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 [Notes]

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.