina* to *lex aeterna*, in a way that possibly went

¹⁰ Mads Langballe Jensen, *A Humanist in Reformation Politics* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 189.

¹¹ Jensen, *Humanist*, 190.

behind Luther but is not really all that different from Luther's hidden God as the demandingly moral and holy God. More recently, Maarten Wisse has attempted to talk of the law as pointing to the ethical properties of God, and thus as fundamental to any theology, making Trinity, Christology, and so on secondary or less fundamental.¹² Yet, by doing that, Melanchthon could be taken to be suggesting that good, virtuous works were part and parcel of "being saved."

The Cordatus affair of the mid-1530s, where Melanchthon was accused of affirming "free will" and righteousness by works did seem to warn that something controversial was being said in the 1535 *Loci Communes* about ethics and especially Christian ethics. Melanchthon seemed to be emphasizing that there exists a realm of free will universally for all people, and a further realm of freedom for moral action for those in Christ. Heinz Scheible concludes that "Melanchthon first makes it clear that every person has the freedom to decide to do good in an external sense, or at least to control their actions."¹³ It would seem that grace received through Christ-mediated forgiveness, together with new life in the Spirit's presence, allowed this freedom to go deeper, down to the level of affect, something that looks like better dispositions, if not quite "habit."

Also, at least by later editions of the *Loci*, there was some sort of blending of theology and *rhetoric* that could offer a worldview or a *Wirklichkeitsverständnis*, as Christoph Schwöbel has interpreted Melanchthon's aims, but one wherein theological truths could inspire the heart.¹⁴ A doctor needs to know the powers of plants, not just describe them, to quote the man himself.¹⁵ One might regard this as a soteriological emphasis rather than a reduction of an interest in theological theory. Melanchthon interpreted *Affekt* in the sense of the *appetitus spiritualis*, the spiritual-intellectual human striving which proceeds beyond animal needs like hunger and thirst, and which expresses itself in love, hate,

¹² Maarten Wisse, *Reinventing Christian Doctrine: Retrieving the Law-Gospel Distinction* (London: T&T Clark, 2023).

¹³ Scheible, *Melanchthon*, 301. Unless otherwise attributed in notes, all translation in this essay is original work by its present author.

¹⁴ Christoph Schwöbel, "Melanchthons *Loci Communes* von 1521: die erste evangelische Dogmatik," in *Melanchthons bleibende Bedeutung Ringvorlesung der Theologischen Fakultät der Christian-Albrechts-Universität zum Melanchthon-Jahr 1997*, ed. Johannes Schilling (Kiel: University of Kiel Theology Faculty, 1998), 57–82, esp. 78–79.

¹⁵ Usefulness is of great importance, as Sven Grosse has also remarked in "Die Nützlichkeit als Kriterium der Theologie bei Philipp Melanchthon," in *Melanchthon und die Neuzeit*, ed. Günter Frank, Ulrich Köpf, (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2003), 69–93.

hope, fear, sadness, anger, and consequent emotions. Rather than the Scotist notion of free will whereby the will is free when linked to reason, for Melancthon the will is actually split by the emotions to which it is subject. There is room for freedom in civil/worldly righteousness, but if any progress out of invisible darkness is to be made, then training, turning, and being persuaded by the Word of God and the Holy Spirit is required. Texts like Rom 11:36 and Eph 1:11 made him unashamed to declare that such is God's power that all happens necessarily, and is according to his will and not just his foreknowledge (*praescientia*). There was no freedom in the heart or affect vis-a-vis God, only an outward freedom in civil affairs. One might notice the possible influence of Marsilio Ficino's *Liebesraptus* as inspiring the answer of intervening reorientation in one's spirit, since humans are unable to reorient themselves.¹⁶ In all of this, there is more than a suggestion that ethics are involved in the life of faith.

