similar way and inspired by Luther’s hermeneutics, 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,” 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, Melanchton, 170.
¹² See H. Scheible, Melanchton, 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

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.