

PRAISE FOR  
*COMMONPLACES: LOCI COMMUNES 1521*

Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* are presented here in an appropriate and suitable manner: introduction and footnotes help to understand this founding text of Lutheran theology. Teachers as well as students in the field of Reformation will profit from this revised version.

—Prof. Dr. Volker Leppin  
Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen

This book takes us back to the early stages and to the heart of the Reformation, so it is just wonderful that it has now once again become so accessible. The translation is as fresh as the content of the *Loci* of 1521 and that makes it just the kind of material we need for teaching and learning. Melanchthon's book has been fundamental for church and theology in the Lutheran as well as the Calvinist tradition. And both will see through this new edition how relevant this reformer and his work still are today.

—Herman Selderhuis  
Director Refo500  
Professor of Church History  
Theological University Apeldoorn

Christian Preus provides helpful historical and theological contextualization to the *Loci Communes* of Philip Melanchthon in his introduction. With the text itself, he gives us a clear, modern translation that both improves on the work of past translators and also includes judicious scholarly commentary. This is a welcome and useful tool for modern students of the Reformation.

—Dr. Günter Frank  
Director of the European Melanchthon Academy

What better recommendation could one have for a book than Luther's praise of his colleague Philip Melanchthon's *Topics On Theological*

*Matters*, his *Loci Communes* of 1521: his friend's treatment of these "commonplaces" of Paul's letter to the Romans was "divine." Melanchthon incorporated Luther's distinction of Law and Gospel into the basic outline of scriptural truth in this work, which initiated the Lutheran dogmatic tradition. This handbook, intended as a guide for reading Scripture, almost five hundred years old, will aid twenty-first century readers in understanding Scripture and sharing this biblical faith with others.

—Robert Kolb  
Missions professor of systematic theology emeritus  
Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis

The lucidity that marked the first version of Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* is captured in this expert translation by a scholar equally expert in the nuances of humanist Latin and the principles of evangelical theology. Preus brings modern readers into contact with Melanchthon's brilliant early work, augmenting his clear translation with helpful annotations and the perfect introduction to Melanchthon's life and thought.

—Ralph Keen  
Schmitt Professor of History  
University of Illinois at Chicago

# COMMONPLACES

LOCI COMMUNES 1521

PHILIP MELANCHTHON

TRANSLATED WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES  
BY CHRISTIAN PREUS

About the cover: Philip Melanchthon’s crest depicts a serpent lifted up on a cross, a symbol that alludes to Numbers 21:4–9, where looking at a bronze serpent lifted up on a pole saved the people from venomous snake bites. Jesus Christ applied this story to Himself in His discussion with Nicodemus (John 3:14–15): “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” Melanchthon’s use of this crest dates back to 1519. Beginning in 1526, it adorned printings of Melanchthon’s writings.



Copyright © 2014 by Concordia Publishing House  
3558 S. Jefferson Ave., St. Louis, MO 63118–3968  
1-800-325-3040 • [www.cph.org](http://www.cph.org)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of Concordia Publishing House.

Scripture quotations are translation of translator.

This work uses the SBL Greek Unicode font developed by the Font Foundation under the leadership of the Society of Biblical Literature. For further information on this font or on becoming a Font Foundation member, see <http://www.sbl-site.org/educational/biblicalfonts.aspx>.

Cover image: Courtesy of the Pitts Theology Library, Candler School of Theology, Emory University.

Manufactured in the United States of America

# CONTENTS

<b>Abbreviations</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
The Life of Philip Melancthon (1497–1521)	2
Theological Context of the <i>Common Topics</i> of 1521	10
Editions of the <i>Loci</i>	15
The Translation	16
<b>Common Topics of Theology or Theological Outline</b>	<b>19</b>
Dedicatory Epistle	19
Common Topics of Theology or Theological Outline	22
Human Powers, Especially Free Will	26
Summary	36
<b>Sin</b>	<b>37</b>
What Is Sin?	37
The Source of Original Sin	38
The Power and Fruits of Sin	40
<b>Law</b>	<b>61</b>
[Natural Law]	61
Divine Laws	66
Counsels	71
Monastic Vows	73
Judicial and Ceremonial Laws	75
Human Laws	77
<b>The Gospel</b>	<b>91</b>
What Is the Gospel?	92
The Power of the Law	99
The Power of the Gospel	107
<b>Grace</b>	<b>111</b>

CONTENTS

<b>Justification and Faith</b>	<b>115</b>
The Efficacy of Faith	138
Love and Hope	140
<b>The Distinction between the Old and New Testament and the Abrogation of the Law</b>	<b>151</b>
The Old and New Man	163
Mortal and Daily Sin	165
<b>Signs</b>	<b>167</b>
Baptism	171
Repentance	175
Private Confessions	180
Participation in the Lord's Supper	182
<b>Love</b>	<b>185</b>
<b>Magistrates</b>	<b>187</b>
<b>Scandal</b>	<b>191</b>
<b>Scripture Index</b>	<b>195</b>
<b>Subject Index</b>	<b>203</b>

## INTRODUCTION

Philip Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* (*Common Topics*) of 1521 reflects the fusion of humanist and theologian. With the eloquence and philological acumen of a humanist, Melanchthon derides the inconsistencies and subtleties that he finds so objectionable in the writings of the Scholastics and arranges a summary of Christian theology in good, rhetorical fashion around clear and concise passages of Scripture. But with the fervor of a theologian, he takes the confession of Martin Luther as his own, parting ways with his humanist roots and insisting that canonical Scripture alone with its radical message of sin and grace, Law and Gospel, captivity and freedom, be the source and norm of a Christian's confession and life.

With this influential work, published in the tumultuous year of 1521, as Luther, the Reformation's Elijah, was hidden in Wartburg, Melanchthon, the grammarian and classicist, made his debut as theologian and emerged as Wittenberg's Elisha. In the years leading up to 1521, Melanchthon had shined as a star of humanism in Germany and was compared to Erasmus, whose critical edition of the Greek New Testament, among many other works, had made him world renowned.<sup>1</sup> In keeping with his humanist roots, Melanchthon had articulated the Gospel in largely ethical terms up to 1519, seeing Christ as the perfect moral example and speaking in generalities about God's grace.<sup>2</sup>

Melanchthon's theological breakthrough in these early years was his realization of the utter incapacity of fallen man to come to God by his own powers.<sup>3</sup> Melanchthon's acceptance of this aspect of Luther's theological anthropology meant his rejection of humanist theology

---

<sup>1</sup> Clyde Manschreck, *Melanchthon: The Quiet Reformer* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958), 41.

<sup>2</sup> This stress is seen as late as 1520 in his address on Paul and the Scholastics, for which see below p. 7. Cf. Michael Rogness, *Philip Melanchthon: Reformer Without Honor* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969), 10.

