



WITTENBERG BEER

EPISODE 1: INTRODUCTION TO MELANCHTHON'S *LOCI COMMUNES*

Outline

- I. The purpose of Wittenberg Beer
 - A. Wittenberg Beer is a project to bring Reformation insights into theology to a broader audience and with a deeper appreciation.
 - B. Any topic may be considered, but the focus will be on *Reformation doctrine*, that is, the peculiar way that the Reformation *taught* the Christian faith.
 - C. The website wittenbergbeer.com is also accompanied by a podcast called Wittenberg Beer, which will include studies and sermons.
- II. The first subject: Philip Melanchthon's *Commonplaces*
 - A. Philip Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* of 1521 will serve as our first subject.
 - B. A contemporary translation by Christian Preus is available from Concordia Publishing House, titled *Commonplaces* (cph.org / also available on amazon.com).
 - C. *Commonplaces* is a direct translation of the Latin phrase *Loci Communes*.
 - D. *Commonplaces* is a suitable place to start because it may be considered the first systematic theology of the Lutheran Reformation.
- III. Brief biography of Philip Melanchthon
 - A. Melanchthon was a colleague of Martin Luther and a driving force behind the Lutheran Reformation; he may not be as well known as Luther, but certainly as important, if not more important than Luther.

- B. Melanchthon was the author of several confessional documents of the Lutheran Church: the Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, and the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope.
- C. He was one of the leading academic lights in Europe in the late middle ages.
 1. Born in a well-to-do family, the son of an armorer
 2. The great-nephew of John Reuchlin, a famous humanist scholar
 3. Became a humanist scholar in his own right
 4. A master of languages, biblical interpretation, education, and rhetoric
 5. Became a colleague of Martin Luther as a young man called to Wittenberg University
- D. Melanchthon was a gentle soul who yearned for peace and unity.
- E. Later in life he strayed somewhat from the core of the Lutheran Confession and was estranged from some of his would-be allies.

IV. What are theological *loci*?

- A. *Loci* are “places” or “locations” and refer to the topics of the Christian faith.
- B. The Bible is often narrative or poetic, and doesn’t often treat the faith by topics; *systematic theology* collects and organizes theology under topics (e.g., Baptism, Sin, etc.).
- C. Systematic theology provides the grammar for speaking about God and faith.

V. Melanchthon’s purpose for writing his *Loci Communes*.

- A. Systematic theology is not a departure from the Bible, but a return to it.

“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.”
(*Commonplaces*, 20)

- B. Though not all *loci* are equally suited for investigation in an academic way.

“We should adore the mysteries of divinity, not investigate them...God almighty clothed his Son in flesh to draw us away from contemplating his majesty and toward contemplating our flesh, and thus our weakness. So

also Paul writes to the Corinthians 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.” (*Commonplaces*, 23)

C. Finally, what is the end of systematic theology? Why should we care?

“For through these topics [i.e., sin, the Law, grace] Christ is properly known, if it is true that to know Christ is to know his benefits, and not, as *they* teach, to contemplate the 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?” (*Commonplaces*, 24)