

Luther and Melanchthon on the Papacy at Smalcald

By Edward C. Fredrich

In the process of evoking two of the Lutheran confessional writings—Luther’s Smalcald Articles and Melanchthon’s “Of the Power and Primacy of the Pope”—the Smalcald Convention of 1537 also highlights a major problem that perplexes Reformation students. That is the enigmatic personal relations and complex joint efforts of the two reformers, Luther and Melanchthon. The problem came to the fore at Smalcald in their reactions to the major question confronting the assembly of princes and theologians: What is to be done about the pope and his council summons?

The problem can be briefly summarized and stated by placing in juxtaposition three pertinent quotations:

1. Luther in the Smalcald Articles (Part II, Article IV) gathers together his treatment “Of the Papacy” in the statement: “This teaching shows forcefully that the Pope is the very Antichrist who has exalted himself above, and opposed himself against Christ because he will not permit Christians to be saved without his power, ...”¹
2. Melanchthon in his subscription to Luther’s Articles expresses general agreement but then declares: “Regarding the Pope I hold that, if he would allow the Gospel, his superiority over the bishops which he has otherwise, is conceded to him by human right also by us, for the sake of the peace and general unity of those Christians who are also under him, and may be under him hereafter.”²
3. Melanchthon’s “Of the Power and Primacy of the Pope” reaches a climax in the declaration, “This being the case, all Christians ought to beware of becoming partakers of the godless doctrine, blasphemies, and unjust cruelty of the Pope. On this account they ought to desert and execrate the Pope with his adherents as the kingdom of Antichrist.”³

It should not be expected that every aspect of this seeming contradiction of Luther by Melanchthon and, for that matter, of Melanchthon by Melanchthon can be fully explained at this late date. A competent Melanchthon scholar, Robert Stupperich, comments on the *Tractatus* in this fashion:

This treatise contradicted the previous statements of Melanchthon, and it is unclear what motive induced him to make this complete about-face. Obviously he had wished to accommodate Luther, who was ill almost to the point of death, and he had wished to act in his place. However, other grounds also may have influenced him. In any case, Melanchthon henceforth adhered to the opinion presented therein, nor did he change it after Luther’s recovery.⁴

Much will be and remain “unclear” in the area of differences between Luther and Melanchthon on this subject and others because of a studied silence that the two men involved for the most part chose to maintain.

In the main they followed the desires of Elector John Frederick who viewed as the plague any discord between Luther and Melanchthon and indicated he would rather close Wittenberg University than let it become the place where such discord might manifest itself.⁵ The lengthy dealings regarding Agricola’s antinomianism are a case in point of Luther’s willingness to go the extra mile in correcting and containing doctrinal dissent.⁶

¹ Quotations from the Confessions are from *Triglote Concordia* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921) This one is found on p 475,10.

² *Triglote*, p 501, 7.

³ *Triglote*, p 517,41.

⁴ Robert Stupperich, *Melanchthon*, translated by Robert Fischer (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), pp 108–109.

⁵ Franz Hildebrandt, *Melanchthon: Alien or Ally?* (Cambridge: University Press, 1946), pp XV–XVI.

⁶ See the introduction to “Against the Antinomians” in LW, XLVII, 101–107.

When differences with Philippus threaten, Martin is even more patient. The results are beneficial in the over-all, even if in the process questions we would dearly love answered remain unanswered.

This lack should, however, not deter us in our efforts to evaluate the Smalcaldian stand of Luther and Melancthon on the papacy. What is involved is a confessional stand. What bears careful investigation is the question: Are there real differences and, if so, do they becloud our confessional commitment?

