

John Calvin and Philip Melancthon's *Sum of Theology*

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Abstract

This preface to the French translation of Melancthon's *Sum of Theology* (*Opera Omnia* 9:847-50) was written by Calvin in 1546. It has been translated from the French by Alison Wells, introduced and annotated by Paul Wells. Our thanks to Paul Helm for suggesting this translation, to our knowledge the first time into English.

Introduction

In 1546 a French translation of Philip Melancthon's 1545 *Loci communes* was published in Geneva under the title *The Sum of Theology, or Common Places, revised and expanded for a last time by M. Philippe Melancthon*.¹ In his introduction, Calvin is careful to praise Luther's lieutenant, rather than pointing to fracture lines that existed between them, particularly on free will and predestination. Wulfert de Greef states, "This is surprising because later (1552), in a debate with Jean Trollet about predestination, it

¹ *La Somme de théologie, ou Lieux communs, revus et augmentez pour la dernière fois, par M. Philippe Melancthon*. Melancthon's work, which first appeared in 1521, was expanded through several editions, principally in 1535 and 1545 before its definitive version in 1559 a year before its author's death. The "last time" referred to in the French title is probably a sales pitch.

is quite clear that Calvin and Melanchthon did not agree in every respect.”² However, the lack of reference to these subjects is perhaps not all that surprising because of Calvin’s purpose in his preface. Bruce Gordon judges that Calvin’s aim was “to make the Wittenberg professor known to French readers as a godly teacher of the Church (and) to demonstrate that there was an agreed body of doctrine among the Protestant churches and that in addressing the French evangelicals Calvin spoke with the common voice of the wider Reformation.”³

It is certainly a mark of Calvin’s appreciation and magnanimity that he did not allow these differences on issues both men held to be central to mar a lifelong friendship, which began in October 1538 when they were put in contact by Martin Bucer.⁴ Calvin valued this friendship, even though at times Melanchthon’s advocacy of Luther and his subservience to him was to cause Calvin distress, particularly with regard to the doctrine of the real presence in the eucharistic controversies and Luther’s virulence on the subject. In the dedication to his commentary on Daniel, he described Melanchthon as “a man who, on account of his incomparable skill in the most excellent branches of knowledge, his piety, and other virtues, is worthy of the admiration of all ages.” From his side, Melanchthon called Calvin “The Theologian.”⁵ Their mutual esteem is witnessed to in the letters they exchanged, rather more from the Genevan side (14) than from Wittenberg (8). As Philip Schaff says, “Melanchthon was twelve years older than Calvin, as Luther was thirteen years older than Melanchthon. Calvin, therefore, might have sustained to Melanchthon the relation of a pupil to a teacher.”⁶

The two Reformers met three times in all, in Frankfurt (1539), Worms (1540), and Regensburg (1541). After the Colloquy of Regensburg, they did not see each other again, as Calvin had resumed his position in Geneva in September 1541 after a three-year absence. The following year Melanchthon suggested that Calvin reply to the Dutch theologian Albert Pighius, which

² Wulfert de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 193. De Greef suggests that Calvin’s reference to Melanchthon’s “accommodation” (see the Preface below) is critical, whereas it can be interpreted as an appreciation of the Wittenberger’s sensitive approach to difficult issues.

³ Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 162. Melanchthon did not respond to the translation and, with no French, probably never read the text.

⁴ James T. Hickman, “The Friendship of Melanchthon and Calvin,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 38.2 (1976): 152–65. Cf. Clyde L. Manschreck, *Melanchthon: The Quiet Reformer* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 254–55.

⁵ Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 8, *Modern Christianity. The Swiss Reformation*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/hcc8.iv.xi.vi.html>, 344 (344–54 are on Calvin and Melanchthon).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8:344.



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Calvin did, dedicating his treatise *De Libero Arbitrio* to Melanchthon in February 1543.⁷ Melanchthon thanked Calvin for this gesture the following May: “I am much affected by your kindness, and I thank you that you have been pleased to give evidence of your love for me to all the world, by placing my name at the beginning of your remarkable book, where all the world will see it.”⁸

Calvin wrote this introduction to Melanchthon’s major work being fully aware of the difference in their approaches, particularly concerning the problem of divine foreordination and sin. In the first edition of the *Loci* in 1521 and his commentary on Romans three years later, Melanchthon had affirmed, like Luther in the controversy with Erasmus, that God does all things not *permissive*, but *potenter*, and that he foreordained free human acts.⁹ Later he equivocated, saying, “I maintain the proposition that God is not the author of sin, and therefore cannot will it. David was by his own will carried into transgression.”¹⁰ In spite of this difference, Calvin put his reservations behind him and wrote an exceptional introduction. Schaff comments, “This is the only example of a Reformer republishing and recommending the work of another Reformer, which was the only formidable rival of his own chief work on the same subject (the Institutes), and differed from it in several points.”¹¹

