

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 9

The Faith of Christ

In the fall of 1980, I sat under Dr. Harvey Floyd for Greek class at David Lipscomb College (now University). His knowledge of Greek was unsurpassed on campus and in much of the scholastic world.

In addition to Greek, I had Dr. Floyd for a number of other Bible classes. Dr. Floyd was a remarkable professor. Back then, the Bible Department at Lipscomb were different than they are now. The Bible professors were instructed to teach out of either the King James Version or the American Standard Version. Students, on the other hand, were welcome to use whatever version they chose. Dr. Floyd always avoided controversy of versions by having students read the verses being studied. That way if Dr. Floyd liked the translation of the NIV better on some certain passage, he could call on a student with an NIV to read it. Should Dr. Floyd wish to make a point made by the Revised Standard, he would call on a student with that version.

I still remember when one student challenged Dr. Floyd because Dr. Floyd read a Romans passage from his own Bible and the words did not precisely follow either the King James or the American Standard. The student proudly produced both versions and demanded Dr. Floyd answer his question, "Dr. Floyd, are you violating school policy? Just what version are you teaching from?"

Dr. Floyd replied, "Ah, that is not such a simple question to answer. Perhaps you could help here. Why don't you come up before this class and tell them the version I am using. I think that would be most helpful. You come answer your own question for me!"

The student marched up to the podium, flipped open the now closed Bible and with a puzzled look on his face, began trying to figure out how to answer his own question. For Dr. Floyd, in the years I knew him, never read nor taught from any translation of the New Testament. Dr. Floyd always used only the Greek. As the student finally muttered, "Uh, I guess this is the Greek," Dr. Floyd looked out to the class and said, "Yes, I guess we should say I am using Paul's version. Would that be okay you think?"

THE ISSUE

Our agenda for this class centers on a phrase Paul used over and over again. Seven times in six verses Paul writes about the "faith of Christ." Does Paul mean

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our faith *in* Christ or does he mean the faith that Christ has? Scholars around the globe are debating this issue. We join that debate today!

GREEK LESSON

Dr. Floyd knew his Greek through and through. So, we go back to Greek class in the fall of 1980. Dr. Floyd was discussing a Greek grammar issue related to the ambiguity of translating certain Greek nouns with “of.” The example he used was from Rom. 8:35, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” Here was the ambiguity: Does Paul mean:

1. Who shall separate us from our love for Jesus? Or,
2. Who shall separate us from Christ’ love for us?

The “of” could mean either one. Similarly, I could speak of the revelation *of* Jesus Christ and we could fairly ask whether I am speaking of a revelation that reveals Jesus Christ or am I speaking of a revelation that comes from Jesus Christ.

In Greek, as in Latin, there is a way of putting an ending on nouns that tells you how the noun functions in a sentence. In English, we generally accomplish this by word order. We can say the cow ate the cabbage, and by putting “cow” first, we make it the subject doing the eating. The cabbage, after the verb, is the direct object; it is what is eaten. The Greek language did not use word order, but instead accomplished this by adding endings to the words. There was an ending that tells you if the noun is the subject and a different ending if noun is the direct object. In Greek, the words could go in any order you choose. You could write “cabbage ate cow” and as long as you had the endings right, the reader would understand the cow was the one eating the cabbage.

One of the types of endings for nouns in the Greek is called the “genitive” ending (actually the “genitive case form” is the phrase used). This is the ending that is typically translated as “of.”¹ When one studies Greek, one learns a number of different ways to translate the genitive endings with nouns. The genitive case, as it is called, generally operates to limit a noun. See in English how the nouns are limited by the follow up nouns in my examples below:

- Texas Tech beat the University *of Texas*.
- I fell into a burning ring *of fire*.
- Becky is the love *of my life*.

¹ The genitive is used in ways that cannot always be translated with “of.” Sometimes it is used to express a comparison, a purpose, etc. Sometimes the noun is translated with “from” or “in” or “to.”

Each bold italicized phrase would be a Greek genitive. It is put into English with “of.” It serves to limit the noun it modifies, so the “University” is limited or defined as the one of Texas. The burning ring is one of fire. The love is the one of my life. Many times, the limiting of the genitive makes the meaning obvious, as in the above examples. Unfortunately, there are also times where we are uncertain of the meaning of the genitive. Consider again the example used earlier:

- I considered the revelation of Christ.