Luther's Statement

In a brief article of a little over 1,000 words Luther sets down clearly his position on the papacy. The comparatively late overt appearance on the stage of history is noted and a before-after comparison is employed. The claim to a rule by divine right is flatly denied. The mischief that has been wrought under this claim is denounced, especially the arrogant assertion that "no Christian can be saved unless he obeys him."⁷

What of the resort to a "rule by human right" platform for papal supremacy such as Melancthon espoused in his subscription to the Smalcald Articles and dialogers today so often employ in their position papers? This hypothetical approach, Luther says, is simply too hypothetical. The realities are against the proposition.

For one thing, the claim to a "rule by divine right" cannot and will not be relinquished. Too much is at stake for the papacy. "He would have to suffer his entire realm and estate to be overthrown and destroyed, with all his rights and books, a thing which, to speak in few words, he cannot do."

Then there is also the practical matter of maintaining and enforcing a "rule by human right" over the entire church. For Luther the whole thing is a contradiction in terms. Other persons and places would advance the same claim and soon all that could be said would be, "Oh, the complicated and confused state of affairs!"⁸

On the basis of II Thessalonians 2:4 Luther then asserts, as previously indicated, "that the Pope is the very Antichrist." After citing numerous false teachings and practices of Rome, Luther sums up the matter in these words: "Therefore, just as little as we can worship the devil himself as Lord and God, we can endure his apostle, the Pope, or Antichrist, in his rule as head or lord."⁹

This was not a spur-of-the-moment outburst of an ill and aging outcast of the church. For years Luther had been haunted by the prospect that the Antichrist might be residing in Rome. There is a surfacing already in the earliest conflicts with Rome. Writing to Spalatin as he prepared for the 1519 Leipzig debate he cautiously and privately wonders whether the pope is the Antichrist or his apostle.¹⁰ The 1520 Bull from Rome threatening excommunication was countered by a Latin writing with the title *Adversus execrabilem Antichristi bullam* and the *German Wider die Bulle des Endchrists*.¹¹

In the days when Luther lived the Turk obviously was a strong candidate for the title *Antichrist*. Pope and Turk are often bracketed by Luther in such a connection. Those who have sung their church hymns in German will remember that the second line of "Lord, keep us steadfast in thy Word," rendered in English as "Curb those who fain by craft and sword," was in the original, *Und steur' des Papsts und Türken Mord*.¹²

Luther, however, was always careful to distinguish when precision was in order. He would point out the difference between body and soul, as in the *Table Talk* item, "I am entirely convinced that the papacy is the Antichrist; if, however, someone wants to add the Turk, the Pope is the spirit of Antichrist and the Turk is the flesh of Antichrist. They both help one another slaughter, the latter bodily and with a sword, the former by teaching and spiritually."¹³ Even more to the point Luther writes in the Smalcald Articles: "Even the Turks or

⁷ Triglot, p 473, 4.

⁸ Triglot, p 473,8.

⁹ Triglot, p 475,14.

¹⁰ WA, *Briefe*, I, 359. Luther writes, *Nescio an papa sit Antichristus ipse vel Apostolus eius*.

¹¹ WA, VI, 595 and 613.

¹² The hymn number is 261 in *Lutheran Hymnal* and in the old synodical *Gesangbuch*, 233.

¹³ WA, *Tr*, I, 135.

the Tartars, great enemies of Christians as they are, do not do this [exalt themselves above all that is called God] but they allow whoever wishes to believe in Christ, and take bodily tribute and obedience from Christians.¹⁴

Luther was led to the firm conviction that the papacy was the fulfillment of II Thessalonians 2. He expressed that conviction in the Smalcald Articles and maintained it for the rest of his life. He frequently repeated the substance of the serious warning with which he closes his Smalcald Articles treatment “Of the Papacy”:

Therefore, just as little as we can worship the devil himself as Lord and God, we can endure his apostle the Pope or Antichrist in his rule as head or lord. For to lie and to kill, and to destroy body and soul eternally, that is wherein his papal government really consists, as I have clearly shown in many books.¹⁵

Melanchthon’s Reservation

It is to this conviction of Luther that Melanchthon addresses himself in his subscription. In it Philip asserts his willingness to grant the pope as a human right the prime place he holds over the bishops in the interest of peace and tranquility for those under his sway, assuming that he permits the preaching of the gospel.¹⁶

The guarded declaration of difference leaves certain questions unanswered. There is no fiat statement that rejects Luther’s identification of the pope as the Antichrist. But the sense definitely tends in that direction. Could the Antichrist be granted superiority, even *iure humano*?