<sup>3</sup> See Wolfgang Matz, *Der befreite Mensch: Die Willenslehre in der Theologie Philipp Melanchthons* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2001), 27–38; and below, pp. 5–6.

and its stress on man's natural, ethical potential.<sup>4</sup> If man is utterly dead in his sins, his only hope for salvation and life must be completely out of his own hands. If all human powers are thoroughly bound in sin, he cannot do good in God's eyes. God's grace alone frees him from the shackles of his slavery. And as Luther had articulated more and more clearly in the years leading up to 1521, the ground and reason for God's grace is found in Christ alone, who became man, suffered, died, and rose again to safeguard God's mercy to the human race. God's grace is not based in our obedience to God's Law. Rather, God's Law shows the sinner how sinful he is and would lead him to despair were he not to hear the gracious promise of the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake. So these topics—sin, grace, Law, and Gospel—are the central topics of the Christian faith, the central themes of Scripture, and the central focus and experience of the Christian life. This is the thesis of Melanchthon's *Common Topics* of 1521.

To place the *Loci Communes* of 1521 in their proper context, I will first offer a brief survey of Melanchthon's life up to 1521, then address the three theological and intellectual movements most influential on this, Melanchthon's first major theological work—Scholasticism, humanism, and the theology of Martin Luther.

## THE LIFE OF PHILIP MELANCHTHON (1497–1521)

Philip Melanchthon was born Philip Schwarzerd on February 16, 1497, in Bretten, the son of a well-off armorer, Georg Schwarzerd. His father died when he was 11 years old, poisoned by well water that had left him incapacitated for years. After his father's death, Philip's mother sent him to Pforzheim, where Philip's maternal grandmother lived, to attend the prestigious Latin school there. Through his grandmother, Philip became close to the famous humanist scholar John Reuchlin, his grandmother's brother and therefore Philip's own granduncle. In typical humanist fashion and under the influence of his

---

<sup>4</sup> Of course, Melanchthon himself remained a humanist, in the sense of a philologist. Not all humanists (especially after the start of the Reformation) held to a theology of works or of "free will." Even before the Reformation, the humanist Laurentius Valla held to a bondage of the will based on divine predestination (see p. 31 below). For Erasmus's derision of Valla, see p. 31, n. 40 below. Cf. Timothy Wengert, *Human Freedom, Christian Righteousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5–11.



granduncle, Philip hellenized his last name and began to be called Melanchthon (“black earth”).

Philip excelled in Latin and Greek and in short time was ready to graduate to university studies. In October 1509, at the age of twelve, he began his studies at the University of Heidelberg. Within two years he had completed his Bachelor of Arts and immediately began his studies for the Master of Arts. When a year later he had completed the requirements for this degree also, his application was denied by the faculty, who cited his young age and childlike appearance as their reason. The rejection, however, was fortuitous. Melanchthon’s humanist learning had already surpassed that of many of his professors at Heidelberg, which possessed a more conservative faculty still working with Scholastic models of linguistics, logic, and philosophy in the tradition of the *via antiqua*.<sup>5</sup> Urged by his granduncle Reuchlin, Melanchthon decided to seek his Master of Arts at the University of Tübingen, a university of a slightly more humanist bent and with professors following the *via moderna*. In Tübingen, Melanchthon flourished. Despite taking up with fervor the pseudoscience of astrology, with which he continued to be enamored his entire life, he supplemented his university studies with private readings in theology and the classics. He took special interest in Ciceronian rhetoric, Aristotelian logic (which he wanted to redeem from Scholastic corruption), and Scripture. On January 25, 1514, he obtained his Master of Arts and was certified to teach at the university.

Melanchthon was known as an energetic teacher from the start. As he taught, he continued his humanist studies, becoming more and more involved in the movement and identifying with such men as Reuchlin and Erasmus in opposition to Scholasticism. The Hebrew scholar Reuchlin, in fact, was already in quite the controversy due to his defense of Jewish literature (and therefore Jews) against a Dominican campaign seeking imperial approval to confiscate and destroy all Jewish literature in the Empire on the grounds that they were anti-Christian. Melanchthon saw firsthand that many of the old guard in academia—including even the faculty at the University of

---

<sup>5</sup> The term *via antiqua* refers to the “old way” of doing Scholastic theology, which posits the reality of abstract concepts (realism). The *via moderna* or “new way” denies the reality of abstract concepts, positing that they are merely names used to designate a class of concretions (nominalism).

Paris—were willing to undermine the study of Hebrew and advances in humanist learning because of uninformed prejudices and under the guise of ill-conceived inquisitions. Melanchthon's preface to Reuchlin's *Letters of Famous Men* demonstrates that at the early age of seventeen he was well on his way to becoming a famous and recognized humanist scholar.<sup>6</sup>

As a professor, Melanchthon was hard at work both teaching and publishing. Besides translating some classical works, he compiled a new edition of the comedian Terence in 1516, setting his plays to meter for the first time, and published his Greek grammar in 1518, a much used and quite popular primer, a major boon for humanist studies in Northern Europe. He taught rhetoric based on classical models and lectured on classical authors such as Livy and Virgil. Moved by the controversies of the day and a convinced humanist, Melanchthon also turned to theological study. The theology of the humanists was in large part a kind of practical ethic as opposed to the complicated Aristotelian system of the Scholastics.

Still, Melanchthon had to deal with the old guard of conservative Scholasticism even at Tübingen. More and more Melanchthon was viewed by the faculty there as a modern innovator, a dangerous and subversive teacher. In contrast, his reputation as a scholar among the humanists was growing all around Northern Europe—even in England, where his Greek grammar was received with enthusiasm. Melanchthon knew he had to leave Tübingen and began to seek where he could teach in a freer atmosphere. A position at Ingolstadt opened up, but, when offered the job, Melanchthon turned it down. His granduncle, John Reuchlin, had advised against accepting the position, thinking that Melanchthon would have the same kind of troubles there as at Tübingen.

Thus Melanchthon was almost as overjoyed as his granduncle when the latter informed Melanchthon that he had secured a position for him to be professor of Greek at the University of Wittenberg, a small university newly founded in 1502, but anxious to be a representative of the new learning and quickly growing in fame because of Martin Luther. The Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise, had asked Reuchlin who would best be suited for the position, and

---

<sup>6</sup> CR 1:5–6. Reuchlin shows in this work, by publishing his correspondence with the most eminent scholars of Europe, that he himself was being slandered by despisers of learning.

Reuchlin had informed him that among Germans Melanchthon was a humanist second only to Erasmus.<sup>7</sup> Despite opposition from Luther, who preferred a different candidate, the Elector chose Melanchthon. On August 25, 1518, Melanchthon arrived in Wittenberg, a small and unimpressive town in comparison with Heidelberg and Tübingen.

To Luther and his colleagues in Wittenberg, Melanchthon's small, boyish appearance was underwhelming and disappointing. But when Melanchthon gave his inaugural address a few days after his arrival, Luther realized that appearances had been deceiving. The address was entitled *On Reforming the Studies of the Youth*.<sup>8</sup> After hearing Melanchthon speak of educational reform, how by study of the classics in their original languages, by going back to the sources, including especially a fresh look at the works of Aristotle, students could be taught to pursue true philosophy, philology, rhetoric, and dialectic, and not the stale traditions of men pawned off as knowledge, Luther was convinced that Melanchthon was a gift from God, a true godsend for the University of Wittenberg. And he was right. Within two years of Melanchthon's arrival, the student population had tripled, in large part due to the fame of the young humanist.<sup>9</sup>

Melanchthon's inaugural oration shows that upon his arrival in Wittenberg his concerns were more educational and ethical than theological. But the next years would prove to be transformational. At first, Melanchthon taught exclusively in the classics, lecturing on Homer and other Greek and Latin authors. His works published in 1518 and the early months of 1519 reflect less Reformation theology than the humanism of Erasmus.<sup>10</sup> But as Melanchthon studied more Scripture and, in turn, read and listened to Luther more, he began to adopt his colleague's theology as his own, convinced that it was the theology of Scripture and that Scripture was the only reliable source of Christian doctrine. The turning point in this first stage of Melanchthon's theological development was his attendance at the

---

<sup>7</sup> CR 1:34.