Do we mean I considered the material that Jesus Christ revealed (the New Testament book entitled the Revelation of Jesus Christ)? Or, do we mean I considered the revelation I (or someone else) had of Jesus Christ? That is one ambiguity that sometimes exists with the genitive case.

Now, we come to our problem of today’s class. Paul writes in seven places about the “faith of Christ.” Paul does not mean just any faith; he means the faith *of Christ*. “Of Christ” is in the genitive case, meaning it limits or specifies the kind of faith Paul is referencing. The problem is that there is an ambiguity here. Does Paul mean the faith we have of Christ, in other words, faith *in* Christ? Or, does Paul mean Christ’ faith, the faith that Christ has?

How does one go about deciding what the meaning is when the genitive case is used? First, scholars apply rules of Greek syntax to attempt to clarify the meaning. Many times, however, those rules do not provide a final answer. In those times, scholars consider how the particular author uses the phrase or construction in other places. Additionally, scholars will carefully examine the context of the passage for any insight on the meaning. Then finally, the scholars will consider the theology involved to help understand the passage within the broader concepts of Biblical teaching.

PAUL’S PASSAGES

Because this is not a Greek class, our review of Paul’s seven passages today (actual seven occurrences in six verses) will not focus heavily on the Greek syntax or passages of similar usage. Instead, we will shift most of our focus on the theology and the implications of the various passages. First, let us set out the verses:

- **Romans 3:22 (Young's Literal Translation)** “and the righteousness of God [is] through the *faith of Jesus Christ* to all, and upon all those believing, -- for there is no difference,”

- **Romans 3:26 (Young's Literal Translation)** “For the shewing forth of His righteousness in the present time, for His being righteous, and declaring him righteous who [is] of the *faith of Jesus*.”
- **Galatians 2:16 (Young's Literal Translation)** “having known also that a man is not declared righteous by works of law, if not through the *faith of Jesus Christ*, also we in Christ Jesus did believe, that we might be declared righteous by the *faith of Christ*, and not by works of law, wherefore declared righteous by works of law shall be no flesh.”
- **Galatians 2:20 (King James Version)** “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the *faith of the Son of God*, who loved me, and gave himself for me.”
- **Galatians 3:22 (Young's Literal Translation)** “but the Writing did shut up the whole under sin, that the promise by *faith of Jesus Christ* may be given to those believing.”
- **Philippians 3:9 (King James Version)** “And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the *faith of Christ*, the righteousness which is of God by faith:”

A related passage is found in Ephesians 3:12, “In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the *faith of him* [Jesus].”

You will notice that we have carefully put the various translations down for each passage. That is because these translations allow the reader to discern the way the genitive is used. Other translations make that choice for you.

In these passages, there are three possible meanings behind Paul’s writing the “faith of Christ.” Paul could mean:

1. The believers faith *in* Christ (the “objective genitive”)
2. Christ’ perfect faith (the “subjective genitive”), or
3. Christ’ faithfulness (also a “subjective genitive”).

How do scholars, and how do we, determine what is the right meaning behind Paul? As mentioned earlier, the first step is analysis of the Greek syntax and writing style of Paul. This analysis is best left to serious Greek scholars. If one should want to read on this topic, a number of excellent Greek resources are available that come down on each side.²

² Consider as a principal source for the “subjective genitive” Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Zondervan 1996) pgs 114-116. Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Hendrikson Publishers, Inc. 2007).

The review of Greek does not answer this question,³ so we are pressed to consider the context of the scriptures and the theology of the broader implications. On the context of the scriptures, we leave that, in this class, to everyone's self study. We suggest that some passages seem to make a bit more sense meaning faith *in* Christ while others make more sense as Christ' faithfulness/faith. Here, we must be careful which translations we use. Because, as we noted earlier, some do not even leave the reader the choice! Consider in this vein,

Romans 3:22 (King James Version) “Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference:”

Romans 3:22 (New International Version) “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference,”

The King James Version allows the reader to decide if it is the righteousness of God which is by Christ' faith/faithfulness upon all who are themselves with faith or whether it is a redundancy or extra emphatic message that the righteousness of God is by faith in Jesus to all who have faith in Jesus. The NIV has decided it is the latter and does not give the reader the choice of the former.

Following our suggestion that the context is not determinative of this issue, we suggest the final course of action, and the real meat of this class, is the theological consideration! Here, we consider the three different possible meanings likely from Paul's writing.