There should be no misunderstanding of the broad motives, whatever the questions about the precise meaning. Melanchthon was not giving way to fears for his own person. He did not shrink from the risk of bringing the wrath of Paul or Charles down upon himself. A sympathetic biographer deals with this charge emphatically, asserting that Melanchthon’s subscription was written

in honest conviction and love of peace, not because of fear; for actually it took much more courage at that point to set one’s self by such a declaration against the hatred of the pope and the vehemence of one’s own party and to bring upon one’s self all the ill-will and bitterness of the zealots than to intensify the existing and irreconcilable hatred of the opposition by an unconditional subscription to the Articles.¹⁷

Melanchthon, however, was very much interested in continuing theological discussions with the other parties, whether the Reformed or the Roman. As early as 1533 when a papal inquiry about a possible council came to Saxony and Philip’s advice was sought, he strongly urged attendance at a “free” council. He maintained that position steadfastly in the prolonged negotiations and discussions, even against the pronounced contrary views of Elector John Frederick.¹⁸ Luther’s down-to-earth treatment of the papacy seemed like too much of a roadblock on the pathway to a council.

¹⁴ *Triglot*, p 475,11.

¹⁵ *Triglot*, p 475,14.

¹⁶ *Triglot*, p 501,7.

¹⁷ Friedrich A. Koethe, ed., *Philipp Melanchthon’s Werke* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1899), I, 54–55. The quotation is from Koethe’s introductory biographical sketch.

¹⁸ Descriptions of the pre-Smalcald activities are provided in: Stupperich’s *Melanchthon*, pp 106–108 and *Triglot*, Historical Introduction, pp 47–52. See also Armin Panning’s “Smalcald Politics and the Smalcald Articles” in the previous issue of WLQ, pp 92ff.

Perhaps the best place to get at Melanchthon's frame of mind is a lengthy letter he wrote from Smalcald on March 1 to his good friend and fellow Grecophile, Camerarius.¹⁹ Melanchthon describes the dual purpose of the Smalcald meeting as a thorough doctrinal discussion to remove any differences and as a deliberation over which points were to be defended and retained and which might be conceded to the pope.²⁰

He, however, laments the fact that no such purposes could be carried out because others feared that an impression of yielding would be given and that the unity of the League might be threatened.²¹ So that something might be accomplished and those assembled might not be mute participants, Melanchthon adds matter-of-factly, "We were ordered to write something on the primacy of Peter or the Roman Pope and on the power and jurisdiction of the bishops." That assignment, Philip says, he carried out somewhat more sharply than was his wont.²²

After referring to the cursory discussion of the Augsburg Confession as an extra task and explanations of Bucer and Blaurock concerning Article X, Melanchthon confides in Camerarius about his arguments with others concerning the possibility of attending a council.²³ Admitting that there were dangers in the course of action he prescribed, he opposed a bare-faced refusal and insisted that the pope, even if he could not serve as a judge, did have the right of calling the council. Since the contrary opinion prevailed, Melanchthon can only reveal to his friend his fears for the future.²⁴ His only comfort is that which a good cause can bring.²⁵ It is in this frame of mind that Philip prepared his contribution to the Smalcald confessional documents.

Melanchthon's Treatise

The *Tractatus* is certainly written *asperius* than might have been expected, given the writer's normal approach and the specific reservation that he had put on the record regarding Luther's section on the papacy. One wonders, in fact, why he was given the writing task when the assembly resolved to add to the Augsburg Confession and Apology a statement on the papacy. The results are as gratifying as surprising.