The moral life belongs to a realm that is not outside that of saving grace, even if it is not to be understood as moral progress. As Luca Baschera tells us, for the Reformed theologians: "Therefore, as Polanus before him, William Ames rejects the Melancthonian approach to ethics, according to which there would be an essential difference between ethics and theology."¹⁷ Actually, in spirit and intention, Melancthon was not so very different from the Reformed on this point.

For, according to Melancthon, the will of the Christian agrees with the Holy Spirit who leads in the heart. Hence human will can be a material cause (and the Word is the formal cause, the Holy Spirit is the efficient cause.) Required is the punctual gifting of the Spirit which restores reason and conscience; yet human free will can be *causa sanctificationis*. Sanctification follows from justification, but is "personal," needing faith looking to God's promise.¹⁸ Thus, in the *Loci* of 1532, he writes: "There is also some cause in him who accepts, namely in as far as he does not repudiate the grace offered"; "the cause in him who accepts."¹⁹ But this is omitted in the 1540 edition (and much more, "the elect do not resist

¹⁶ Schwöbel, "Melancthon's *Loci Communes* von 1521," points to Wilhem Maurer, *Der junge Melancthon zwischen Humanismus und Reformatio*, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967–1969), 2:257.

¹⁷ Luca Baschera, "Ethics in Reformed Orthodoxy," in *A Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 519–52, at 528.

¹⁸ Wolfgang Matz, *Der befreite Mensch: die Willenslehre in der Theologie Philipp Melancthon's*, *Forschungen Zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte* 81 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), 155.

¹⁹ Text found in *CR*, 21:253–352.

the calling . . . when the Holy Spirit impels,” but in *Loci* of 1543, there are “three causes of conversion—the Holy Spirit, the Word of God and the will of man”—combined with the “ability to apply oneself to grace”).

Yet, when all is said and done, the points to be drawn are: (1) there is a place for the human will’s contribution; (2) however, it is a case of repeated conversion, not of moral progress as such. It is more about turning to God in Christ. This is strongly borne out in the two works on Romans (skipping over his early *Annotations*²⁰), from 1532 and 1556 (although written two or three years earlier) respectively. We shall look first at the respective treatments of some key verses from Rom 1 and 2 on human moral capability, and then consider his comments on the “hinge” between the end of Rom 7 and the early verses of Rom 8, those which concern the nature of Christian moral and spiritual experience.

1532 Commentary on Romans²¹

The biblical lemma from Romans 1:18 (“*Qui veritatem in iniusticia detinent*”—“who restrain or retain the truth in unrighteousness”) is followed immediately with Melanchthon’s comment: “[Paul] calls [the truth that the Gentiles have] the knowledge of God, or the law of nature [*veritatem vocat noticiam Dei, seu legem naturae*].” He continues: “For as much as God can be known, he is known to them’: not in a prelapsarian age but even now [*quatenus enim Deus cognosci potest, notus est eis*].” God’s metaphysical and moral qualities are the content of a knowledge placed in the human conscience that naturally knows nothing about mercy but only about law.

There is no doubt but that humans especially were founded in a way that the knowledge of God was shining in them. God wished to make himself clear and to be recognized and celebrated by the human race. Thus in the human mind there glowed a light clear and to be wondered at, and an illuminated knowledge of God, imposed in each one by foundation. And if darkness had not entered in by sickness of origin, the human mind would have been like a mirror, showing, as I might so say, an image, that is many clear “knowings”

²⁰ Philipp Melanchthon, *Annotationes Phil. Melancthon in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos unam, et ad Corinthios*. Argentorati apud Hervagium, mense Januar. 1523. In the preface he opposed Origen’s failure to distinguish between theology and philosophy.

²¹ *Commentarii in Epist. Pauli ad Romanos*, printed in Wittenberg in 1532 by Joseph Klug. Text found in *CR*, 15:492–796; citations and quotes located by biblical text.

about God. Hence it is written that the mind is a certain image of God.