<sup>8</sup> *De corrigendis adolescentiae studiis* (SA 3:29–42).

<sup>9</sup> Manschreck, *Melanchthon*, 43.

<sup>10</sup> See the discussion of Erasmian theology in Melanchthon's *Rhetoric* in Martin Greschat, *Philippe Melanchthon: Théologien, Pédagogue et Humaniste (1497–1560)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011), 23.

debate in Leipzig between John Eck, a theologian of Scholastic bent from the University of Ingolstadt, and Martin Luther.

In June and July of 1519, Luther and his colleague Andreas Carlstadt debated with Eck—Carlstadt over the bondage of the will, and Luther over papal supremacy, purgatory, and indulgences. Although only a spectator, Melanchthon was soon drawn into the debate. He had written a letter to his friend John Oecolampadius describing the debate and giving some slight criticisms of Eck along with lavish praise of Luther. Eck, upon reading the letter, responded with a vitriolic attack on the “grammarian” who dared offer his judgment against a doctor of theology.<sup>11</sup> The critique stung, as can be seen even two years later in the *Common Topics*.<sup>12</sup> But while he received insult from the Scholastic theologian Eck, he received the constant encouragement of Luther. In a reply of August to Eck, Melanchthon argued that Scripture was the only reliable norm for Christian doctrine.<sup>13</sup> A short time later, Melanchthon defended his baccalaureate theses, submitted in fulfillment of the Bachelor of Theology at the University of Wittenberg. Here he clearly argues that human nature cannot love God of itself and that Christian righteousness consists in the gracious declaration of God. He subordinates the authority of councils to Scripture and rejects the binding authority of the doctrine of transubstantiation.<sup>14</sup> His theses on faith, written within a year after his baccalaureate theses, clearly teach that sinners are justified through faith, and anticipate many doctrinal points in the *Common Topics*.<sup>15</sup> The same developing thoughts on faith, justification, the Law, and grace can be seen in the forerunners of the *Common Topics* of 1521, the *Theological Introduction to the Epistle of Paul to the Romans* of 1519 and *The Chief Points or Topics of Theology* of 1520.<sup>16</sup> We will return to these works shortly.

In embracing the teachings of the Reformation, Melanchthon was alienating himself from humanist doctrine, especially the teaching that man’s righteousness resides in his own actions and not in the

---

<sup>11</sup> See p. 31, n. 40 below.

<sup>12</sup> See pp. 31–32 below.

<sup>13</sup> *Defensio Phil. Melanchthonis contra Joh. Eckium* (SA 1:12–22).

<sup>14</sup> SA 1:24–5.

<sup>15</sup> CR 1:125–127, and note (p. 125) the scholarly debate on the dating of these theses.

<sup>16</sup> CR 21:49–60; 11–48. See p. 19, n. 3 below.

gracious imputation of God. More than this, the humanists, at first allies with the Scholastic-battling Luther, were uncomfortable with the rough and gritty language of Luther and the unrest in Europe that surrounded his preaching and writing.<sup>17</sup> Reuchlin urged Melanchthon to leave Wittenberg and join the faculty of Ingolstadt, promising that Eck would forgive him and bear no grudge. After Melanchthon kindly refused, Reuchlin never spoke to him again. Melanchthon lost a father figure in Reuchlin (and the promised inheritance of a very valuable library), but gained a father in Luther.<sup>18</sup>

Beginning in 1519, Melanchthon began to teach theology at the University of Wittenberg. He began an intense study of Paul's epistles, especially his Letter to the Romans. It was from these studies and lectures that Melanchthon's *Common Topics* of 1521 arose. In his address on Paul and the Scholastics in January 1520, we can see the fruits of these studies. In this speech, Melanchthon mixes the eloquent rhetoric of Erasmus, along with some key Erasmian themes and phrases, with the Law/Gospel paradigm of Luther. On the one hand, he stresses Christ as the greatest exemplar of virtue and the author of happiness, and on the other he articulates the condemnation of the Law and the gracious pardoning of the Gospel in the free forgiveness of sins.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Melanchthon's polemic against the Scholastics is no longer from a purely humanist perspective. He opposes them not because they are despisers of higher learning and the classics, but because they are enemies of Paul, who has expressed the Gospel with the greatest clarity. In Luther's fashion, Melanchthon attacks philosophy itself, which teaches only the external righteousness of outward actions and posits that practice makes perfect. Melanchthon insists that even as an ape will always be an ape, no matter how he practices, so by practice man cannot change his nature. The grace of God is needed, and this grace is the forgiveness of sins. Still, in this speech of 1520 Melanchthon concentrates more on the transformational, ethical results of God's grace in Christ than on the

---

<sup>17</sup> See Erasmus's letter to Melanchthon of 1520: "Those who support Luther—and almost all good men support Luther—would prefer that he had written some things with more civility and moderation. But this admonition is too late now. I see that the matter is tending toward public discord" (CR 1:205–6).

<sup>18</sup> In an emotional letter of May 1521, Melanchthon refers to Luther as his "dearest father" (CR 1:389–90).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Maurer 2:121; Rogness, *Melanchthon*, 10–12.

forgiveness of sins. By giving his grace of forgiveness, God transforms the Christian so that he delights in obeying the Law.<sup>20</sup> Though this concentration would continue to be important for Melanchthon, he would give more attention to the centrality of forgiveness in his *Common Topics* of 1521.<sup>21</sup>

The turbulent year of 1520 would see Melanchthon drawing closer and closer to Luther, and Luther articulating the Gospel more clearly than ever. Luther's three great tracts of that year, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *On Christian Freedom*, set forth with clarity the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church and the need for reform, so that the Gospel could be preached in its purity and the Sacraments administered according to their institution. If Luther was not already the hero of Germany, these works guaranteed his popularity despite Rome's strenuous objections. Melanchthon's references to these works in his *Common Topics* of 1521 show his enthusiastic agreement with them.<sup>22</sup>

On June 15, 1520, Luther was threatened with excommunication by the papal bull *Exsurge Domine*, in which many of his teachings were condemned as heresy. Ordered to recant within sixty days of receipt of the bull, Luther, with Melanchthon at his side, burned the papal bull publicly on December 10, 1520. To this the pope responded with another bull, *Decet Romanum Pontificem*, by which he formally excommunicated Luther on January 3, 1521. A short five months later, the decision of the emperor was published at the Diet of Worms against Luther, naming him a heretic and an outlaw. But Luther had already left Worms and was whisked away to hiding in Wartburg. Melanchthon was left alone in Wittenberg, without his Elijah.