Melanchthon's Tract agrees with Luther "that the Pope is the very Antichrist."²⁶ After refuting the papal claim to primacy by divine right, just as roundly as Luther had and at much greater length, Melanchthon disposes of the additional claims that he has both swords and that salvation depends on submission to him. As his line of thought is carried out, it converges with Luther's.

Even the words could easily be assumed to be Luther's.

Now it is manifest that the Roman pontiffs with their adherents, defend [and practise] godless doctrines and godless service. And the marks [all the vices] of Antichrist plainly agree with the kingdom of the Pope and his adherents. For Paul, 2 Ep. 2, 3, in describing to the Thessalonians the Antichrist calls him *an adversary of Christ, who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that*

¹⁹ Ernst Voegelinus, ed., *Liber Continens Continua Serie Epistolas Philippi Melancthonis Scriptas Annis XXXVIII ad loach. Camerar. Pabep...* (Lipsiae, 1569), pp 279–282. Pertinent quotations from the March 1, 1537, letter appear in this paragraph and the two that follow. The St. Louis Edition has a translation in XVI, 2023–26.

²⁰ *Alter, ut de doctrinae fieret collatio non sutilis, sed accurata, ut tollerentur dissidia, et consentiens doctrina et explicata in nostris Ecclesiis extaret. Altera, ut deliberaretur, qui articuli ad extremum defendendi sint ac retinendi, at anteponendi communi tranquillitati et omnibus rebus humanis, qui concedendi Pontifici ... propter pacem, et ad communem Ecclesiae concordiam restituendam, si res ad moderationem aliquam deduceretur.*

²¹ Melanchthon characterizes the opposition as being *indocti et vehementiores*.

²² *Haec scripsi mediocriter et exhibui.* But a very similar February 23 letter to Jonas says, *Id scripsi paulo, quam soleo, asperius.* In *Corpus Reformatorum: Melanchthon, Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, ed. by Bretschneider and Bindseil, XXVIII vols. (Halle, 1834–1860), III, 271—No. 1528; Microfiche III, Card 4.

²³ *Nostra sententia semper fuit, ne simpliciter recusaretur Synodus, quia etiamsi Papae non liceat esse Judicem, habet tamen Jus indicendae Synodi.*

²⁴ He predicts that an unyielding spirit will bring, among other things, *ad posteros discordiam aeternam, barbariem horribilem, and vastitatem in hac natione omnium artium et officiorum civilium.*

²⁵ *Sed magna est in omnem eventum consolatio in bonitate causae.*

²⁶ *Triglot*, p 475,10.

is called God, or that is worshiped, so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God. He speaks therefore of one ruling in the Church; not of heathen kings, and he calls this one the adversary of Christ, because he will devise doctrines conflicting with the Gospel, and will assume to himself divine authority.²⁷

The errors of the kingdom of the Pope are manifest. And Scripture with its entire voice exclaims that these errors are a *teaching of demons* and of Antichrist. The idolatry in the profanation of the masses is manifest, which, besides other faults [besides being altogether useless] are shamelessly applied to most shameful gain [and trafficking]. The doctrine of repentance has been utterly corrupted by the Pope and his adherents. For they teach that sins are remitted because of the worth of our works. Then they bid us doubt whether the remission takes place. They nowhere teach that sins are remitted freely for Christ's sake, and that by this faith we obtain remission of sin.

