II Philip Melanchthon’s reading of Paul’s letter to the Philippians and contemporary exegesis*

1. The quest

Since the 1960/70s, widely initiated by Krister Stendahl’s (1921-2008) deconstruction of the “introspective Self,”¹ the so-called “New Perspective on Paul” (NPP) has formulated a strong critique on a Pauline exegesis dominated by Lutheran hermeneutics.² By Lutheran hermeneutics we generally mean a specific Lutheran reading by which certain theologoumena of reformatory theology are taken as an interpretative frame for reading Paul’s letters and understanding Pauline anthropological thinking.³

With its strong focus on terms like πίστις, νόμος, and δικαιοσύνη, Paul’s letter to the Romans was and still is the focus of NPP- and “Radical New Perspective” (RNP)-debates.⁴ Paul’s letter to the Philippians, by contrast, never really was in the frontline of these discussions. However, when it comes to the interpretation of Paul’s autobiographical narrative in Phil 3:4bff., the question about how to analyze the genitive Χριστοῦ in 3:9 (… διὰ πίστεως Χριστοῦ) – whether it is an objective or a subjective genitive⁵ – in fact reflects some hermeneutical issues implied in the (Lutheran) justification-concept as uncovered by the NPP.

In many ways, Paul’s letter to the Philippians is an interesting test case for the study of reformatory exegesis: The topics of “law,” “faith” and “circumcision” appear most prominently in Phil 3. Likewise, Paul’s polemics against those who practice “mutilation” (3:2) is of constant interest for studying Philippians in light

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² See in general e.g. M. Zetterholm, Paul.
³ Stendahl wanted to detect a certain Western, i.e. an Augustinian and Lutheran, hermeneutics of Paul which had dominated especially the reading of Paul’s letter to the Romans. What Stendahl criticizes here is a reading of Paul that was construed along the lines of a negative theological anthropology. According to Stendahl, the ‘introspective view’ “rests on the presupposition that man is essentially the same through the ages, and that this continuity in the human self-consciousness is the common denominator between the New Testament and any age of human history”, K. Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul (1963),” 208.
⁴ See J. P. B. Mortensen, Paul, esp. 21ff.
⁵ See lately P. A. Holloway, Philippians, 165-168.
of the NPP or RNP. So far, however, the role of Paul’s letter to the Philippians for reformatory theology has not been studied systematically. This applies despite the fact that reformatory exegesis has – based on Pauline exegesis – produced fresh ideas about Paul and his life course as the discussion about the interpretation of Phil 4:3 most impressively shows.

In this contribution, I shall provide some observations on Philip Melanchthon’s approach to Philippians. Beside a rather “Lutheran”-inspired reference to Philippians in his *Loci Communes* (see 2.), Melanchthon shows multiple hermeneutical interests when reading and interpreting Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Melanchthon’s multi-faceted interest in Philippians becomes evident especially in his “Oratio in funere reverendi viri D. Martini Lutheri” from 1546 (see 3.).

2. Melanchthon’s interpretation of Philippians in the *Loci Communes* (1521)

Protestant theology in the first half of the 16th century emerged in a specific historical context, where its theological pragmatics (justification of the believer) and hermeneutical principles (“Schriftprinzip”) had socio-political relevance (critical attitude towards religious authorities). In this context, the *theologoumenon* of justification played an important role. Gerhard Ebeling once has pointed out that Luther’s idea on the justification *sola fide* cannot be seen as an arbitrary preference of a favorite teaching ..., but rather as a declaration of what the inner structure of all theological assertions are about.

Ebeling’s statement, however, also implies that biblical theology and Pauline exegesis in particular is the *material* center of Lutheran hermeneutics. In a

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7 See, however, B. Weiss, *Der Philipper-Brief*, who continuously takes in protestant theology when depicting the reception history of Philippians.

8 Clement of Alexandria identified a female character behind the expression: γνήσιε σύζυγε – in fact: Paul’s wife (strom 3.448B; see B. Weiß, *Philipper-Brief*, 299) – an interpretation that was already (with reference to 1 Cor 7:8) heavily debated in Patristic exegesis. In reformatory exegesis, however, that interpretation was reestablished (see Erasmus, Bugenhagen, Bullinger; B. Weiß, ibid.).


similar way and inspired by Luther’s hermeneutics,11 Melanchthon makes use of the theologoumenon of justification. His interpretation of Paul’s letter-writing is widely informed by a Lutheran theological hermeneutics.