1. Faith in Christ

The view that this passage is an objective genitive, and that it should be translated as “faith in Christ” was the dominant view, and almost the sole view, since Luther's reformation until the last 50 years.⁴ One reason this view reigned supreme for so long is its natural fit with the cry of Luther and other reformers in *sola fide* (“faith alone”).⁵

³ We agree here with Cambridge scholar Morna Hooker in her Presidential Address of 1988, “the question is one which cannot be settled on the basis of appeals to grammatical construction alone.” M. Hooker, ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ, *New Testament Studies*, vol. 35, 1989, p. 321.

⁴ *Ibid.* at 322.

⁵ See our lectures on Luther on the class website at www.biblical-literacy.com.

If we consider the passages themselves, and apply the genitive as one that is talking about the human's faith in Christ, then we can readily see why this view is consistent with most orthodoxy. In fact, many prominently used translations actually make this choice and translate the passages accordingly as we set out before with the Romans 3:22 passage. Consider the others:

- **Romans 3:26 (New International Version)** “he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have *faith in Jesus*.”
- **Galatians 2:16 (New International Version)** “know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by *faith in Jesus Christ*. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by *faith in Christ* and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.”
- **Galatians 2:20 (New International Version)** “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by *faith in the Son of God*, who loved me and gave himself for me.”
- **Galatians 3:22 (New International Version)** “But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through *faith in Jesus Christ*, might be given to those who believe.”
- **Philippians 3:9 (New International Version)** “and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through *faith in Christ*—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”

From a theological perspective, such a view is certainly justified and consistent with Paul's statements in other places that, “For by grace you have been saved through faith” (Eph. 2:8).

In fact, some of these same verses at issue also make the point clear in follow-up phrases. Consider in this regard Romans 3:22, Paul says, “Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe.” The phrasing “unto all and upon all them that believe” makes the same point as the objective genitive (“faith in Christ”). This is more clear when we remember that the Greek word being translated “faith” is simply the noun form of the Greek verb translated “believe.” In other words, Paul is saying that God's righteousness is

“by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them” that “exercise faith” or “believe.” This argument is advanced by some as a reason to consider the first reference by Paul to “faith of Christ” as referring to Christ’s faith/faithfulness. It removes the redundancy that exists if one believes Paul means, “faith in Christ to all who have faith.”

So, we are on safe ground theologically if we consider Paul to mean that one is to have faith *in* Christ. But what of the other options?

2. *Christ’s faith*

Over the last 50 years, more and more scholars have come to the conclusion that Paul is writing about Christ’s faith or Christ’s faithfulness. Either of these concepts are acceptable translations if one believes that Paul is using the genitive in a subjective sense, meaning the genitive noun (Christ) is the subject of the faith as opposed to the object in which one has faith. This is so much so that one scholar has written, “The correctness of the translation of πιστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ as the ‘faith or faithfulness of Jesus Christ’ has by now been too well established to need any further support.”⁶ While we are not so sure Gaston is right about the “too well establish” argument, we do believe that there is a dearth of modern scholarship arguing the propriety of the subjective genitive. So, we address the view of “Christ’s faith/faithfulness” but we do so in two pieces, first examining “Christ’s faith.”

A basic tenant of Christian orthodoxy is that Jesus lived a perfect sinless life. This concept extends to the precept that Christ’s righteousness in life, his perfection, is credited to the believer in faith. Writing in the early 1980’s Australian Robert D. Brinsmead considered the implications to believers today. Brinsmead did not do a verse by verse consideration of these passages, but took as his key a different passage of Paul’s, Romans 1:16-17:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

Brinsmead was asking the question, how much faith must one have to reach a threshold of “saving faith?” Brinsmead answered his question asserting that no human, save Jesus, ever had perfect faith and trust in God. Brinsmead believed passages like the Romans one above taught that Christ had perfect faith and that

⁶ L Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Wipf & Stock Publishers 2006) at 12.

human imperfect faith was never a problem. The perfect faith of Christ was given or attributed to the believer just as all other aspects of Christ's perfection were. This is the meaning Brinsmead argued for the Romans passage where Paul said, "the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith." Paul was saying, he asserts, that from the faith of Christ to the believer's faith.

Another way of understanding these passages as speaking of Christ's faith is in the sense that Christ became the "second Adam" as Paul taught. Adam was sinful; Jesus was righteous. Adam was untrusting (lacking faith); Jesus trusted fully (had perfect faith). This emphasis is not so much Brinsmead's view of the need for Christ's perfect faith to be attributed in imperfect believers. Rather it is simply an effort to highlight Paul's doctrine that Christ was perfect in all measures before God.