Thus they obscure the glory of Christ, and deprive consciences of firm consolation, and abolish true divine services, ...²⁸

What of the reservation that superiority over the bishops might be conceded to the pope by human right? Melanchthon makes no reference to it in the *Tractatus*. There is no express disavowal but for all practical purposes the reservation vanishes in the face of the realities. In a section of the *Tractatus*, previously quoted in part, Melanchthon asserts that the prevailing situation demands that

all Christians ought to beware of becoming partakers of the godless doctrine, blasphemies, and unjust cruelty of the Pope. On this account they ought to desert and execrate the Pope with his adherents as the kingdom of Antichrist; just as Christ has commanded, Matt. 7:15: Beware of false prophets. And Paul commands that godless teachers should be avoided and execrated as cursed, Gal. 1:8; Titus 3:10. And 2 Cor. 6:14 he says: *Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers; for what communion hath light with darkness?...*²⁹

Therefore, even though [□□□□□□□] the bishop of Rome had the primacy by divine right yet since he defends godless services and doctrines conflicting with the Gospel, obedience is not due him; yea, it is necessary to resist him as Antichrist.³⁰

This stand, as has been noted, Melanchthon is supposed to have “henceforth adhered to” despite any previously expressed or unexpressed reservations.³¹ One could, however, wonder whether some reservations did not remain to make it possible for Melanchthon to play the role he did in the Interim and in the resultant adiaphoristic controversy.

Varying Reactions

The *Tractatus* was a huge success at the Smalcald assembly. It reproduced the hostility to Roman political and ecclesiastical planning that prevailed at the meeting and it served to reinforce the formal decision to decline the summons to the proposed council. When the time came for signing, the assembled theologians subscribed at the request of their princes. Even the South Germans who did not sign Luther's Articles added their names. Luther's illness prevented him from signing and even hearing the *Tractatus*.

²⁷ *Triglot*, p 516,39.

²⁸ *Triglot*, p 517,42–44.

²⁹ *Triglot*, p 517,41.

³⁰ *Triglot*, p 521,57.

³¹ See Footnote 4.

A different kind of reaction manifested itself when Melanchthon's qualified subscription was under consideration. Luther remained silent on the matter. Perhaps he preferred to rest whatever case there was with the formal assembly, confident of the eventual outcome.

Others allowed their displeasure to go on the record. The Nuerenberg representative, Andreas Osiander is supposed to have reacted to Melanchthon's "if he would allow the Gospel" with his own, "That is if the devil would become an apostle."³² Whatever problems Osiander may have had then or developed later about the gospel, he had no problems in recognizing its enemies. He continues his arguments: "If the Pope would allow the gospel, he would no longer be the Pope nor exalt himself above other bishops but he would hear Christ saying, 'But you are not to be like that,' Luke 22."

Elector John Frederick disliked Melanchthon's subscription to Luther's Articles as much as he liked them. After thanking Luther for the Articles which he had commissioned, the Elector comments:

As far as the Pope is concerned, we have no hesitancy to oppose him as rigorously as possible. For if we, as Master Philip suggests, because of a favorable opinion or in the cause of peace were to allow him to remain a lord who could give us and our bishops and pastors and preachers orders, we would be putting ourselves in danger and difficulty. For he and his successors would not desist from efforts to destroy and uproot us and our descendants for all times to come. For this there is no need, since God's Word has freed and rescued us therefrom. And it would be our own smartness that would bring us, who have through God already been freed from a Babylonian Captivity, once again back into such danger, a danger that God, whom we had thus tempted, would without doubt allow to hang over us for times to come.³³

Just as emphatically as the Elector dissented from Philip in this matter, so he assented to Luther's testimony. The League may not have officially adopted the Articles of Luther at the Smalcald meeting but that did not hinder the Elector from advocating them most strenuously. He ordered their reprinting in 1543 and bequeathed them to his three sons in his 1553 will. Several decades before the Formula of Concord was adopted the pastors in Saxony were required to subscribe to the Smalcald Articles along with the Augsburg Confession and its Apology.