The idea is that, although very much darkened, there is something there which can see what and who God is, and certainly that he is. However, a true understanding of a God as one who is present and active in the world seems lost to natural reason in every human. For all philosophers doubted about providence, that although things were moved by nature, so that they could establish that God exists, nevertheless they truly doubted whether God cared about human affairs, when they saw the secondary things of the wicked and the righteous oppressed by the wicked. In this practical atheism, motivation to trusting faith and obedience gets lost.

Where Paul speaks of the wrath of God or judgement, this means God's working through conscience (or "natural law") in a way that accords with 1 Cor 11:31 ("For if we would judge ourselves we would not be judged"), where the self-aware self co-operates with the sense of God's fearful holiness. Those who judge themselves will not have to face (final) judgement. Melancthon takes the opportunity to elaborate:

I reply: Paul does not speak here about the judgement of magistrates or about punishments which for the sake of peace and utility are given to thieves or thugs; but he means the slow private judgement of the conscience in every person.. But after he (Adam) was rebuked by God he acknowledged sin to be contempt of God, and sensing God to be angry, he became full of dread, and would have been snuffed out by the weight of sadness, unless called back from death by divine promise. For, says Paul, the law is the power of sin. Thus the law of nature in human minds judges and condemns sin, shows God to be angry for whatever sin. Paul speaks about this true judgement of conscience and condemns not only outward wrongdoings but also the universal interior impurity, ignorance, and contempt for God, and all depraved desires.

In believers, there is operating a conscience which works "negatively," to stop us in our tracks and turn us to God.

On Rom 2, the idea of inchoate obedience seems to mean something similar to the penitence shown by Adam in light of the hope through the promise:

And in these there has to be inchoate obedience, which pleases, not because it satisfies the law, but since the person is reconciled by faith and acknowledges their weakness and yet believes that on account of Christ this worship pleases the Father. . . . Although there must be inchoate obedience, still faith depends on mercy alone and confirms us as righteous, that is accepted through mercy.²²

So, what about the moral experience of the Christian? Well, on Rom 7 Melancthon states that this chapter describes the state of a believer, not any “pre-conversion Paul,” and parries any objection on theological grounds: “But if there is still sin in the reborn how then are they righteous? How will they be saved?” Here he replies and declares the generosity of grace; for grace means free acceptance. Just prior to that, he describes how this state of grace looks:

This is the voice not of the impious and smug [securi] but of the converted who is moved in that contest, which is the nature of penitence. So let us propose this passage as an example to us of penitence and let us learn that such is the constant penance of the godly, that is to acknowledge one’s misery with immense sadness, that is to shrink with dread, seeing the sickness of nature in another way, that these are not in us motions which burn piously but that fear, faith and love are cold, while fleshly cares and emotions have the upper hand and that the major part of life is directed towards fleshly concerns.

Paul’s cry that Christ would “deliver me” means deliverance not only from punishment but also from sin. Christ is the answer. And this segues into the opening verse of chapter 8: “Nulla nunc condemnatio est his, qui in Christo Iesu ambulant.”

That is, justified by faith they please God on account of Christ, even though sin inheres in them, even concupiscence and vicious emotions. For he does not say there is no sin in the godly, but no condemnation. And this is the principal proposition in this passage about grace, and it is simply the necessary doctrine in the church: because the reborn not on account of fulfilment of the law

²² See on this Timothy Wengert, *Defending Faith: Lutheran Response to Andreas Osiander’s Doctrine of Justification, 1551–1559* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 331.

or their own dignity but on account of Christ by faith are righteous, although sin still dwells in them, that is concupiscence.

Melanchthon here regards the “addition” of “who walk in” as Paul’s own “explanatory addition,” since it was there in the *textus receptus* of his time.

But to this proposition it is added: “to those walking according to the spirit.” This addition is made for two reasons: first to show faith is not human cogitation, but is the movement of the Holy Spirit. The other reason is that we might know that this faith is not in those who walk according to the flesh, that is those who are without penitence and who rush into sins against conscience. . . . In those who are light about sin there is no contrition and no remission of sin. Paul therefore teaches how the justified might please God. It is not that they do what is enough for the law, but that they believe in Christ and that such faith or motion of the Holy Spirit causes them to “walk,” and this is not in those who walk according to the flesh, that is, are impenitent.