Calvin also had the final word in these fraternal exchanges at the height of the eucharistic controversy, two years after his friend’s death in April 1560, appealing to Melanchthon in a heartfelt prayer:

O Philip Melanchthon! I appeal to thee who now livest with Christ in the bosom of God, and there art waiting for us till we shall be gathered with thee to that blessed rest. A hundred times, when worn out with labors and oppressed with so many troubles, didst thou repose thy head familiarly on my breast and say, “Would that I could die in this bosom!” Since then I have a thousand times wished that it had been granted to us to live together; for certainly thou wouldst thus have had more courage for the inevitable contest, and been stronger to despise envy, and to count as nothing all accusations. In this manner, also, the malice of many would have been restrained who, from thy gentleness which they call weakness, gathered audacity for their attacks.¹²

⁷ Cf. note 18 below.

⁸ Schaff, *History*, 8:348.

⁹ In the 1521 edition of the *Loci* Melanchthon quotes a dozen texts and affirms that “since everything that comes about happens necessarily according to divine predestination, our will has no freedom” and then adds, “What else is Paul doing in Romans 9 and 11 except consigning everything that happens to divine predestination?” *Commonplaces: Loci Communes*, 1521, trans. Christian Preus (St. Louis: Concordia, 2014), 65–66.

¹⁰ Quoted by Schaff, *History*, 8:349.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8:350.

¹² Calvin, *Opera* 9:461 quoted by Schaff, *History*, 8:354.

Preface to Melanchthon's *Summa*, 1546¹³

John Calvin, to the Readers,

If this book were being published in Latin, it would hardly be worth my while to give it a commendation at all; were I to do so, I would be opening myself to charges of impertinence and presumption. Its author is so reputed among learned people today that no one can fail to know him. As well as being renowned for his excellent erudition, he is also to be credited for referring to the writings of others, which is all the more reason for recommending his works. Since he is less well-known to those of our countryfolk who have not had the benefit of scholarly instruction, I thought it worthwhile, along with several of like mind, to inform readers that a great deal of fruit is to be gleaned from this book and to encourage them to study it thoroughly.

I will not comment here on the author, or on the extraordinary gifts with which he is blessed, graces for which he is worthy of being honored by all those who love the things of God. I will refer only to the book. As to its contents, it is a brief summary of the things Christians must know to guide them along the way of salvation. Here we find all we need to know of God; how we are to serve him; what we need to hold about Christ; why he was sent to us by his Father; the grace we receive through him; on what we are to found hope for our salvation; how we are to call on the name of the Lord; what true faith and repentance are; how we can be patient in adversity and where Christians can find true consolation; where we ought to discern the church; how it should be governed and who are its true leaders; what use the sacraments are and their administration; what our responsibilities are towards one another, to those in authority over us, to those in our charge, and to our equals. These are the things to which Christians should devote their lives, if they aspire to spend their time with beneficial teaching. All these issues are dealt with in this book, and presented in such a way that both young and old can receive useful instruction from it, as long as they come to it with a desire to learn.

What is praiseworthy is that this deeply learned author has not sought to indulge in subtle niceties, nor write with rhetorical grandeur as he could easily have done, but has simplified the material as much as possible, seeking only to edify his readers. We should all try to write in this fashion, apart from occasions when the specious arguments put forward by our adversaries

¹³ Hereafter follows John Calvin's Preface to the French translation of Philip Melanchthon's *Loci Communes*, in *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, ed. Baum, Cunitz, Reuss (Brunschwig: C. A. Schwetschke, 1870), 9:847–50.

constrain us to do otherwise. However, simplicity is the greatest quality in dealing with Christian doctrine. That is why the author has refrained from developing certain points in depth, even though they may warrant it.¹⁴ He has stuck to what is deemed necessary for salvation, leaving aside or omitting issues not absolutely essential, about which lack of knowledge or suspended judgment do not endanger the outcome, such as, for example, the question of free will. I am well aware that the presentation made here is insufficient to satisfy everyone.¹⁵ It would seem that human capacities are allowed too much latitude. The reason for this is that having dealt with the heart of the matter, the author prefers to pass on, and not to enter upon issues that are not essential to the salvation of believers. He takes it as given that human understanding is blind, so much so that our reason cannot lead us to God or knowledge of him, unless God enlightens us by the grace of his Holy Spirit. In the same way, our very will is perverse and distorted, so much so that it produces only wrong inclinations and rebellion against God and his justice, which are consequently displeasing to him, until the Holy Spirit renews our hearts.¹⁶ So we see that he takes God's grace alone to be the origin of any spiritual good in our salvation, and that man has nothing to glory in. He does, however, maintain that man has a certain freedom in what pertains to this earthly life, in waking and sleeping, going about the daily round, in working, studying, or business.¹⁷ Why? In limiting himself to the essential, he puts man at his true level by showing that of himself he can only stray away from God and sin, so falling into lostness, and that any capacity he has to do good is not his by nature, but only by the grace of God. That said, he sets limits to this freedom, which he calls civil liberty, maintaining that God continually rules from on high. There is not much to find fault with that. But it was important to point out to the reader what the author's intentions were, so no one take offense over a minor detail.