2.1. Melanchthon’s approach to Philippians in the Loci

Melanchthon’s approach becomes evident in his most prominent writing, his “Hauptwerk,”12 which at the same time is commonly known as the first “protestant dogmatic”: the Loci Communes (1521). Melanchthon formulates one of the central theological statements already in the introduction (0.13):

Nam ex his (= vis peccati, lex, gratia [0.12]) proprie Christus cognoscitur, siquidem hoc est Christum cognoscere beneficia eius cognoscere, non, quod isti docent, eius naturas, modos incarnationis contueri.13

In his comment to this Locus, Horst Georg Pöhlmann emphasizes how Melanchthon partly has based this thesis of protestant theology on his reading of Paul (see “Declamatiuncula in Divi Pauli Doctrinam”, 1520). Melanchthon partly refers to Luther’s “Heidelberger Disputation” (1518) and Luther’s Operationes in Psalmos (1519-1521).14 How can we best describe the potential of “protestant” – or, more specifically: Lutheran – hermeneutics as articulated here?

There are two hermeneutical insights implied in Melanchthon’s proposition – one is critical or analytical, the other one is constructive:15 The critical or analytical dimension leads to a substantial deconstruction of a theologia gloriae, as represented by Scholastic theologians like Thomas of Aquinas16 (... non, quod isti docent, eius naturas, modos incarnationis contueri). It leads, at the same time, to a disclosure of what beneficium actually contradicts (vis peccati, lex, gratia, 0.12).

In a constructive sense, Melanchthon shows how the perception of Christ is defined (... hoc est Christum cognoscere beneficia eius cognoscere ...) and what “beneficium” ex positivo means and presupposes (vis peccati, lex, gratia). The “constructive potential” of Melanchthon’s theological proposition becomes most evident in the way in which he later on in the Loci explicitly refers to Paul and his letter to the Philippians (7.34; 7.90f.):

11 See H. Scheible, Melanchthon, 170.
12 See H. Scheible, Melanchthon, 172.
13 P. Melanchthon, Loci, 22.
14 P. Melanchthon, Loci, 22f. (n. 27).
15 Melanchthon would according to Neh 4:11 describe this phenomenon as follows: Jerusalem was rebuilt in that people did building-work with one hand and had their sword in the other – s. reference to this in his funeral tale on Luther below.
16 P. Melanchthon, Loci, 22f. (n. 27).
(a) In 7.33f., Melanchthon discusses the fact that justification is not yet reached completely. He refers to Luther as well as to Augustine, Cyprian and Paul (Rom 7:23; 12:2). Melanchthon claims: “... quatenus credimus, liberi sumus, quatenus diffidimus, sub lege sumus.” In that context, he adds a reference – not a direct quotation – to Phil 3:12 in order to show that Paul himself was conscious about the continuous need of aiming for “perfection.” I cannot discuss here in detail how Melanchthon interprets the meaning of “law.” More importantly, the basic idea here is to shape in a noetic sense an “Existenzbeschreibung” that follows up the distinction between credimus = liberi sumus, and diffidimus = sub lege sumus.

In other words, Melanchthon develops a type of a Christ-believing Existenzbeschreibung in which the “law” has a constitutive function for the believer’s self-understanding. From this point of view, Melanchthon also approaches Phil 3:12 – a text that can be read differently from a modern exegetical perspective. When Paul talks about his imperfection in Phil 3, he points to his eschatological hope (Phil 3:14) as well as to his current personal situation: the biographical context in prison (Phil 1:7 etc.). Paul does not necessarily develop an anthropological statement but rather reaches an interpretation of his personal fortune, which might be of relevance for his “imitators” (see Phil 3:17) who are like himself emulators of Christ.

(b) Another example of how Melanchthon approaches Philippians via the hermeneutical key of iustitia ex lege, can be found in his interpretation of Phil 3:8f. The Pauline passage is still framed by Paul’s autobiographical narratio (Phil 3:4bff.). Herein, it refers to Paul’s self-understanding as a personal example to his readers. In his interpretation of that passage in the Loci (7.90f.), however, Melanchthon reads the Pauline statement in light of the theologoumenon of the iustitia ex deo est (per fidem est Christi). We, thus, get the impression that Melanchthon, again, narrows Paul’s thinking, such as in his letter to the Philippians, in that he makes it first of all to be a contribution to the theological discourse about iustitia and lex.