It was in this period that the *Common Topics* was published. The polemical tone of the work is therefore understandable, as is Melanchthon's utter devotion to Luther and the Lutheran cause. Luther had made it clear to Melanchthon in letters from Wartburg that he could die knowing that Melanchthon would articulate the Gospel

---

<sup>20</sup> An English translation of Melanchthon's oration is available in Charles L. Hill, trans., *Melanchthon: Selected Writings* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1962), 31–56.

<sup>21</sup> See below, p. 108: "Is not the forgiveness of sins the chief message of the Gospel and the preaching of the New Testament?"

<sup>22</sup> See below, pp. 121, 170, n. 5.

better than he, that Elisha had surpassed Elijah.<sup>23</sup> Not knowing the future, Luther had passed his mantle on to the twenty-four-year old Melanchthon as his spokesman in Wittenberg. The unqualified and excessive praise that Luther heaps upon Melanchthon's *Common Topics* of 1521 speaks to how closely Melanchthon had followed his "dearest father."<sup>24</sup> But at the same time it speaks to Luther's acknowledgement of Melanchthon's unmatched ability to articulate and defend the Gospel clearly, convincingly, and in good order.

Melanchthon decided to publish his *Common Topics* of 1521 after an incomplete version, meant only for presenting the doctrine of Paul's Epistle to the Romans in a systematic way to his students, was published without his consent. This document, which Melanchthon calls his *lucubratiuncula* or "nighttime studies" was entitled *The Chief Points or Topics of Theology*. As Melanchthon explains in his prefatory epistle to the *Common Topics*, the work is short and obviously incomplete. Before the illicit publication of *The Chief Points*, Melanchthon had also composed in 1519 his *Theological Introduction to the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, also a result of his lectures on Romans. This work condemned philosophy and Scholasticism in no uncertain terms and offered the content of Romans as an alternative to the philosophical presentation of Peter Lombard, whose *Sentences* had been used for centuries to teach theology in the universities.<sup>25</sup> Thus the *Common Topics* of 1521 resulted from an intense study of Paul, and above all, of Romans. This explains the constant reference to Romans throughout the work.

Before we leave this section, a brief explanation of the term *Common Topics* is needed. The Latin *Loci Communes* is a translation of the Greek *topoi koinoi* and finds its origin in Aristotle. But Aristotle's conception of the "common topic" is far from Melanchthon's. Whereas Melanchthon thinks of common topics in Ciceronian terms, namely as indices or guides showing where to find the material whereby to defend a proposition, Aristotle thought of common topics as propositions common to dialectical investigation. The difference is important, because it underlines Melanchthon's

---

<sup>23</sup> WA Br 2:348.

<sup>24</sup> CR 1:389–90. For Luther's praise of the *Loci Communes* of 1521 as "worthy not only of immortality but also of the Church's canon," see AE 33:16; WA 18:601.

<sup>25</sup> CR 21:49.

rhetorical approach to theological method, especially in this first edition of his *Loci*. The subject matter of theology is already present in Scripture. The job of the theologian is to learn the common topics of Scripture, the doctrinal veins of Scripture, so that he may be driven further into Scripture to confirm what Scripture expresses clearly elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> Whereas Scholastic theology argued technical theological points using logical syllogisms and complex dialectic, Melancthon sees his job as showing what the clear Scriptures simply say. He does this rhetorically, that is, by gathering together several key subjects or topics that Scripture treats in abundance.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, as Melancthon himself insists more than once in this work, the *Common Topics* of 1521 is more a hermeneutical handbook than a dogmatic treatise.

### THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF THE *COMMON TOPICS* OF 1521

Scholasticism was the theological movement, beginning in the twelfth century and lasting up to the Reformation, that stressed the systematic articulation of Christian doctrine through dialectic and logical inference and deduction. In its critical examination and organization of the statements of the ecclesiastical fathers, Scholasticism applied Aristotelian logic and Platonic categories to develop logically defensible systems of Christian theology. Scholasticism dominated the universities of Europe and coincided with their invention and growth. In the early sixteenth century, humanists decried its sterility and Luther its theology.

Melancthon's criticism of Scholasticism in the *Common Topics* of 1521 centers upon a few prominent Scholastic theologians, but includes a condemnation of the Scholastic method in general. First of these Scholastics is Peter Lombard (c. 1100–60), whose *Four Books of Sentences* was used in the universities to teach Scholastic method and doctrine for centuries. In his *Sentences*, Lombard arranges Christian teaching under doctrinal headings, working from God and his attributes to the Church and her sacraments. The work consists

---

<sup>26</sup> See especially p. 20 below.

<sup>27</sup> For further discussion of the term *loci communes* see Quirinus Breen, "The Terms 'Loci Communes' and 'Loci' in Melancthon," *Church History* 16 (1947): 197–209.



in man why one is saved and another damned.<sup>46</sup> These changes and many others, along with the scholastic treatment of the subject matter, make the later editions of the *Loci* works of a different kind. A comparison of the *Loci* of 1521 and the *Loci* of 1559 shows the evolution in the thought and outlook of Melanchthon throughout the course of the Reformation. Still, Luther highly praised these later editions, including that of 1543,<sup>47</sup> and Martin Chemnitz and other leading Lutheran theologians used the last edition to teach their students and as a basis for their own dogmatic works.<sup>48</sup>

Despite Melanchthon's continued revisions, the *Loci Communes* of 1521 stands as a complete work of biblical theology. It is meant as an introduction to biblical theology and thus as an introduction to the Bible, its study and interpretation. As such the *Loci Communes* of 1521 is the beginning not only of the Lutheran systematic tradition but also of the Lutheran hermeneutical tradition. The Lutheran principles of biblical interpretation—that Scripture interprets Scripture, that the literal, grammatical sense of Scripture is the basis for all interpretation, that Scripture is united in its message of Law and Gospel, that Scripture is clear, that it is the source and norm of all Christian teaching and the formative power in the Christian's life—all of these are found in this influential and seminal work. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it did to its first readers in the turbulent years of the early Reformation.

## THE TRANSLATION

The text has been translated from the *Corpus Reformatorum*.<sup>49</sup> I have aimed at readability without sacrificing a faithful rendering of the text. As with every translation, some interpretation is inevitable. No translation can be a replacement for the original text, and in the spirit of Melanchthon I recommend that those who are able reference the

---

<sup>46</sup> For a full treatment of the evolution of Melanchthon's teaching on the will throughout his editions of the *Loci*, see Matz, *Der befreite Mensch*.

<sup>47</sup> WA TR 5:205.

<sup>48</sup> See Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, trans. J.A.O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia, 1989).

<sup>49</sup> CR 21:81–228. The Latin may also be found with German notes in Hans Engelland, ed., *Melanchthons Werke in Auswahl*, vol. 2.1 (Gütersloh: C Bertelsmann Verlag, 1952).

Latin, which is more beautiful than this translator could replicate in the English language.