3. *Christ's faithfulness*

Another aspect to understanding of the subjective genitive view is that Paul is writing about Christ's faithfulness. Paul makes the point in other places that Christ, as God, was and remains faithful to his word and promise. In 2 Timothy 2:13, Paul quotes a "trustworthy saying" that "if we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself."

WHAT ARE THE THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE SUBJECTIVE GENITIVE?

Before drawing final conclusions on the passages, we should ask, why are some scholars so uneasy accepting that Paul may have meant that? Why the hesitancy to allow for that in the translations? What are the theological arguments against meaning Christ's faith/faithfulness? Hooker offers three reasons:

1. The translation Christ's faith undermines the basic Reformation teaching on faith.
2. While faith is an appropriate action for the believer, it is inappropriate for the Messiah. Somehow the presence of faith indicates Jesus was something less than fully God.
3. Some scholars dislike the idea that believers are to imitate the earthly Jesus in his ministry asserting that such takes away from the proper emphasis of imitating Jesus in his death and resurrection.

These three arguments do not seem to give full credit to the theology behind accepting Paul could have meant Christ's faith. Consider the first argument, that it undermines justification through human faith. Such is not even remotely true. As

we have already noted, one reason for accepting that Paul intends to include Christ's faith as a meaning is that the verses are otherwise redundant. Verses like Romans 3:22 add phrases or other contextual information to make it clear that Christ's faithfulness is for those who themselves have faith. The two are not mutually exclusive.

The second argument, that faith is inappropriate for Christ, we also find without merit. First, it seems to miss the concept that Christ was faithful in going to the cross. Who can read the Gethsemane story and not appreciate that Christ was faithful? If we also consider Paul's teachings that Christ died out of God's faithfulness to his promise to Abraham and other Old Testament people (Rom. 3:25), we certainly see that God's faithfulness to God's promises is squarely in line with orthodoxy.

The third argument loses merit already in most of the Christian world. Most Christians already believe and understand that we are to follow Christ in his life as well as his death and resurrection. Most Christians who accept the gospel accounts of the life of Christ see the model life of Christ as making the sacrifice of Christ properly atoning. In other words, because Jesus lived a perfect life (hence one worthy of following in all matters) Jesus' death can substitute for that of other sinners. It does not have to cover his own sins for he had none. It also means, especially in Hebrews, that Jesus could then offer his own perfect human life to God as the sin offering for all time. This sin-offering would never need supplementing and would never need repeating, because it gave God what he had always wanted from human beings – a faithful human life.

This leaves us with very good reasons to appreciate our salvation by grace through our faith in one who himself was perfect in faith and was/is faithful to us.

SO WHAT?

Certainly, we can safely assume that both faith in Christ and Christ being faithful are theological sound renderings of the passages. What shall we make of this? Shall we write this off as the confusing Greek of Paul?

TIME OUT! Look at my last sentence – “Shall we write this off as the confusing Greek of Paul?” I have used an ambiguous genitive! Do I mean the Greek language was ambiguous or that Paul's usage of the Greek was ambiguous? Actually, I meant to ask the question with both meanings! I am asking whether Greek itself is so ambiguous or whether Greek as used by Paul was so ambiguous.

I did so intentionally to illustrate a point. I think it likely that Paul knew he was writing in a way that opened up two facets to fully understand his point. Both

facets are true and both are valid. Both make sense grammatically and both make sense theologically. We can embrace both and get a full serving of thought!

So we plug in both to our verses and we see:

- **Romans 3:22 (Young's Literal Translation)** “and the righteousness of God [is] through the *faith of Jesus Christ* to all, and upon all those believing, -- for there is no difference,”

God’s righteousness comes to believers through the faithfulness and faith of Christ himself. Because Christ was faithful to his word, and because Jesus trusted fully and perfectly in God, all believers have the righteousness of God.

- **Romans 3:26 (Young's Literal Translation)** “For the shewing forth of His righteousness in the present time, for His being righteous, and declaring him righteous who [is] of the *faith of Jesus*.”

Those who are “of the faith of Jesus” could mean both those with faith *in* Jesus and those belonging to the faithful Jesus. Karl Barth takes the latter view of this passage in his Romans commentary and translates the verse as, “for the shewing, I say, of his righteousness at this present time: that he might be just, and the justifier of him that is grounded upon the faithfulness which abides in Christ.”⁷ Barth believes Paul emphasizing that the “atonement occurs only through the faithfulness of God.”⁸

- **Galatians 2:16 (Young's Literal Translation)** “having known also that a man is not declared righteous by works of law, if not through the *faith of Jesus Christ*, also we in Christ Jesus did believe, that we might be declared righteous by the *faith of Christ*, and not by works of law, wherefore declared righteous by works of law shall be no flesh.”