This textual addition reinforces what was already implicit without it, that Paul here is talking about believers whose faith is an active, “walking” one.

This brings him to Rom 8:2—“The law of the spirit of life”—where he comments:

Therefore the law justifies. However, the law does not mean the moral or Mosaic law as such, but it means this teaching: Love the Lord your God etc. It adds Law (of the) spirit. Thus he understands the guiding spirit, that it [is] that governor, the spiritual motion who enlivens by the apprehension of Christ, that motion is the spirit. . . . For the law in these words, “the law the spirit life [etc.],” does not signify the teaching of the law since it says “the Law of the spirit,” that is the guiding spirit or moving or vivifying. And this is metalepsis. . . . Paul himself adds: “the Law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus” that is that spiritual guiding which makes alive, apprehending Christ Jesus. Therefore he desires that we are made alive by faith and the knowing of Christ and free from sin and death, as one might say: “Not on account of the fulfilment of the law but because you have apprehended Christ.” And this is the sum of the sense: there is no condemnation for the righteous, not because they

have the fulfilling of the law but because by faith in Christ they will be made alive and freed from the curse of the law or damnation.

We should note here the future tense: Melanchthon does assume that there will be a future judgement. There is, at a number of points, the reminder of an eschatological dimension, with Christian hope painted against a background of final judgement as default; and yet the work of God in believers seems to be done by (1) renewed conscience and (2) afflictions from outside. Melanchthon is more interested in the here and now of the Christian life.

It is also clear that those who pursue only civil righteousness are far from God. All remains external and their pursuit of such goals does not serve to carry them towards God and his freedom:

Therefore to be “according to the flesh” means to be without the spirit. And to know “according to the flesh” means to have knowledge or judgement that is rational and an affect of sense and of will, such as are without the holy spirit, as to understand and seek pleasures, riches, peace, glory. And at the highest level, one might understand civil righteousness and many do and seek this righteousness, while all the time their heart, if without the fear of God, is full of doubt and ignorance of God. On the contrary to know God according to the spirit is to judge spiritually and have spiritual movement, that is light by which God can be recognized, and true fears and a true faith that wrestles with doubt.

So there can be high-minded operations without the Holy Spirit, but these do not avail for the person. In fact, the root or fount of bad behavior and desires lies in the mind: ignorance of God, doubt, contempt, disrespect towards God. Afflictions are not always punishments, and they certainly are beyond the control of the “power of the keys,” that is the Church hierarchy. But they can be sobering opportunities for us to do penance, and so God might stop calamities once we are penitent, and as we know that we can be forgiven. Lastly, we can see what this means for ecclesiology—one of self-judgement (again cf. 1 Cor 6:1; 11:31). It is necessary for us to become like to the image of the Son of God. And this says that the Church is subject to death on account of present sins, that vicious flesh might be abolished. In other words, sanctification comes through the right collective response to suffering.

So, in the first Romans commentary, of 1532, even when the text of

Romans turns to consider what might be called the positive side of the Christian life—that is, life in the Spirit as set out in Rom 8—Melanchthon seems determined to resist discussing sanctification. It is almost as though doing that might distract the reader just as much as the Christian from the task of “apprehending Christ,” which is what the Spirit moves one to do. And what Christ has done is to have condemned sin in the flesh rather than anything more “positive”-sounding. Even “walking in the spirit” is explained as the opposite of living according to the flesh, which in turn is viewed as less about indulging fleshly lusts and more about being boastfully self-righteous. The spiritual life is defined, therefore, in terms more with reference to God, with more made of the light by which God is known, the motion of the Holy Spirit, true fears, and trust that wrestles doubt. In short, this is spirituality more than “ethics,” a turning inwards to find God.