This translation is the third in the English language. The first by Charles Leander Hill, while a major boon and a praiseworthy achievement at the time of its publication, is literal to the point of difficulty and, at times, obscure. His introduction and notes, read with discernment of modern scholarship, are still valuable.<sup>50</sup> The translation of Pauck is quite readable with few errors, but is, inconveniently for many, bound up with Bucer's *On the Kingdom of Christ*.<sup>51</sup> Pauck's commentary is also sparse and in large part reduplicated from the German notes in the Latin edition of *Melanchthons Werke*. A more recent German translation of the *Loci Communes* of 1521 by Horst George Pöhlmann, with an informative and scholarly commentary, is available for those who can read German and are interested in further study of the context and theology of the *Loci Communes* of 1521.<sup>52</sup>

I have tried in this volume not to burden the reader with too many notes, but at the same time to give the necessary background for a better understanding of the text. In line with the introduction given above, I have included citations and quotations from Scholastic theologians, humanists, and Luther in order to show their influence on Melanchthon and his work. I have also referenced later Lutheran tradition and confessional writings when appropriate. It is my prayer that this edition and translation will profit the pastor, scholar, and layman interested in the theology and history of the early Reformation and in the Lutheran tradition of dogmatic and exegetical theology.

Thanks are due to my father, Pastor Rolf Preus, for his helpful comments and suggestions throughout the process of translation and commentary.

---

<sup>50</sup> Charles Leander Hill, *The Loci Communes of Philip Melanchthon* (Boston: Meador Publishing Co., 1944).

<sup>51</sup> Wilhelm Pauck, ed., *Melanchthon and Bucer*, vol. 19 of *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969).

<sup>52</sup> Horst George Pöhlmann, ed., *Philipp Melanchthon: Loci Communes 1521 Lateinisch-Deutsch* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1997).

# COMMON TOPICS OF THEOLOGY OR THEOLOGICAL OUTLINE

1521

## DEDICATORY EPISTLE

To Dr. Tileman Plettener,<sup>1</sup> a man as pious as he is learned, Philip Melanchthon sends his greetings.

When we were preparing to teach Paul's Epistle to the Romans last year, we methodically arranged its various contents under the most common theological topics.<sup>2</sup> This study was meant only to give a very rough treatment of the subject and proofs of Paul's argument to the students whom I was teaching privately (*privatim*).<sup>3</sup> But

---

<sup>1</sup> Tileman Plettener taught in Stolberg before enrolling at the University of Wittenberg in 1520, accompanying his two friends, the counts Wolfgang and Ludwig of Stolberg. Wolfgang was elected rector of the University of Wittenberg the following year, and Plettener became vice-rector at the beginning of the summer semester, 1521. Plettener earned his doctorate in theology at Wittenberg together with Justus Jonas on October 14, 1521.

<sup>2</sup> Melanchthon writes in a letter of April 17, 1520: "I followed the plan of the orators, who recommend that we treat disciplines (*artes*) with common topics" (*CR* 1:158–9). Erasmus, in his *Manner or Method of Arriving at True Theology in a Compendium* of 1519, had recommended a similar method of creating a compendium for theology (*AS* 3:117–495; cf. Maurer 2:140). Melanchthon later credited the rhetorical treatise of Rudolf Agricola (1444–85) as an influence on his use of common topics, writing that Erasmus and Agricola "have written best" on this method of arrangement (*CR* 20:696). Melanchthon was first introduced to Agricola's work when he was a University student in Heidelberg (*CR* 3:673; cf. Peter Mack, "Melanchthon," in *Renaissance argument: Valla and Agricola in the tradition of rhetoric and dialectic* [Leiden: Brill, 1993], 320–33).

<sup>3</sup> Melanchthon is likely referring to his private school. In addition to his lectures at the University, Melanchthon also held classes in his house, and the school that formed there became known as his *schola privata* or private school. There he taught Latin and Greek grammar, and in 1519 lectured on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans (*CR* 21:5; cf. Maurer 2:103–15, 139–40). From his lectures on Romans were written the *Theological Introduction to the Epistle of Paul to the Romans* in 1519 (*CR* 21:49–60), and in 1520 *The Chief Points or Topics of Theology* (*CR* 21:11–48). These

someone—I don't know who—published it.<sup>4</sup> Whoever did publish it showed more zeal than sense. Of course, I wrote in such a way that it is difficult to understand what I mean without constant reference to Paul's epistle. Now I cannot take back the little book since it is all but officially published, and so I thought it would be best to rework and revise it. For many places required more precise arguments and much of it needed revision.

Now to the substance of the matter. I here present the chief topics of Christian doctrine, so that the youth may know what they should especially look for in the Scriptures and so that they may realize how obscenely those have strayed in all things theological who have handed down to us Aristotelian sophistries instead of the teaching of Christ.<sup>5</sup> But we treat everything sparingly and briefly, because we are making an index rather than a commentary. For we are merely compiling a catalogue of topics that the reader should consult as he makes his way through divine Scripture, and we are teaching with only a few words the foundations of all Christian doctrine.

I am not doing this to distract students away from the Scriptures into obscure and difficult arguments, but rather to attract them, if possible, to the Scriptures. In fact, I do not generally approve of commentaries—not even those of the ancients. The last thing I want is to draw anyone away from studying the canonical Scriptures with too long a writing. Rather, I could wish nothing more than that all Christians, if possible, were thoroughly versed in divine Scriptures alone and wholly transformed into their nature. For since in them

---

works, though incomplete and in the form of outlines, were enthusiastically received (cf. Pöhlmann, 8).

<sup>4</sup> Some of Melancthon's students published his notes on Romans without his consent. The work referred to is *The Chief Points* of 1520. Though some have taken Melancthon to be referring to the *Theological Introduction* of 1519 (e.g., Maurer 2:103–4), *The Chief Points* must be the proper referent, since this work rather than the *Theological Introduction* most resembles the *Loci* and could easily be revised into the *Loci* that we have (cf. CR 21:7; SA 2:2).

<sup>5</sup> *Aristotelian sophistries*. The reference is to the scholastic tradition that began in the twelfth century and relied heavily on Aristotle to systematize Christian doctrine. Melancthon here echoes the polemics of Luther. Luther's frequent condemnation of Aristotle and the scholastic tradition is summed up neatly in Thesis 29 of his *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518): "Whoever wishes to philosophize in Aristotle without danger must first become completely foolish in Christ" (WA 1:355; AE 31:41). See also Luther's *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* of 1517 (WA 1:221–28; AE 31:9–16).

divinity has expressed its purest image, it cannot be known more surely or more intensely from any other source. Whoever seeks the nature of Christianity from a source other than canonical Scripture deceives himself.<sup>6</sup>

How far are the commentaries from the purity of Scripture!<sup>7</sup> In the latter you will find nothing undignified; in the former how many things that depend on philosophy and the suppositions of human reason, things diametrically opposed to the judgment of the Spirit! The writers failed to suppress their human nature (τὸ ψυχικὸν) so as to breathe only spiritual things (πνευματικὰ). If you take away all the absurd allegories of Origen, together with the forest of his philosophical opinions, how little will be left?<sup>8</sup> And yet the Greeks almost unanimously follow this author. And of the Latin fathers, Ambrose and Jerome, who are supposed to be pillars, chase after him.<sup>9</sup> After these authors, it is almost the case that the more recent the writer, the more corrupt he is, until finally Christian doctrine has been degraded to sophistic nonsense, and it is hard to say whether it is more impious or stupid.<sup>10</sup> In a word, it cannot but happen that human writings often mislead even the careful reader.