This passage applies Paul’s plain language to those who believe. But the genitives in issue allow for the construction also of the faithfulness of Christ extending to those who believe. Richard Longenecker translates the passage to get this emphasis, “and who know that a person is not justified by the works of the law but only by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.”⁹ Longenecker emphasizes that it is not works of law that save, but rather the faithfulness of Christ in dying in our stead.

⁷ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (Oxford 1968 ed.) trans. by E. C. Hoskyns.

⁸ *Ibid.* at 105.

⁹ Richard Longenecker, *Word Biblical Commentary: Galatians* (Word 1990).

- **Galatians 2:20 (King James Version)** “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the *faith of the Son of God*, who loved me, and gave himself for me.”

As before we see the sense of this both as an objective genitive, Paul saying he lived by faith *in* the Son of God, and the subjective, emphasizing the more active role of Christ in speaking of his faithfulness in loving and giving himself up.

- **Galatians 3:22 (Young's Literal Translation)** “but the Writing did shut up the whole under sin, that the promise by *faith of Jesus Christ* may be given to those believing.”

Here again, we see Paul making the clear point that his passage applies to the believer, “to those believing,” but he adds the genitive of “faith in Christ” so that we can also understand that the promise was based on one who was faithful, who would live up to the promise. Hence, Longenecker translates this passage, “so that the promise that is based on the faithfulness of Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.”¹⁰

- **Philippians 3:9 (King James Version)** “And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the *faith of Christ*, the righteousness which is of God by faith.”

This passage conveyed is another one where Paul writes of the “faith of Christ” and then separately emphasizes that the righteousness comes “by faith.” So, we have the classical understanding present that Paul contrasts righteousness by works and law with righteousness credited to the believer’s faith.

But if we absorb the impact also of a meaning by Paul of the genitive as subjective, then we have a translation like that of Peter O’Brien, “and be found in him, not having my own righteousness which comes from the law, but that righteousness which comes from God through the faithfulness of Christ and which is based on faith.”¹¹ O’Brien believes the passage shows righteousness: (1) based on Christ’s faithfulness; (2) originating from God; and (3) received on the basis of faith.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ P. T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: a Commentary on the Greek Text* (Eerdmans 1991) at 382.

Much like Brinsmead's interpretation of the Romans passages earlier, O'Brien says:

Instead [of self-righteousness], the righteousness Paul now has...is of a different order: it is that status of being right with God which comes as his gift (cf. Rom. 3:21). Its basis is Christ's faithfulness, that is, his unflinching obedience to the Father's will and to his loving purposes of salvation through suffering and death, and it is appropriated on the basis of faith.¹²

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"The righteousness of God [is]...to all, and upon all those believing"* (Rom. 3:22).

Paul, and all of scripture, make clear that no one stands before God on the merit of his or her own merit or good works. No one is sinless. No one merits God's love or mercy. God has appropriated and reckoned his righteousness through faith. This was true for Abraham (Gen 15:6) and it is true for the church (Eph. 2:8-10). To see the merit behind Paul's added focus on the faithfulness of Christ does not diminish this truth one wit. It simply adds depth to it.

2. *"The righteousness of God [is] through the faith of Jesus Christ"* (Rom 3:22).

There is a clear sense in Paul teaching about the faithfulness of God and Christ in passages such as those we have looked at today. We should remember that while God reckons our faith as righteousness, the God who does so is himself reliable and faithful. We trust in one who is trustworthy. We put faith in one who has proven himself faithful. We model our lives after a Lord who lived a model life in all ways.

3. *"Be found in him, [having] that righteousness which comes from God through the faithfulness of Christ"* (Phil. 3:9).

In Christ we have all blessings. His perfect life, including his perfect faith, is the life that we share. It is the perfection we need. It is why we can stand before the world and acknowledge God as our *Abba* Father.

¹² *Ibid.* at 392.

A final note: If you made it this far, you deserve a hearty pat on the back. This lesson may not be the most captivating one so far, but it has dug deeper and explored current theological questions more than any class so far. Digging into God's word is a fantastic thing to do. To explore God's production and expand our understanding is fantastic! Congratulations!