There were other early disapprovals of Melanchthon's qualified subscription to Luther's Articles in addition to the Elector's. Osiander's terse rebuttal has been mentioned. The editors of the venerable Jena edition of Luther's Works felt constrained to insert an explanation and repudiation of Melanchthon's subscription running to a dozen lines as it describes the differences between Philip's hypothetical pope and the real thing.³⁴

In rebutting Melanchthon's subscription, Carpzov in his □□□□□□ asserts that at the time it was presented it gained the approval of no one.³⁵ This would agree with what the early Reformation historian reports about the Smalcald subscription of Aepinus, the Hamburg superintendent. Aepinus, according to Seckendorff, originally subscribed in this fashion: "John Aepinus, along with all the Hamburg pastors, agrees with Master Philip's opinion in the matter of the primacy of the Pope." Later, however, he should have stricken that subscription and indicated a change of mind by simply signing, "I, John Aepinus, subscribe."³⁶

The most important reaction to the Smalcald writings of Melanchthon and Luther is, of course, that contained in the Formula of Concord. In the "Comprehensive Summary" of the Thorough Declaration the formulators declare:

In the fifth place, we also confess *the Articles* composed, approved, and received *at Smalcald* in the large assembly of theologians in the year 1537, ... In them ... the cause and grounds are

³² Jo. Benedictus Carpzov, *Isagoge in Libros Ecclesiarum Lutheranism Symbolicos* (Dresden, 1725), p 895.

³³ WA, Br, VIII, 4-5, no. 3125.

³⁴ Jena, VI, 522a.

³⁵ □□□□□□, p 894. The statement is: *A nemine tunc quidem temporis id fuisse probatum.*

³⁶ Seckendorff's *Reformation History*, trans. Elias Frick, (Leipzig, 1714), p 1596.

indicated, as far as necessary, why we have abandoned the papistical errors and idolatries, and can have no fellowship with them, and also why we know, and can think of, no way for coming to any agreement with the Pope concerning them.³⁷

This firm commitment, however, has unfortunately often been violated in the four centuries since it was originally made. When loyalty to the Confessions was in question, as for instance in the Age of Pietism, a first point of attack often was the Smalcald declaration on the papacy. Melanchthon's qualified subscription gave the opponents of the Confessions aid and comfort and provided them with a line of attack. His *Tractatus* unfortunately was often ignored.

The same situation prevails today, only more so. Melanchthon's reasoning in his subscription is approved and followed, even though it has no confessional force or standing.³⁸ But the confessional declarations regarding the papacy in Melanchthon's *Tractatus* and Luther's Smalcald Articles are either rejected out of hand or written off as historical evaluations that do not apply today and were overly harsh in the first place. Whether so intended or not, Melanchthon's qualified subscription to Luther's declaration has contributed to this state of affairs.

Saving Similarity

In conclusion it should be stated that the Smalcald subscription of Melanchthon does have one aspect worth commending. A papal primacy will be granted by human right only "if he would allow the Gospel." When Melanchthon asserts that the gospel is the *conditio sine qua non*, he is in complete accord with Luther. That was always the key point at issue in the Reformation battles with Rome.

It is the key issue today. The real problem is not with the doctrine of the Antichrist but with the doctrine of the gospel. As appreciation for the gospel of salvation by grace through faith wanes, so must an awareness of the threats and danger to the gospel and conviction concerning the identification of the Antichrist.

The confessional statements on the papacy made at Smalcald in both Luther's Articles and Melanchthon's *Tractatus* are to be cherished and confessed by us because those statements are based on and demonstrate a concern for the truth of the gospel. "The Church can never be better governed and preserved than if we all live under one head, Christ," is the way Luther sums up the matter.³⁹ By way of agreement Melanchthon says of the pope, "Since he defends godless services and doctrine conflicting with the Gospel, obedience is not due him."⁴⁰

³⁷ *Triglot*, p 853.

³⁸ Carpzov in □□□□□□□□, p 894, puts it this way: *In subscriptione locum suum id occupare quidem, sed tamen partem Articulorum minime constituere, in quibus contrarium tot verbis inculcatur et docetur.*

³⁹ *Triglot*, p 473.

⁴⁰ *Triglot*, p 521.