¹⁴ Calvin's trademark is simplicity and brevity.

¹⁵ Melancthon's formulations on the subject of free will are a good deal more rounded than the trenchant tone of Martin Luther's *De servo arbitrio* against Erasmus (1525). Calvin probably thinks Melancthon does not go far enough but refrains from explicit criticism.

¹⁶ In spite of Calvin's reservations, his moderate reaction is partly due to the fact that the essentials are secure—the total sinfulness of man and the necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit in renewal.

¹⁷ Freedom in terrestrial things was indicated by Luther in his argument against Erasmus, and not to be confused with man's incapacity in the spiritual realm, apart from regeneration. In the 1521 *Loci*, Melancthon distinguishes between internal and external freedom, *Common-places*, 76. Considered according to predestination there is no freedom in either domain, but if the will is considered according to external works, "natural judgment concludes that some freedom exists."

The same can be said for the question of predestination. Since today there are so many wayward spirits who seek only to satisfy their curiosity and who know no moderation, in an effort to forestall the danger, he prefers to deal only with what is necessary to be known, leaving further things in abeyance.¹⁸ Were he to fully develop this question, full rein would be given to a great deal of confused and bewildering debate, without fruit or edification. I maintain that nothing of what is revealed to us in Scripture must be held back, whatever be the case. However, anyone who desires to edify his readers should not be blamed for limiting himself to the things known to be the most useful, or for only touching on or leaving aside what he knows to be unprofitable.

When it comes to the sacraments, a sense of humility prompted him to add absolution as a third to baptism and the Lord's Supper.¹⁹ Since absolution commonly appears in this context, he has accommodated to common practice in a desire to avoid contention. Not that he ever intended to put absolution on the same level as baptism and the Lord's Supper and give it equal status, or to oblige Christians to observe it as if it were a sacrament instituted by Jesus Christ. His intention was not to impose it, but rather to allow Christians to have recourse to it.²⁰ This can be seen clearly in the reason he gives. He considers it to be a good and useful practice, which is not, however, a sufficient reason for considering it to be a sacrament.

If readers keep the same sense of proportion in assessing this book as the writer has shown in writing it, all will be well, and nothing will prevent them from profiting greatly from reading it. But the problem is that many people today do not read books with a desire to learn, whatever they may be about, but rather seek to find something to attack. And if they are able to quibble over a single word, it acts as a stumbling block that prevents them from benefiting in any way at all. Then ignoring all the good in the book, they pride themselves in a way that causes their downfall. Even worse, the most ignorant are the most outspoken and critical. Others are so finicky that a single detail can put them right off, so much so that a single sentence that is not to their taste turns them away from the book as a whole, even though it may contain a great deal that they would be well advised to dwell upon.

¹⁸ Calvin replied in 1543 to the first six books of Albert Pighius, *Ten Books on Human Free Choice and Divine Grace* with his *De Libero Arbitrio*, English translation, *The Bondage and the Liberation of the Will*, ed. A. N. S. Lane, trans. G. I. Davies (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

¹⁹ Cf. Herman A. Spielman, *Melanchthon and Calvin on Confession and Communion: Early Modern Protestant Penitential and Eucharistic Piety* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016).

²⁰ Absolution for Calvin is related to the "power of the keys" and forgiveness through the preaching of the gospel, in contrast with the sacrament of absolution. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes* 3.4.14–15 and 4.19.16.

It is no doubt a trick of the devil to turn them aside and stop them from receiving sound doctrine presented them. So those who would reap any profit from this book should cultivate a teachable spirit, putting aside anything that is an obstacle to progress, so that they might advance on the straight path that leads towards the pure truth of God, the only thing we are called to hold to, using those human means to help us reach that goal.²¹

²¹ Calvin likes to contrast the straight and narrow path of truth in Christ with wandering paths that are “stormy and uncertain.” Cf. for example, his commentary on Christ as unique mediator in *Commentary on 1 Timothy 2:5*, *Opera* 42:270.