---

<sup>6</sup> Melancthon had written two tracts in 1521 championing the cause of Scripture against the Scholastic tradition. His pseudonymous *Oration of Didymus Faventinus for the Theologian Martin Luther against Thomas Placentinus* and his *Philip Melancthon's Defense of Luther against the Mad Decree of the Parisian Theologians* both maintained that Scripture was the sole source of Christian doctrine and lambasted the scholastic tradition (SA 1:56–162). In the latter he writes, “But what could be clearer than that neither the universities, nor the holy fathers, nor the councils can establish articles of faith?” (SA 1:145).

<sup>7</sup> Melancthon has in mind the commentaries on Peter Lombard's *Four Books of Sentences*. Hundreds of Scholastic theologians commented on Lombard's *Sentences*. No book, besides Scripture itself, has had more commentaries devoted to it.

<sup>8</sup> Origen of Alexandria (c. 184–254) was a Christian Neoplatonist famous for his allegorizing of the Old Testament. Contained in this condemnation of Origen is a veiled criticism of Erasmus, who calls the exegesis of Origen a “river of gold” (AS 3:158) and consistently praises him (cf. Timothy Wengert, *Human Freedom, Christian Righteousness* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998], 59).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Galatians 2:9. For Jerome's spirited defense and panegyric of Origen see his *Epistle* 33 (MPL 22:446–48); cf. Ambrose, who mimics Origen in his *Epistle* 63, stating, “The Old Testament is a well, deep and quite dark, from which you can draw water only with difficulty” (MPL 16:1210). For most of the Church Fathers, the alleged obscurity of the Old Testament necessitated its allegorical interpretation.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Melancthon's *Defense against the Parisian Theologians* (1521): “The Gospel has been obscured, faith erased, a teaching of works accepted, and instead of a

But if knowledge of sacred matters is indeed prophecy and a kind of inspiration, why do we not embrace this type of literature, through which the Spirit flows? Or has God not accomplished all things through his Word? For the Spirit, or as 1 John [2:27] says, the Anointing, will teach by means of the Scriptures many things that the greatest exertion of the human mind could not attain. We are determined to do nothing else but help in some way the studies of those who want to be versed in the Scriptures. If my little book does not seem to achieve this, may it be destroyed outright, for it is not my concern what the public thinks of a public work.

### COMMON TOPICS OF THEOLOGY OR THEOLOGICAL OUTLINE<sup>11</sup>

Individual disciplines customarily have certain topics with which each discipline can be summarized. These topics serve as the scope according to which we should direct all of our studies.<sup>12</sup> In theology, we see that the ancients also followed this way of doing things, though sparingly and with moderation. More recent theologians, such as John of Damascus and Peter Lombard, have done so senselessly. For John of Damascus is an excessive philosophizer,<sup>13</sup> and Lombard preferred to collect human opinions rather than record the judgment of Scripture.<sup>14</sup> And though, as I said before, I do not want students to

---

Christian people, we are a people not even of the Law, but of Aristotelian morals, and contrary to every intent of the Spirit Christianity has been turned into a philosophical way of life" (*SA* 1:143).

<sup>11</sup> *Hypotyposis*, translated here as "Outline," is taken from Greek and means "illustration," "model," "example," or "outline." The term is used to stress the rhetorical nature of the work—to give an outline for studying the Scriptures (cf. Quirinus Breen, "The Terms 'Loci Communes' and 'Loci' in Melancthon," *Church History* 16 [1947]: 197–209, esp. 203).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Erasmus, *Manner or Method* (1519): "Doctrines, having been drawn from the Gospels first of all, then also from the apostolic epistles, should be taught after being arranged into a summary or compendium, so that the theologian has everywhere certain scopes, to which he may compare what he is reading" (*AS* 3:170).

<sup>13</sup> John of Damascus (c. 676–749) was a Greek theologian from Damascus in Syria. His rather philosophical dogmatic work, *On the Orthodox Faith* (*MPG* 94:789–1228), was received in the West and influenced the Scholastic tradition, especially in the works of Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Lombard (c. 1100–60) was a Scholastic theologian who taught at Notre Dame in Paris. His magnum opus, the *Four Books of Sentences*, was used for

dwell on summaries of this sort,<sup>15</sup> still I think it is almost necessary to point out, at least, on what topics the sum of theology depends. In this way, one can understand where he should direct his studies.

Now the following, in general, are the chief topics of theology:

God	The Fruits of Grace
His Unity	Faith
His Trinity	Hope
Creation	Love
Man, Human Powers	Predestination
Sin	The Sacramental Signs
The Fruits of Sin, Vices	Human Estates
Punishments	Magistrates
The Law	Bishops
The Promises	Damnation
Renewal through Christ	Blessedness
Grace	

Just as there are some subjects among these that are completely incomprehensible, so there are some that Christ wants every Christian to know most intimately. We should adore the mysteries of divinity, not investigate them. In fact, as many saints have experienced for themselves, great danger necessarily accompanies the inspection of these mysteries. God almighty clothed his Son in flesh to draw us away from contemplating his majesty and toward contemplating our flesh, and thus our weakness.<sup>16</sup> So also Paul writes to the Corinthians

---

centuries to teach Catholic doctrine in the schools. The work consists largely of systematically organized quotations from the Fathers, especially Augustine.

<sup>15</sup> The term *summae* (sg. *summa*), translated “summaries” here, applied to the dogmatic works of medieval theologians, such as Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* or Thomas Aquinas’s (1225–74) *Summa Theologica*. Melanchthon’s attack on sophistry and Scholasticism in large part centers on these two works, which still in the sixteenth century were the main theological textbooks in the schools.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), who after quoting 1 Corinthians 1:21 writes, “It is neither sufficient nor profitable for anyone to know God in his glory and majesty unless he knows him in the humility and shame of the cross” (WA 1:362; AE 31:52–3). Melanchthon, by calling God *optimus maximus* (“best and greatest,” translated “almighty” above), is contrasting the majesty that we should not

that God wanted to be known in a new way—through the foolishness of preaching, since in his wisdom he could not be known through wisdom [1 Corinthians 1:21].

Moreover, there is no reason for me to exert much effort on those majestic topics about God, his unity, his Trinity, the mystery of creation, or the manner of his incarnation.<sup>17</sup> I ask you, what have these Scholastic theologians accomplished over so many centuries as they concentrated only on these topics? Have they not become vain in their disputes, as Paul says,<sup>18</sup> while they talk nonsense their whole lives through about universals, formalities, connotations, and other vacuous terms?<sup>19</sup> And their foolishness could be forgiven if those stupid arguments had not meanwhile obscured the Gospel and the benefits of Christ. Now if I wanted to display my genius unnecessarily, I could easily destroy the arguments that they offer in support of their teachings and show how many of them seem better to support various heresies than catholic doctrine.

But whoever is ignorant of the other topics—the power of sin, the Law, grace—I do not know how I can call him a Christian.<sup>20</sup> For through these topics Christ is properly known, if it is true that to know Christ is to know his benefits, and not, as *they* teach, to contemplate his natures and the modes of his incarnation. Unless you know why Christ took on flesh and was crucified, what is the profit of knowing historical facts about him? Or is it enough for a doctor to

---

investigate with the weakness imposed upon the Son of God, which Christians must know intimately.

