

BOOK REVIEW

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Law and Gospel: Philip Melanchthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over *Poenitentia*

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This volume is the third in Paternoster's "Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought," a very valuable series in which Paternoster is publishing translations of Reformation works that have never been available in English, reprints of works that are no longer readily available, and various modern studies and analyses of Reformed theology. Wengert, a professor at the Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia and an expert on Melanchthon, has given us one of these studies.

The work was both exceptionally interesting and disappointing. This reviewer found the book so interesting that it was difficult to put down, but having finished the book, was left feeling distinctly unsatisfied. That dissatisfaction arose primarily from a lack of a clear theme, and the impression that the author was doing his best to hide Melanchthon's theological weaknesses, which were not few.

The debate between Melanchthon and Agricola, which is the subject of the book, led directly into the antinomian controversies that plagued the Lutheran churches in the mid sixteenth century, as Wengert so ably shows. The debate centred around the meaning of "*poenitentia*," roughly translated "penitence" and involved such questions as whether *poenitentia* preceded faith, whether it included "confession" to a priest, and the extent to which the law was involved in producing such *poenitentia*.

The book shows beyond doubt that Agricola's theology was antinomian. Indeed, his views were in many ways similar to those of certain Baptist antinomians today, who believe that the decalogue, the law of the Ten Commandments, has no place in the life of the New Testament Christian. Wengert demonstrates this antinomianism from Agricola's writings and shows its connection with the subsequent antinomian controversies in Lutheranism.

Melanchthon's opposition to Agricola was, therefore, very much justified. Nevertheless, though Wengert never admits this (his purpose, seemingly, is to defend Melanchthon and to present him in the very best light), one is left with the very strong feeling that Agricola's fears in the controversy were also justified, especially if one knows something of Melanchthon's later "development" as a theologian.

Agricola was certain, and later history proved him right, we believe, that in the debate Melanchthon was compromising the doctrines of *sola fidei* (faith alone) and *sola gratia* (grace alone). There can be no doubt that Melanchthon was primarily responsible for introducing an element of synergism (that man cooperates with God in his salvation) into Lutheran theology. That synergism is found in Melanchthon's own writings and in the creeds of Lutheranism.

The *Formula of Concord*, for example, teaches that "if the Holy Spirit, by the preaching of the word, shall have made a beginning, and offered his grace in the word to man, that then man, by his own proper and natural powers, can, as it were, give some assistance and co-operation, though it be but slight, infirm, and languid, towards his conversion, and can apply and prepare himself unto grace, apprehend it, embrace it, and believe the gospel" (Art. II, Negative, IV). Wengert's quotations from Melanchthon's writings show that he was moving in this

direction already at the time of his debate with Agricola, though, as we have said, Wengert never really admits this.

Thus it was that Wengert's book left us feeling so dissatisfied. He very ably traces the controversy between the two men though the wealth of historical detail is sometimes a bit difficult to follow, but comes to no other conclusions, it seems, than that Agricola *was* antinomian, and that this controversy did set the stage for other controversies.

Wengert admits that there were changes in Melanchthon's theology, but by showing Luther's support for Melanchthon, and by downplaying these changes, leaves the reader with impression that Melanchthon was doctrinally sound, while Agricola was not. What is perhaps even more unsatisfactory is that fact that Wengert offers little in the way of showing the impact of this controversy on later Lutheranism and how these views of Melanchthon became the official teaching of Lutheranism as reflected in its creeds.

Maybe that is the way historical theology is done these days - a plethora of historical detail with little or no analysis or application - but it certainly leaves this reviewer unsatisfied. Of much more value, whatever one thinks of Melanchthon's theology, would have been a clear statement of how Melanchthon's theology did change and how, with Luther's approbation it became the standard of Lutheran orthodoxy.

We would have appreciated also some brief discussion at least of the relevance of these issues for modern Lutheranism and maybe even for Reformed churches. What is the use of historical theology if it does not offer some lessons for the present? One cannot read Wengert's book and consider the issues involved in the controversy between Melanchthon and Agricola, without feeling that there is "nothing new under the sun." The place of the law in the life of the Christian, the relation between penitence and faith, and other such issues are as hotly debated today as they were at the time of the Reformation.

Nevertheless, for all its faults, the book is worth reading for the abundance of historical material contained in it and is recommended to those who are interested in these issues. They will, however, have to draw their own conclusions. Wengert draws none.