Is Melanchthon’s approach to Phil 3 legitimate in terms of hermeneutics? In a motivic sense it is: In Phil 3:9 Paul talks about πίστις, νόμος, and δικαιοσύνη. However, in the argumentative frame of Phil 3 it becomes evident that the theologoumenon of justification does not really stand in the center of the Pauline argument but only supports Paul’s conceptualization of his own personal exemplum that he provides for his readers. In his interpretation of Phil 3 in the

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17 P. Melanchthon, Loci, 300.
18 The Vulgata-text (Phil 3:12) is: ... non quod iam acceperim aut iam perfectus sim sequor autem si comprehendam in quo et comprehensus sum a Christo Iesu.
Melanchthon’s interpretation of Philippians in the *Loci Communes* (1521)

Loci Melanchthon thus narrows or even misconceives Paul’s crucial argument of apostolic self-reflection.

I shall add here a philological remark to Phil 3:9, where Melanchthon quotes the Pauline text, while he only alludes to it in the cases of Phil 3:8 and 3:12 (see above). In the case of Phil 3:9 the Pauline text obviously is of specific theological importance. It seems as if Melanchthon does not have the Vulgata-text in mind but that he himself translates the Greek text: Melanchthon’s Latin text is much closer to the Greek than contemporary Latin translations, especially when it comes to the complicated interpretation of the prepositions that are used here:

The Vulgata-text says: ... sed illam quae *ex* fide est Christi quae *ex* Deo est iustitia in fide.

The Greek text, however, says: ... ἀλλὰ τὴν διὰ πίστεως Χριστοῦ, τὴν ἐκ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην ἐπὶ τῇ πίστει – a phrase that is much better expressed in Melanchthon’s translation in his *Loci*: ... sed eam, quae *per* fidem est Christi, quae iustitia *ex* deo est19 – *per* fidem equals διὰ πίστεως.

The art of Greek philology finally leads Melanchthon to a significant concept of “faith”: Melanchthon’s translation – even though it might reflect reformatory theology here – is much more than the Vulgata-tradition close to the Pauline Greek in a philological sense. Melanchthon’s expertise as a Greek philologist is an important contribution to the reformatory movement since it attests to the reformatory movement in humanism.20

2.2. Melanchthon’s exegetical principles in his *Loci* in light of the “New Perspective”

In his interpretation of Pauline texts, such as Phil 3, Melanchthon is in his *Loci* strongly influenced by a “Lutheran hermeneutics.” Melanchthon approaches his reading of Phil 3 through the lenses of the *theologoumenon* of justification by focusing his interpretation on *lex, gratia* and *iustificatio* as key terms. Even if Melanchthon is concise regarding matters of Greek philology, he tends to narrow Pauline thinking to the concept of justification. The suspicion regarding the paradigmatic of a “Lutheran reading of Paul,” raised by the representatives of the “New Perspective,” seem to be legitimate – it even applies to Melanchthon’s exegesis of Pauline texts.

Nevertheless, the NPP-critique of a “Lutheran Paul” that was dominating Protestant exegesis and its preunderstanding of Pauline texts in the sense of a “Western reading” falls much too short. This becomes evident in two points:

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The critique of the “Lutheran Paul” as articulated by the representatives of the NPP is not new. It is rather typical of protestant theology – in line with Lutheran tradition – to question its dogmatic and hermeneutical framework constantly. One of these self-critical debates took place in 1916 between Wilhelm Bousset (1865-1920) and Paul Wernle (1872-1939). Bousset – in his refutation of Wernle’s critical remarks about Bousset’s monograph “Kyrios Christos” – raised the issue of to what extent protestant theology as a hermeneutical key can legitimately lead Pauline exegesis. As Bousset and Wernle, as well as all subsequent protestant theologians, are diverse interpreters of Paul and Luther, the history of (protestant self-)critique still continues. Likewise, Ed P. Sanders and Krister Stendahl have formulated their critique of previous Lutheran theologians and their approaches to Pauline exegesis.