1556 *Enarratio Epistulae Pauli ad Romanos*²³

In the introduction he pauses to refresh his major themes of the last number of decades. At all times we need to understand the distinction between “law” and “Gospel.” Our pains are not means to placate God, but rather are signs that he is angry with our sins. Adam was consoled only by hearing about the seed of the woman, not by hope for moral improvement. Opponents tend to substitute love for faith; but faith is the application or the imputation of righteousness of Christ, and we do not have that on the basis of our own virtues. The question is not “am I virtuous?,” but “have I accepted Christ’s righteousness?”

And then on chapter 1, coming after a discussion of Greek vocabulary for virtues and vices, there is the lemma *scientes ius Dei* (“knowing the law of God”). This seems a strange rendering—the text in Rom 1:21 is *scientes Deum* (γινόντες τὸν θεόν). It is as though Melanchthon is reading Rom 2 back into Rom 1.

Here he adds the rule about the natural laws or “knowledges” which are called the law of nature. For so as to convict men with this charge he puts forward these natural knowledges. He says that these accuse you, which God has not wanted to extinguish in the nature of humans so that they might be witnesses of God and of the judgement of God, and we might indeed know, placed on caution by

²³ Printed in Wittenberg in 1556 by Wittenberg, Kreuzer; repr. in *CR*, 15:797–1052; citations and quotes located by biblical text.

this voice of nature, that God indeed is terrifyingly wrathful against those who work against these knowledges implanted in us divinely.

Melanchthon takes the opportunity to equate the law of God with natural law.

More recent people have thought about the message of Paul. These acknowledged which we call laws of nature or law of nature, here he calls law of God. Let us know then—which is most true—that the laws of nature are the divine law. For the light from God is established in our minds and most truly accords with the Decalogue and other writings in the law of Moses, in which the law of nature is restated. For there are most serious causes on account of which God re-states in clear voice the same law placed previously in creation in minds, and he added clear testimonies and ordered thus to be written. For after the depravation of human nature there is darkness in minds and a great amount of doubts. And gradually the bad examples increased the darkness. I have said much about these matters elsewhere. And the recent ones teach what truly is the law of nature, and they hold to a rule passed down from the ancients: “The violation of the law of nature is mortal sin, just as the violation of divine law.”

So he confirms a few lines later: There is a law to them, and in them conscience accuses and excuses. For there is in them a natural knowledge, discerning between honest and base, which by the very thing is the law of God, congruent with the Decalogue. Again, this appears to be reading chapter 2 (discussion of natural law) into chapter 1 (natural theology), and the “accuses and excuses” comes clearly from Rom 2:15.

But when it comes to Romans 2:15:

And the word “Nature” here signifies the same, that is “by natural knowledge,” meaning the discrimination of honest and base things. This is simple and innate sense, which the reader embraces even as he rejects the corrupt. . . . And where Paul says “The work [opus; cf. Vulgate “qui ostendunt opus legis scriptum in cordibus suis”; Greek ὁ ἔργον τοῦ νόμου γραπτὸν] written in hearts”—this means that these natural “knowledges” are gifts attributed to nature and innate with us, just like the “knowledges” of numbers are attributed to nature and born within us. It is said there is one eternal moral law, which accuses sin in all at all times, and the fathers were not righteous by law, but by faith in the mediator whom they recognized from the promise.

So the accent is on the positive, and on the extent to which people can know the moral law which works on their conscience to restrain them but also to guide them towards forgiveness from God.

Right at the end of his comments on chapter 7, just as he approaches chapter 8, Melancthon writes:

Now Paul returns to the description of grace, and it adds consolation to the above complaint, since he said previously that sin inheres in the saints in this life. The question is common to all saints: in what way are they righteous? Well, they are accepted by God and heirs of eternal life, even when they still experience sins, have their doubts, and when it is necessary to say that all their good motions and the fear of God, love, faith and hope are slow, and on the other hand, there are at the same time in their hearts many erring flames of desire.