<sup>17</sup> Melanchthon does not treat God as a topic in this work, but adds the articles of God and creation to his later editions. The exclusion of topics on God and creation does not reflect Melanchthon's view of their importance, but rather the scope of his work—to correct the Scholastics on the topics of sin, Law, and grace (cf. Maurer 2:140).

<sup>18</sup> Romans 1:21.

<sup>19</sup> Melanchthon is dismissing the centuries-long debate between realism and nominalism as irrelevant to the proclamation of the Gospel. Realism taught that abstractions had reality or form and thus spoke of “formalities,” while nominalism taught that abstract concepts were merely names (*nomina*) and thus concentrated on semantic concerns and “connotations.” In his *Defense against the Parisian Theologians* (1521), Melanchthon accuses the Parisian Scholastics of caring about nothing except “the formalities of Scotus and the connotations of Occam” (SA 1:148).

<sup>20</sup> Melanchthon identifies these three topics, sin, Law, and grace, as “most relevant to us” in his *Theological Introduction* of 1519: “For in these three topics the entirety (*summa*) of our justification is embraced” (CR 21:49).



know the shapes, colors, and features of herbs, no matter that he does not know their inherent power? Just so, we must come to know Christ, who has been given to us as our remedy, and to use a scriptural word, our salvific remedy,<sup>21</sup> in some way other than that which the Scholastics urge.

This, finally, is Christian knowledge—to know what the Law demands, where to find the power to fulfill the Law, where to claim grace for sins, how to strengthen a wavering soul against the devil, the flesh, and the world, and how to console the afflicted conscience. Do the Scholastics teach these things? Does Paul, in his Epistle to the Romans, which he wrote as a summary of Christian doctrine, philosophize about the mysteries of the Trinity, the mode of the incarnation, active and passive creation?<sup>22</sup> Certainly not! But what does he treat? Of course he treats the Law, sin, and grace, the sole foundations for knowledge of Christ. How many times does Paul testify that he desires that the faithful have a rich knowledge of Christ!<sup>23</sup> For he foresaw that we would rid ourselves of salutary doctrinal topics and turn our attention to useless arguments that have nothing to do with Christ.

Therefore, I will lay out these topics in such a way that they present Christ to you, strengthen your conscience, and uphold your soul against Satan. Too many seek nothing from Scripture but topics about virtues and vices. But this is a philosophical, not a Christian, exegesis.<sup>24</sup> Why I say so, you will soon understand.

---

<sup>21</sup> E.g., Luke 2:30.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Aquinas (*Summa* I, q. 45, art. 2) makes a distinction between active and passive creation, arguing that since creation cannot be considered apart from its relationship with the creator, creation should be viewed first of all as God's action in creating, which is the very essence of the thing that has been created (active creation), and secondly as the creation which has been received passively by the thing that has been created (passive creation).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. 2 Corinthians 4:6; 10:5; Ephesians 1:17; 3:4; 4:13; Philippians 3:8; Colossians 2:2.

<sup>24</sup> This criticism is directed primarily against Erasmus, whose list of potential common topics in his *Manner or Method* (1519) contains nothing but subjects of morality (*AS* 3:170–4). Melancthon is arguing for a theology of Christ against Erasmus's famous "philosophy of Christ" (*philosophia Christi*). In his address to the University of Wittenberg on the doctrine of Paul (1520), Melancthon issued a similar, thinly veiled criticism of Erasmus and his *philosophia Christi* (*SA* 1:36).

# SIN

The sophists have done a wonderful job obscuring this article, too, arguing about the relations of reason<sup>1</sup> in sin, making distinctions about actual and original sin, and much else that I need not recount here. A compendium is not, after all, the best place to list all their musings. We will treat the matter briefly and use the normal, scriptural term “sin.”

## WHAT IS SIN?

I. Original sin is an inborn propensity and a natural impulse that actively compels us to sin, originating from Adam and extending to all his posterity.<sup>2</sup> Just as fire rises because of the power innate to it and just as in a magnet there is an innate power by which it attracts iron to itself, so in man there is an inborn power to sin. Scripture does not distinguish between actual and original sin, since original sin is also clearly an actual corrupt desire. Rather, Scripture simply calls both original vice and actual vice sin, though sometimes it calls what we consider actual sins “the fruits of sin” as Paul likes to do in Romans.<sup>3</sup> And what we call original sin, David sometimes names “crookedness” and sometimes “iniquity.” But there is no reason to discuss here those stupid distinctions concerning sin. Sin is a corrupt

---

<sup>1</sup> “Relation of reason” (*relatio rationis*) or “being of reason” (*ens rationis*) is a term derived from Aristotle (*Categories* 6a37–8b24; *Metaphysics* 1003a–b) denominating a relation or concept that properly exists only in the mind. Aquinas calls sin a being of reason (*ens rationis*) insofar as it truly exists (*prout verum*), since it exists only as a deprivation of being and so is correctly called a being (*ens*) only as an intellectual object (*In sent.* dist. 37, art. 2).

<sup>2</sup> What is translated here as the adverb “actively” is the noun *energia*. Despite Melanchthon’s attacks on Aristotelian terminology in this treatise, he is well aware of Aristotle’s distinctions between potentiality (*dynamis*) and actuality (*energeia*). By referring to the *energia* of sin, Melanchthon is stressing the fact that sin is not a latent possibility in man, but an ever active force. He treats this matter more thoroughly below under “The Power and Fruits of Sin.”

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Romans 6:21.

inner disposition (*affectus*) and a depraved agitation of the heart against the Law of God.

## THE SOURCE OF ORIGINAL SIN

II. After creating man without sin, almighty God was present with him through his Spirit, who aroused him to pursue righteousness. Had Adam not fallen, the same Spirit would be guiding all his descendants. But now after the sin of Adam, God is at enmity with man, so that his Spirit is not present with him as his guide. So it is that the soul, blind and lacking the light and life of heaven, esteems itself with all eagerness, seeks its own advantage, has nothing but carnal desires, and hates God. No words can describe the corruption of the human heart. The creature who is not filled with love of God necessarily loves himself most. The flesh cannot love spiritual things.

So we read in Genesis [6:3], “My Spirit will not remain in man, because he is flesh.” And Paul writes in Romans 8: “Those who are of the flesh,” that is, those who lack the Spirit of God (for even from the passage just quoted from Genesis it follows that “flesh” designates human powers lacking the Spirit of God), “desire the things of the flesh” [v. 5]. And again, “The affection of the flesh is enmity against God” [v. 7]. Therefore when the sophists teach that original sin is a lack of original righteousness (for so they speak), they speak correctly. But why do they not add that where there is no original righteousness or Spirit, there is really only flesh, godlessness, and contempt of spiritual things?