Today we have to continuously work out how we can further develop our research perspective on Paul and Pauline reception history up to the reformation period and its impact on modern Paulinism. The task of interpreting Luther and Paul is per definitionem infinite. Rudolf Bultmann, who was himself frequently under suspicion as a representative of the so-called “Lutheran Paul,” was quite sensitive of the various dilemmas of the Paul-and-Luther-reception. Bultmann himself pointed out how Luther’s interpretation of Pauline texts does not only provide helpful insights into the interpretation of Paul’s letter-writing but also tends to narrow or even conceal Pauline thinking: Before judging about Luther’s reading of Paul, we have to work on an appropriate understanding of Luther. The “Lutheran Paul,” in other words, cannot be restricted to a fixed paradigm or a concise hermeneutical concept – Luther as an exegete of Paul is himself part of a dynamic process of reception history. We thus have to prepare for a careful understanding of Luther and Luther’s exegesis of Pauline texts first.

(2) At the same time, we cannot take all protestant theologians or all protestant writings with the same brush: We have to distinguish between Luther and Melanchthon as we have to distinguish between the Loci Communes and

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22 Cf. M. Zetterholm, Paul, e.g. 75.

23 In 1928, Rudolf Bultmann says: “The academic research is infinite, because our terminology develops infinitely and therefore each generation is given the task of interpretation. Luther’s exegesis of Paul may be based on a real understanding of Paul; but we cannot settle for it, since we first of all need to interpret Luther,” R. Bultmann, “Bedeutung,” 114-133, 123.
other types of reformatory literature – either written by Melanchthon or other theologians. Even though certain theologoumena – such as the justification-theologoumenon – have consistently been brought up by reformatory theologians, there is no uniform “reformatory Pauline exegesis.” We have to study Luther and Melanchthon differently – we have to look at them as individual theologians and authors and we even need to distinguish between the different types of writings that derive from the same author.

I shall thus in a final step look at a different writing of Melanchthon – dating to 1546 – where he, in contrast to the Loci, approaches Paul’s letter to the Philippians from a rather different perspective.

3. Melanchthon’s interpretation of Philippians in his Oratio (1546)

We will now turn to a text that has generally not been counted among the most central writings of Melanchthon: Melanchthon’s funeral speech on Luther (“Oratio in funere reverendi viri D. Martini Lutheri”). However, this text gives a good impression of Melanchthon’s view on both Luther and Paul in 1546. After a complicated history of transmission that cannot be discussed here, the “Oratio in funere reverendi viri D. Martini Lutheri” has been edited again in 1997.

In his funeral speech on Luther, Melanchthon chooses a prominent literary type of an oratio that is known from antiquity: the laudatio funebris. In his speech, Melanchthon though claims several times that he would differ from the ancient prototype (... tantum de mortui laudibus ...) since he would not intend to hold a laudation. This assertion, however, rather functions as an introductory trope.

Melanchthon starts by placing Luther in the list of de viris illustribus, which reaches from Adam to Johannes Tauler. Hereafter Melanchthon compares the regents of big ancient empires – Solon, Themistocles, Scipio and Augustus – with leaders of the church, such as Isaiah, John the Baptist, Paul, Augustine and Luther who, of course, exceed the former group of ancient figures. Afterwards, Melanchthon portrays Luther as a humanist and a teacher of the church.

In order to show Luther’s humanist profile, Melanchthon uses various proofs: He refers to respective attestations made by Erasmus; he talks about Luther’s virtues – in comparison with ancient ideas of virtues (see Hercules or Cimon);

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he claims that Luther was eager to read history-writing in order to interpret on the basis of exempla mentioned there contemporary time and life. In Melanchthon’s funeral speech, Luther appears as a true humanist.

Which role does Pauline exegesis play in Melanchthon’s speech and in his portrait of Luther? Regarding how Melanchthon reads and uses Pauline texts here and how he summarizes Luther’s theology, two observations are of particular interest to me: First, Luther’s teaching – and this is the main argument in Melanchthon’s speech – “points to the will of God and the real worship, it interprets the Bible and the word of God, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

According to Melanchthon’s interpretation, Luther has renewed the true and necessary teaching, especially in regard to atonement (poenitentia). Luther had explained Paul’s teaching, “which says that Man is justified by belief,” as Melanchthon puts it. Here, again, the theologoumenon of justification occurs as a central element of how Luther conceptualizes Paul’s theology. The theologoumenon of justification, however, is not the only way in which Melanchthon characterizes in the funeral speech Luther’s achievements as a teacher.