For, the term “grace” is a relative word, that is, free acceptance, which more plainly expressed means no condemnation and does not mean now there is no sin. And they are heirs of eternal life, even if sins inhere in them even with vicious sinful desires and depraved effects, so long as they are in Christ Jesus and walk according to the Spirit, that is, if they are in conversion to God and faith is consoling their hearts with the knowledge of the Son of God, which faith indeed is the movement of the Holy Spirit, who henceforth guides them and sanctifies those as cleansed, even as they fight against depraved emotions.

This is the main proposition in this chapter, containing teaching and consolation that is necessary for the church in all ages. For it always was, is and will be a question for the minds of all the saints, how you please God when you still feel much filth. The Pharisees and monks have taught men to please on account of their own merits and of sacrifices, of masses. In this way they confirmed the faith of their own dignity among those who felt safe, and they drew people to sacrifices, where empty trust made idols from sacrifices. After their security was disturbed, they ordered people to stay in doubt. They had fear of punishments, . . . but the voice of the Gospel forbids doubt and orders us that we believe in the Son of God, and it claims and affirms that those believing in the Son please God, even if the remnants of sin inhere in them. . . . It must be observed that he says expressly: “to those walking in Christ according to the spirit, not according to the flesh.” He does not promise consolation to those who are without penitence, who securely rave and persevere

in wicked things against conscience, about which it will be said later: "if you live according to the flesh you will die."

Melanchthon then argues that, since the mind can be carnal too, there is no hiding place in the human person from sin, no citadel untouched by it, despite what the Scholastics say. For the sense of the flesh is to be found also in the higher part, where there is darkness and doubts about God, providence, and the Word of God. There follows a short excursus on Rom 8:2: the Word's assuming a real humanity means a humanity that was passible (pain) but not sinful, with the conclusion that the Word of God condemned sin in the flesh by means of the Incarnation, since the Word includes the creation, not vice versa. This looks very much like an *extracalvinisticum* and even rather "Antiochene" in flavor. Doctrine and lifestyle matter equally. If you admit false doctrines and indulge wicked affections, you will again be guilty of eternal punishments and will lose the grace and Holy Spirit, so there must be no presumption. And when we wrestle, the Spirit comes to console. One can then see that, in the Church, sin is not dominant, but is contested by those who keep a good conscience. Rushing against conscience is what makes sin "unforgivable."

True humility means mourning the remains of sin and yet knowing peace from the mediator. Although both heroes were able to brake the moving motor (*uterque frenat locomotivam*), the pagan Scipio had great virtue in remaining chaste and faithful but did so without true knowledge of God and invocation, whereas Joseph called on God and knew to please God according to the Lord (Jesus) having been promised and he (Joseph) delighted in him and sought guidance from God.

As for the reborn, there are two grades of sinners. One is sin that is not reigning, which gets called venial sin, but is original sin, a mass of defects and depraved inclinations and doubts, sins of ignorance and omission, and wicked emotions, but in those reborn they maintain faith and the honor of God with the help of the Holy Spirit, they resist wicked affections and do not rush or rage against conscience. . . . The other grade is the error of sin in foundation, the very lapse against conscience, as when David knowingly and intentionally took another man's wife.

The difference is that whereas the former type (believers) are self-aware and invoke divine moderating help, the latter type (unbelievers) resist even their own consciences.

Addendum: 1559 *Loci Praecipue Theologic*²⁴

It does seem that there are two tracks, one civil and the other theological. According to the final edition, the 1559 *Loci* (at *locus* 9: *De bonis operibus*), one is sketched in the Decalogue as the beginning of inner obedience, which even the ungodly can imitate, and the other is the works that God has prepared (Eph 2:10). It would seem that faith produces the love for God by which believers submit to the will of God, given that there is a weight of sinfulness, and frequently Melanchthon adds to this that there is the influence of the devil to take into account. In this same place, after citing Rom 7:23, Melanchthon confirms: “The mountains of sin that cling to the regenerate are far greater than can be comprehended by the judgment of any man.” Paul’s experience here is clearly one of being well on the way to being defeated and reaching despair, with only Christ’s intervention able to save him. Conversion is the start of a “new obedience,” and what this means is to have a good conscience and, although sinning, never to sin against that.²⁵ One has to rely on Christ and the Holy Spirit so that, as he refers to Rom 8:13 “If you put to death the deeds of the flesh you shall live.” A Christian must keep a good conscience so as not to be persistent in sins, such that Melanchthon can conclude: “I have mentioned which sins remain in the regenerate, namely, certain inner evils against which they must contend. But when we permit sins which are against conscience, then the Holy Spirit is driven out and grieved, grace is lost and faith destroyed, that is the confidence in the mercy of God.”

