



A BIBLE STUDY ON PHILIPP MELANCTHON

REFORMER, PROFESSOR, EDUCATOR

“LORD JESUS CHRIST, WITH US ABIDE”

(Text by Philipp Melancthon and Nicolas Selnecker TLH 292)

(Luke 24:13–35; John 8:31–36; Col. 2:1–15; 1 John 2:18–29)

Next only to Erasmus of Rotterdam, Melancthon was one of the greatest scholars in Europe at the time of the Reformation; he was later given the prestigious title of Preceptor of Germany, the chief director of education in the Lutheran regions of Germany. In paintings, woodcuts and commemorative coins and medals, Philipp Melancthon is most often portrayed next to Martin Luther in connection with commemorations of the 1530 Augsburg Confession and the 1580 Book of Concord. A commemorative medal later depicts Luther and Melancthon bidding Christ to stay with them at Wittenberg (**LUKE 24:29**), a reminder of Luther and Melancthon's insistence on Christ's real, saving presence in the breaking of the bread — the Lord's Supper (**LUKE 24:30–31**).

“I prefer the books of Master Philipp to my own. I am rough, stormy, and altogether warlike. I am here to fight innumerable monsters and devils. I must remove all stumps and stones, cut away thistles and thorns, and clear the wild forests, but Master Philipp comes along softly and gently, sowing and watering with joy, according to the gifts which God has abundantly bestowed upon him,” Luther wrote.

He quickly recognized Melancthon's academic skills, his gift of language and his ability to synthesize and systematize theological truths. When it came to proclaiming the light of Christ and his Gospel, Martin sang the melody while Philipp embellished the song of the Reformation by adding his own polished harmony. Melancthon even wrote the text of enduring Reformation hymns like “Lord Jesus Christ, with Us Abide.”

Luther also realized that Master Philipp would have a tough go of it after the singing of the Swan of Wittenberg (Luther) had ended. Yet despite his later political and theological compromises, Melancthon's legacy continues in the Augsburg Confession, his *Loci Communes*, his biblical commentaries and the confession given by his personal coat-of-arms: the bronze serpent on a high wooden pole (**NUM. 21:7–9; JOHN 3:14–16**).

STANZA ONE

Lord Jesus Christ, with us abide, / For round us falls the eventide. / O let your Word, that saving light, / Shine forth undimmed into the night.

The abiding promises of our Lord Jesus Christ — the Word of God incarnate — are the Church's only redeeming light in the face of so much that threatens our faith.

This is the hymn Philipp Melancthon sang during his career as theological professor at the University of Wittenberg. This is the hymn he sang after Luther had been taken up into heaven and a threatening darkness came upon those who confessed this new understanding of the Bible explained in the Lutheran Confessions.

After the death of Martin Luther in 1546, Philipp Melancthon's theological career slowly fell apart. His conciliatory nature got the best of him as he tried to manipulate the clear confession of the Word of God revealed in Scripture in a misguided attempt to bring doctrinal unity where there could be no unity. Those that followed his attempts to gloss over true differences between conflicting denominational beliefs came to be marked by the derogatory label “Philippists.”

In his mistaken attempt to alter the words of the Augsburg Confession to accommodate many different theological opinions, the truth of the Word was blurred and the abiding promises of Christ were muted. Melancthon's seemingly noble experiment to bring everyone together failed.

1. Why was it so tempting for Melancthon to smooth over the difficult teachings of the Bible when presenting Christ and His Gospel to others? Why are we tempted to do the same thing today? (**MATT. 4:8–10**; Luther's Small Catechism on the sixth and seventh petitions of the Lord's Prayer)

2. What are the actual results of trying to make the Word of God pleasing and attractive to the world and the world's religious leaders? What was Melancthon trying to gain? What was actually lost in the process? (**JAMES 4:4; ROM. 8:7A**)

STANZA TWO

In these last days of great distress / Grant us, dear Lord, true steadfastness / That we keep pure till life is spent / Your holy Word and Sacrament.

Faith's constant desire is to be steadfast to the Christ of the Scriptures and His abiding commands and

promises, even when we may suffer for our faithfulness.

Melanchthon's temptation was to rely on his own fallen intellect and human abilities. He was a great master of language and rhetoric. He could turn a phrase and argue a philosophical position with the best of them. But being a faithful witness is something quite different from being a master salesman. Melanchthon fell headlong into the trap of giving up a little doctrine in order to win the applause of as many as possible.

