

On the Death of Luther
February 1546
Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560)

Philip Melanchthon was a Professor of Greek at Wittenberg in 1518; he revised the Augsburg Confession in 1530; drew up the "Apology" in 1530; was active as a collaborator with Luther, taking part in various Protestant conferences with the Roman Catholics. Philip Melanchthon is a Lutheran and will advance the ideas and teachings of Martin Luther throughout his life.

GOD has always preserved a proportion of His servants upon the earth, and now, through Martin Luther, a more splendid period of light and truth has appeared. Solon, Themistocles, Scipio, Augustus, and others, who either established or ruled over mighty empires, were indeed truly great men, but far, far inferior to our illustrious leaders, Isaiah, John the Baptist, Paul, Augustine, and Luther, and it becomes us to study this distinction. What, then, are those great and important things which Luther has disclosed to our view, and which render his life so remarkable; for many are exclaiming against him as a disturber of the Church and a promoter of inexplicable controversies? Luther explained the true and important doctrine of penitence, which was involved in the profoundest darkness. He showed in what it consists and where refuge and consolation could be obtained under a sense of divine displeasure. He illustrated the statements of Paul respecting justification by faith, and showed the distinction between the law and the Gospel, civil and spiritual justification. He pointed out the true principle of prayer, and exterminated that heathenish absurdity from the Church that God was not to be invoked if the mind entertained the least doubt upon an academic question. He admonished men to pray, in the exercise of faith and a good conscience, to the only Mediator and Son of God, who is seated at the right hand of the Father, making intercession for us, and not to images or deceased saints according to the shocking practice of the ignorant multitude. He also pointed out other services acceptable to God, was singularly exemplary himself in all the duties of life, and separated the puerilities of human rites and ceremonies—which prevent instead of promoting genuine worship—from those services which are essential to obedience.

In order that heavenly light might be transmitted to posterity he translated the prophetic and apostolic writings into the German language with so much accuracy that his version of itself places Scripture in a more perspicuous light than most commentaries. But he published also various expositions upon the sacred writings which in the judgment of Erasmus by far excelled all others; and as it is recorded respecting those who rebuilt Jerusalem, "with one hand they laid the stones and with the other they held the sword," so, while he composed annotations on Scripture replete with heavenly instruction, and consoled afflicted consciences by his pious counsels, he was necessitated at the same time to wage incessant war with the adversaries of evangelical truth. When it is recollected that this truth, especially the doctrine of faith and the remission of sins, is not discoverable by the merely human eye, it must be acknowledged he was taught of God, and many of us have witnessed his anxious solicitude to impress the great principle of acceptance by faith. Multitudes of the saints will therefore praise God to all eternity for the benefits which have accrued to the Church by the labors of Luther.

Some by no means evil-minded persons, however, express a suspicion that Luther manifested too much asperity. I will not affirm the reverse, but only quote the language of Erasmus, "God has sent in this latter age a violent physician on account of the magnitude of the existing disorders," fulfilling by such a dispensation the divine message to Jeremiah, "Behold I have put My words in thy mouth. See I have this day set thee over the nations, and over the kingdoms, to root out and pull down, and to destroy and throw down, to build and to plant." Nor does God govern His church according to the counsels of men, nor choose to employ instruments like theirs to promote His purposes. But it is usual for inferior minds to dislike those of a more ardent character.

When Aristides observed the mighty affairs which Themistocles, by the impulse of a superior genius, undertook and happily accomplished, although he congratulated the State on the advantage it possessed in such a man, he studied every means to divert his zealous mind from its pursuits. I do not deny that ardent spirits are sometimes betrayed into undue impetuosity, for no one is totally exempt from the weaknesses incident to human nature, but they often merit the praise assigned by the ancient proverb to Hercules, Cimon, and other illustrious characters, "rough, indeed, but distinguished by the best principles." So in the Christian Church the apostle Paul mentions such as "war a good warfare, holding faith and a good

conscience," and who are both pleasing to God and estimable among pious men. Such a one was Luther, who, while he constantly defended the pure doctrines of Christianity, maintained a conscientious integrity of character. No vain licentiousness was ever detected in him, no seditious counsels, but, on the contrary, he often urged the most pacific measures; and never, never did he blend political articles for the augmentation of power with ecclesiastical affairs. Such wisdom and such virtue I am persuaded do not result from mere human skill or diligence, but the mind must be divinely influenced, especially when it is of the more rough, elevated, and ardent cast, like that of Luther.

What shall I say of his other virtues? Often have I myself gone to him unaware and found him dissolved in tears and prayers for the Church of Christ. He devoted a certain portion of almost every day to the solemn reading of some of the Psalms of David, with which he mingled his own supplications amid sighs and tears; and he has frequently declared how indignant he felt against those who hastened over devotional exercises through sloth or the pretense of other occupations. On this account, said he, divine wisdom has prescribed some formularies of prayer, that our minds may be inflamed with devotion by reading them, to which, in his opinion, reading aloud very much conduces.

When a variety of great and important deliberations respecting public dangers have been pending, we have witnessed his prodigious vigor of mind, his fearless and unshaken courage. Faith was his sheet-anchor, and by the help of God he was resolved never to be driven from it. Such was his penetration that he perceived at once what was to be done in the most perplexing conjunctures; nor was he, as some supposed, negligent of the public good or disregarding of the wishes of others, but he was well acquainted with the interests of the State, and preeminently sagacious in discovering the capacity and dispositions of all about him. And although he possessed such extraordinary acuteness of intellect, he read both ancient and modern ecclesiastical writings with the utmost avidity, and histories of every kind, applying the examples they furnished to existing circumstances with remarkable dexterity. The undecaying monuments of his eloquence remain, and in my opinion he equaled any of those who have been most celebrated for their resplendent oratorical powers.

The removal of such a character from among us, of one who was endowed with the greatest intellectual capacity, well instructed and long experienced in the knowledge of Christian truth, adorned with numerous excellences and with virtues of the most heroic cast, chosen by divine Providence to reform the Church of God, and cherishing for all of us a truly paternal affection,—the removal, I say, of such a man demands and justifies our tears. We resemble orphans bereft of an excellent and faithful father; but, while it is necessary to submit to the will of Heaven, let us not permit the memory of his virtues and his good offices to perish.

He was an important instrument, in the hands of God, of public utility; let us diligently study the truth he taught, imitating in our humble situations his fear of God, his faith, the intensity of his devotions, the integrity of his ministerial character, his purity, his careful avoidance of seditious counsel, his ardent thirst of knowledge. And as we frequently meditate upon the pious examples of those illustrious guides of the Church, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, and Paul, whose histories are transmitted to us, so let us frequently reflect upon the doctrine and course of life which distinguished our departed friend.

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