Human nature’s primary and highest affection is love of self. Man is driven by this love to will and desire only those things that seem good, agreeable, pleasant, and glorious to his nature. This love of self also drives him to hate and fear those things opposed to his nature and to oppose whoever keeps him from what he wants or commands him to obey or seek what he does not want. How unfathomable is the misery of humanity! So arises in man hatred of God and his Law. Therefore, God is to man a consuming fire, as we will soon explain in more detail.<sup>4</sup>

III. Now the Pelagians are said to have denied the existence of original sin. Augustine has refuted this teaching of theirs in several

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Exodus 24:17; Deuteronomy 4:24; 9:3; Hebrews 12:29.

learned works.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Augustine's argument against the Pelagians is so supremely excellent that almost all his other works seem rather dull in comparison. We will cite some passages from Scripture that testify to the existence of original sin. Nothing could be more clearly articulated than Ephesians 2:[3], "We were by nature children of wrath, as also were the rest." Now if we are children of wrath by nature, we are certainly born children of wrath. For what else is Paul saying here except that we are born with all our powers subject to sin and that no good ever exists in human powers? In Romans 5, he begins a discussion about sin, grace, and the Law where he teaches that sin has been passed down to all men. But how is one man's sin passed down unless all are born sinners because of the one? Nor can it be denied that Paul is discussing original sin in this passage. For if he were speaking of his own and others' personal sins, he could not say that the many have died because of one man's transgression. Unless one wants to do damage to the text, it cannot be denied that Paul is not talking about so-called actual sin.

In fact, if Adam is not the author of sin, then Christ is not the sole author of righteousness, but Adam has to be co-author with him. Also if Paul only means to speak of his own and others' personal sins, why do children, who have committed no so-called actual sins, die? Since sin is the only reason for death, children must be guilty of sin and have sin. But what kind of sin? Obviously, original sin. Now Paul speaks of that sin through which all have been condemned to death. Of course, we are here inspecting a typically Pauline figure of speech. For just as he does here in Romans, so also in 1 Corinthians [15:22] he writes, "Just as all die in Adam, so in Christ all will be made alive." The prophet's exclamation is relevant here: "Behold, I was conceived in iniquities and in sins my mother conceived me!" [Psalm 51:5]. David clearly means that he was born a sinner. Besides, if "every desire of the thoughts of the human heart is always vain and corrupt," as Genesis 6:[5] claims, it follows necessarily that we are born with sin. Now if we are all blessed in Christ, it follows necessarily that we are cursed in Adam. But what does it mean to be cursed, except that we are damned for our sin? This condemnation of sin is signified in the various kinds of uncleanness in the types of the

---

<sup>5</sup> E.g., *On the Spirit and the Letter* (MPL 44:199–246); *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* (MPL 44:549–641); *Against Julian* (MPL 44:641–874).

Law as well as in the slaughter of the Egyptians' firstborn sons. Nor is there any reason to treat this matter further, since Christ's words in John [3:6] are sufficiently straightforward: "What is born of the flesh is flesh." As we demonstrated above, what is flesh seeks its own benefit and loves itself. And what need do we have of rebirth if our first birth is not subject to sin? More to the point, if the birth of the flesh is good, what need do we have of rebirth from the Spirit?

## THE POWER AND FRUITS OF SIN

IV. It is easier to refute the old Pelagians than the neo-Pelagians of our day, who do not deny the existence of original sin but do deny that the power of original sin is such that all human works and all human endeavors are sins. Accordingly we will treat the active power of sin a bit more thoroughly. Original sin is a living, active force, bearing fruit in the form of vices in every part of us and at every moment. For when does the human soul not burn with evil desires? And we do not even notice the most despicable and shameful of these desires. Everyone sometimes feels greed, ambition, hatred, envy, jealousy, sensual passions, and anger, but few recognize their arrogance, pride, pharisaical deceit, contempt of God, disbelief in God, and blasphemy, even though these are our primary affections.

There are those who lead very honest lives in outward appearance. Paul, in fact, testifies that he had led an irreproachable life before coming to the knowledge of Christ.<sup>6</sup> But these people have no reason to boast, since their souls, even without their knowing it, are subject to the vilest and lowest affections. Indeed, what if God should, at some time, perhaps at their death, open the eyes of these so-called saints so that they recognize their vices and diseases? Would they not understand what Isaiah decreed—that all the glory of the flesh is as the glory of grass [Isaiah 40:6–8]? You see how deep, or rather how inscrutable, the wickedness of the human heart is. And yet our sophists are still shameless enough to teach the righteousness of works, satisfactions, and philosophical virtues.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Philippians 3:4–6.

<sup>7</sup> Following the Greek and Roman philosophical tradition, Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas, and other Scholastics recognized four philosophical virtues, which they called cardinal or principal virtues: prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice (Lombard *Sentences* III, dist. 33; Aquinas *Summa* I–II, q. 61). These philosophical

Granted that there was constancy in Socrates, integrity in Xenocrates,<sup>8</sup> self-control in Zeno.<sup>9</sup> But since these resided in impure souls they should not be considered true virtues but vices. Or, to put it more precisely, the shadows of these virtues arose in them because of their esteem and love of themselves. Socrates was patient, but he loved fame or at least was self-satisfied with his virtue.<sup>10</sup> Cato was brave but due to his love of praise.<sup>11</sup> In fact, God has poured out these shadows of virtues upon the nations, upon the godless, and upon whomever else he pleases, just as he gives beauty, riches, and similar gifts. Since human reason is completely enraptured by this facade parading itself as virtue, our pseudo-theologians are deceived by their blind natural judgment and urge us to study philosophical virtues and the merits of external works. But what do philosophers generally teach? The best of them teach nothing but trust and love of self. Marcus Cicero, in his *The Ends of Good and Evil*, derives all manner of virtues from love and esteem of self.<sup>12</sup> How much arrogance and conceit can be found in Plato!<sup>13</sup> It seems to me that if someone with a

---

virtues are distinguished from the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love (Aquinas *Summa* I–II, q. 62), derived from 1 Corinthians 13.

<sup>8</sup> Xenocrates of Chalcedon (c. 395–313) was a philosopher of the fourth century BC, a student of Plato, and eventually the leader of the Academy founded by Plato. Among other things, he stressed that virtue was the key to happiness.

<sup>9</sup> Zeno of Citium (c. 334–262) was the founder of Stoicism. Self-control was a primary Stoic virtue, since emotion was thought to be evil and to cloud the purity of human nature, which should be directed by logic (*logos*).

<sup>10</sup> There is here an implicit criticism of Erasmus, who in the most famous section of his *Adages* (III.iii.1) treats the saying *The Sileni of Alcibiades*. Sileni were statues with grotesque outward appearances but when opened up revealed the beautiful image of a god. Erasmus gives Socrates (along with Jesus!) as an example of a Silenus, arguing that he looked like nothing on the outside but was pure on the inside. Melancthon turns this assessment on its head by showing that Socrates and other philosophers looked beautiful in view of their external actions but were inwardly vicious.

<sup>11</sup> Cato was a statesman of the late Republican period famous for his bravery, immortalized in the epic poem of Lucan, the “Civil War.” Cato took over the republican cause in the West following the death of Pompey after the Battle of Pharsalus (48 BC). He committed suicide rather than receive pardon from Julius Caesar.

<sup>12</sup> In Book I of this work, Cicero has an interlocutor argue for Epicurean self-interest.

<sup>13</sup> In his *Oration* of 1521, Melancthon explains that Plato’s definition of philosophy is knowledge of self, but since only Scripture can show us how miserable we truly