3. Why, five hundred years ago, does Melanchthon call these "the last days"? (**HEB. 1:1-2**)

4. How did Melanchthon convince himself he could twist some details of the biblical revelation and still be faithful to his Lord Christ and His Gospel? What teachings of Christ and His Word are we tempted to alter or just not talk about while we believe we're still being faithful when it comes to the essential Christian doctrines?

STANZA THREE

To hope grown dim, to hearts turned cold / Speak tongues of fire and make us bold / To shine your Word of saving grace / Into each dark and loveless place.

Our hearts and minds are cold and unbelieving until the Spirit of Christ comes to do its work of putting to death and making alive again — through the prophets and apostles, through the water of the baptismal font, through the bread and wine of the altar.

Martin Luther was all but meek and conciliatory. Luther tried to teach Melanchthon that there would always be a majority of people who would not accept the clear teachings of Scripture. Luther was, at the end, at peace with that. Melanchthon continued to try to fix a situation he could never fix. (**MATT. 7:14; 1 JOHN 2:15-16**)

5. What examples from the life of Christ show that He was not concerned about taking a survey from a focus group in deciding what to preach and teach? What example does St. Peter give to warn us about changing the folly of Christ and His cross in order to win a more favorable response from the world? (**LUKE 13:23-25; MATT. 7:21-23; 2 TIM. 2:4**)

6. The Reformers suffered from the tempter's voice that came and whispered, "What makes you so sure you have the pure Gospel and everyone else does not? What if your understanding of Christ and the Sacraments is wrong? How many countless people have you then thrown into hell?" How did Luther remain steadfast on what he had taught? Was this some human ability in Luther that Melanchthon didn't have the luxury of possessing? (**1 COR. 15:58; JAMES 1:1-12**)

7. What is the source of our steadfastness and faithfulness to the clear Word of God? Where does Christ promise to strengthen our faith?

STANZA FOUR

May glorious truths that we have heard, / The bright sword

of Your mighty Word, / Spurn Satan that Your Church be strong, / Bold, unified in act and song.

The only weapon in remaining steadfast and faithful to Christ is to be found in Christ. He is the only defense of weak and wandering sheep. His Word is our light in the midst of threatening darkness.

8. Why do so many Christians mistakenly believe that if they were only more skilled public speakers, more people around them would "accept Christ and make him Lord and Savior"? (**1 COR. 1:17**)

9. Where does our old, sinful nature always look to save ourselves and others? How can St. Paul's description of defensive armor in Ephesians 4 be misunderstood in a way that makes us our own redeemer?

STANZA FIVE

Restrain, O Lord, the human pride / That seeks to thrust Your truth aside / Or with some man-made thoughts or things / Would dim the words Your Spirit sings.

Fallen human pride that attributes Christ's gracious Spirit-enabled gifts as things we should get credit for is the fall of so many within the Christian Church.

10. How could Melanchthon have given such a bright, shining witness to the Christ of Scriptures in formulating the Augsburg Confession and then given such a dim, unclear witness later after Luther had died? (**PHIL. 2:12; ACTS 20:29**)

11. What warning or exhortation does Melanchthon's example give to us and the Christian Church today? What other similar examples of declared-righteous-sinners are presented to us in the Bible? (**ROM. 12:1-21**)

STANZA SIX

Stay with us, Lord, and keep us true; / Preserve our faith our whole life through — / Your Word alone our heart's defense, / The Church's glorious confidence.

Our preservation as confident and confessing Christians shall always remain with the abiding presence of a gracious and merciful Christ and His Word.

12. Christ's Word and Spirit is the true author of the Reformation hymn "Lord Jesus Christ, with Us Abide." What other texts in the hymnal are gracious gifts that clearly give witness to the truths Luther and Melanchthon re-discovered in the Reformation?

13. How does our continued study of the Bible and the Augsburg Confession honor the redeeming gifts given to Philipp Melanchthon? What about Melanchthon can we give thanks to Christ for? How can the salutary gifts given through Melanchthon keep our eyes on Christ and His commands and promises?

14. Often the Gospel for Reformation Day is John 8:31-36. Where is true, eternal freedom for Melanchthon and all Christians to be found? (**ROM. 8:2; COL. 1:13**)