Yet “against conscience” is not the same thing as intentional sin, but is wider than that. On the issue of “the difference between mortal and venial sin,” he concludes: “Finally we must add this point: When we say that mortal sins are lapses which take place against conscience, we are including sins of ignorance and sins of omission.” The sophists’ own claim that “nothing is sin unless it is an act of the will or voluntary” relates to civil

²⁴ Printed in Wittenberg by Johann d. Ä. Krafft, 1559; edited version in *CR*, 21:603–1049.

²⁵ “God anticipates us, calls, moves, aids; but we must see to it that we do not resist” (1543 *Loci*, quoted by Reinhold Seeberg, *Textbook of the History of Doctrines*, trans. Charles E. Hay [Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1905], 349). Cf. Melanchthon on Rom 8:29: “However God is truly present to his calling, justifies and will glorify those called. Paul wants us to guard our calling and remember that it was made divinely, so that we might persevere in it since God will be present to this his calling and his word” (*CR*, 15:675). Contra George Graybill (*Evangelical Free Will: Philipp Melanchthon’s Doctrinal Journey on the Origins of Faith* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010], 222), one is not condemned for rejecting the Gospel but for failing to convert to the natural law.

law but not to the judgement of divine law. Mortal sin, he says, is when conscience has the intent of sinning, and despises God and flees from him and cannot call upon him. Yet this late statement about unintentional sins being sins against conscience is not specified in the Romans commentaries and might reflect further thinking on the subject during the 1550s.

Conclusion: Ecclesia and Ethics

One cannot really speak of ecclesial as communal ethics. There is a syllogism he wants to oppose: the righteous ought to be well; the Church is righteous; therefore the Church ought to do well. The answer is that the Church is righteous only by imputation, not yet by consummation, and God will destroy the body with sin in it. The body here is the individual human body. The body metaphor from 1 Corinthians (but also from Rom 12:4–8) is missing.

Does this mean that the Church as community of a special holiness is missed? He seems to think of *ecclesia* as interchangeable with *renati* (the reborn). The experience towards God is in each believer rather than a sphere of moral excellence. As Johanna Rahner has noted, his was a “word-ecclesiology,” for there was nothing “natural” about the Church in its origins, although she argues that there was a second side to his ecclesiology where a human church law supplemented the “divine” church law transmitted from the Scriptures through the ministry.

But “church” for Melanchthon means something like a laboratory, as it did for Calvin, where people come to be transformed in their faith or continue to be turned around to Christ. This needs to happen because of the constant pressing of sin. There can be useful laws for civil righteousness, but these do not lead to knowing God, and hence can be only external in their effect.

It needs also to be mentioned that Melanchthon was reluctant to see the third use of the law as providing Christian with clear ethical instruction for their renewed lives; as Timothy Wengert puts it, the third use of the law merely means that the first and second (the civil and the elenctic uses) are widened to the whole span of the life of the Christian.²⁶ But in this combination, the civil use becomes holy and the accusing force of the law is turned towards the constructive.

²⁶ See T. Wengert, “Philipp Melanchthon, biblischer Theologe der Neuzeit,” in Günter and Köpf, *Melanchthon und die Neuzeit*, 23–42, at 34: “This third use of the law consists in—in contrast to Calvin—merely in the extension of the first and second uses of the law to the whole life of the Christian.”