Second, how does Melanchthon use Pauline letters in general? How does he refer to Paul’s letter to the Philippians in particular? There is one direct quotation of Philippians existent in the funeral speech. At first, this quotation could be a kind of a reference of any sort to an ancient source text – Melanchthon uses Philippians in a rather unspecific way, in fact in conjunction with other biblical writings or pagan literature like Vergil. When quoting the Greek text of Phil 4:8, Melanchthon only refers to the first part of this verse (4:8a). Phil 4:8 is the only time that Paul uses the term ἀρετή. The topic of “virtue” reflects precisely what Melanchthon addresses in the funeral speech and how he wants to dignify Luther’s lifework.

Melanchthon aims at revealing Luther’s virtues (see above). For that purpose, he refers to the “short list of virtues” as being presented in Phil 4:8. However, Melanchthon himself does not make use of the term ἀρετή here. Neither does he state that already Paul would have had an idea about human or specifically Christian virtues. Melanchthon rather presupposes that his audience knows this verse by heart so that Phil 4:8, in fact, acts as a key-element of the whole speech. Phil 4:8 is in the center of Melanchthon’s valuation of Luther and his ethos as a teacher of the church.

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27 ... Illustrauit Pauli doctrinam quae ait, fide iustificari hominem, S. Bräuer, “Überlieferung,” 215 (see “Rede,” 159).
The role of Paul’s letter to the Philippians for the concept of Melanchthon’s funeral speech is not at all marginal. Philippians rather more appears to be a central source text – an “intertext” which Melanchthon continuously recalls. In the rhetorical frame of lauding Luther and his lifework, it is thus less the theologoumenon of justification that dominates Melanchthon’s argument here, but much more the concept of creating Luther’s paradigmatic role in light of Paul’s self-description.

In the end of his speech, Melanchthon points to various paradigmatic teachers, like Jeremiah, John the Baptist and Paul. He suggests adding Luther to this list of paradigmatic teachers. By fashioning Luther as such a paradigmatic teacher, Melanchthon adequately reflects Paul’s self-conceptualization in Philippians. In no other letter does Paul shape such a clear concept of himself as an exemplum, which should be imitated by his readers. Besides his quotation of Phil 4:8, Melanchthon’s reading of Paul’s letter to the Philippians thus proves to be “appropriate” and in line with Paul’s pragmatics of writing in at least two dimensions:

First, Melanchthon makes Luther to appear as a true imitator of Paul. Hereby, he follows Paul’s pragmatics of letter-writing in Phil 3:17. When Melanchthon talks about Luther’s expectation of being close to God and Jesus Christ – after having been taken out of his body in order to see God’s identity – Melanchthon most obviously alludes to Phil 3:10f.: He makes Paul’s desire of recognizing Christ after being transformed into Christ’s fortune to become Luther’s own desire. Melanchthon actualizes Luther as the paradigm of a Christ-emulator as defined by Paul in his letter to the Philippians.

Second, in pointing to Luther’s virtues and adding him to the list of paradigmatic teachers, Melanchthon explicitly requests of his audience to “imitate” Luther (… Virtutes etiam nobis necessarias pro nostra mediocritate imitemur …). Here Melanchthon obviously alludes another time to Paul’s demand of following or “mimicking” him (Phil 3:17): As Paul admonishes the community in Philippi to “imitate” him by doing what they have learned and received from Paul (Phil 4:9), Melanchthon makes Luther to be a virtue-based object of imitation. In Melanchthon’s speech, Luther becomes nothing less than an impersonation of Paul in his letter to the Philippians.

Melanchthon’s exegesis of Paul has more to offer than a reiteration of a certain hermeneutical key: the theologoumenon of justification. Melanchthon

29 … ita saepe huius uiri doctrinam et cursum consideremus … S. Bräuer, “Überlieferung,” 218 (see “Rede,” 166).
31 S. Bräuer, “Überlieferung,” 217 (see “Rede,” 164).
32 S. Bräuer, “Überlieferung,” 218 (see “Rede,” 166).
demonstrates a high amount of exegetical sensitivity. He shows that there is finally no one-dimensional reading of Paul that would comply with a “Lutheran” or a “Melanchthonian Paul.” Studying Pauline exegesis in reformatory time will certainly reveal manifold ways of conceptualizing Pauline theology beyond the justification doctrine or mimetic ethics.

**Bibliography**


