



Predica Verbum: Jurnal Teologi dan Misi

Vol. 4, No. 2 (2024):114-129

<https://ejournal.sttii-yogyakarta.ac.id/index.php/predicaverbum/index>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51591/predicaverbum.v4i2.112>

ISSN: 2798-1444 (online), 2798-1495 (print)

Revelatory Gospel Power for Final Salvation: Another Look at the Logic of Romans 1:15–17

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Article history: Received: October 25, 2024; Revised: December 02, 2024; Accepted: December 04, 2024; Published: December 19, 2024

Abstract

Romans 1:16–17 is often considered the thesis statement of Paul’s letter to the Romans. Most commentators tend to read later developments in Paul’s argument back into these two compact verses, whether to support the view that these verses articulate Paul’s doctrine of justification in a nutshell or the view that these verses foreshadow Paul’s “Christocentric” presentation of faith(fulness) in Rom 3:21–26. This article, however, seeks to interpret Rom 1:16–17 by focusing on the logical structure of 1:15–17, including Paul’s triple use of the conjunction γάρ. On this basis it is argued that Paul is eager to preach the gospel to those who have already believed in it because the gospel is God’s power for final (not initial) salvation. The gospel has ongoing power in the lives of believers because it sustains their faith by revealing God’s true, righteous character. Paul’s citation of Hab 2:4 is discussed within the flow of Paul’s argument and then the article concludes with some practical conclusions about how Christians can recapture the gospel’s power for their daily lives.

Keywords: Romans 1:15–17, Gospel, Salvation, the Righteousness of God, Faith

INTRODUCTION

For hundreds of years, commentators on Paul’s letter to the Romans have remarked upon the importance of 1:16–17 within the letter’s argument. These two verses are often called the thesis of the letter and are thought to adumbrate the main lines of Paul’s teaching in at least chapters 1–4, in which he expounds his doctrine of justification.¹ Michael Bird has expressed a similar idea by labeling Rom 1:16–17 as the letter’s “nerve

¹ For example, see Colin G. Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (PNTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 66; Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 157; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans* (2nd ed.; NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 66–68; and Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (2nd ed.; BECNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 62–63.



center.”² The frequent side-effect of viewing these two verses as the letter’s thesis, though, has been to isolate Rom 1:16–17 from its immediate context. This is evident in major recent commentaries on Romans, such as those written by Richard Longenecker and Douglas Moo.

Many of the journal articles that have been published on Rom 1:16–17 in the last thirty years have concentrated on one of two issues. Scholars such as Charles Quarles, John Taylor, and Terry Wardlaw have explored the meaning of the phrase ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν (literally, “from faith to faith”)³ in 1:17 and scholars such as Douglas Campbell, Matthew Bates, and B. J. Oropeza, among others, have re-examined Rom 1:16–17 in order to make contributions to the ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ debate.⁴ These articles, being preoccupied with theological controversies, display scant interest in reading Rom 1:16–17 in light of its immediately preceding context.

Nevertheless, in recent years scholars have begun to stress the grammatical and logical connections of these two verses to what precedes and follows them.⁵ This article will pay close attention to the logical connections between these two verses and what precedes them in verse 15. As will be demonstrated, this approach represents a surprising gap in scholarly literature, despite the voluminous commentary that has already been written on Rom 1:16–17. By focusing on the logical structure and flow of Paul’s argument in these three verses, a novel line of interpretation will be presented. In particular, this article will suggest that Paul views the gospel as the power of God for *final* salvation and that God wields this power through the gospel by revealing his righteous character in it, for the benefit of human faith.

METHOD

In this article, the standard grammatical-historical exegetical method, as outlined in any one of several classic textbooks written from an evangelical Christian perspective, will be employed.⁶ The contribution this article makes to scholarship is not in any methodological innovation but in the exegetical conclusions that are reached. Particular attention will be given to the logical structure of Paul’s argument in these three verses.

² Michael Bird, *Romans* (SGBC; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 40.

³ See Charles L. Quarles, “From Faith to Faith: A Fresh Examination of the Prepositional Series in Romans 1:17,” *NovT* 45, no. 1 (2003): 1–21; John W. Taylor, “From Faith to Faith: Romans 1.17 in the Light of Greek Idiom,” *NTS* 50, no. 3 (2004): 337–48; and Terry Wardlaw, “A Reappraisal of ‘From Faith to Faith’ (Romans 1:17),” *EuroJT* 21, no. 2 (2012): 107–19.

⁴ See Douglas A. Campbell, “Romans 1:17—A *Crux Interpretum* for the ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ Debate,” *JBL* 113, no. 2 (1994): 265–85; Matthew W. Bates, “The External-Relational Shift in Faith (*Pistis*) in New Testament Research: Romans 1 as Gospel-Allegiance Test Case,” *CurBR* 18, no. 2 (2020): 176–202; and B. J. Oropeza, “Justification by Faith in Christ or Faithfulness of Christ? Updating the ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ Debate in Light of Paul’s Use of Scripture,” *JTS* 72, no. 1 (2021): 102–24.

⁵ For example, see Schreiner, *Romans*, 62–63; N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God, Volume 4; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013), 764–71; and John Scoggins, “Romans 1:18 as Key to the Structure of the Letter,” *BibSac* 175, no. 4 (2018): 411–24.

⁶ For example, see Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors* (3rd ed.; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Rev. ed.; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), or William W. Klein et al., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017).

The Greek textual tradition does not contain any significant variants that affect my interpretation and thus I will base my exegesis on the 28th edition of the Greek text of Nestle-Aland without comment.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

To Whom Is Paul Eager to Preach the Gospel? (Rom 1:15)

In Rom 1:15, Paul straightforwardly declares, “I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.”⁷ A basic but under-considered and provocative question arises from this verse: “Why would Paul be eager to preach the gospel to *Christians* in Rome, to those who have already believed the gospel?” Some commentators, perhaps sensing a potential incongruity here, change the sense of the text and claim that Paul wants to preach the gospel to “those who are in Rome”—that is, to unbelievers. They say that Paul’s earnest desire is to win more converts through his gospel preaching in Rome.⁸ This understanding is often linked to a decision to interpret ἵνα τινὰ καρπὸν σχῶ καὶ ἐν ὑμῖν (“in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well”) in Rom 1:13 as an expression of Paul’s desire to gain new followers of Christ.

Paul undoubtedly did desire to win more converts in Rome, but we must stick to what he actually writes: “I am eager to preach the gospel *to you*,” the recipients of the letter, those whom he addressed as “loved by God and called to be saints” (1:7) and has termed “brothers and sisters” in verse 13. Paul has just commended his audience: “your faith is proclaimed in all the world” (1:8). Later in the letter he will write, “thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed” (6:17) and in chapter 15 there is no apparent artifice or irony when he states, “I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another” (15:14).

These unqualifiedly positive statements about the believers in Rome also belie any scholarly theory that Paul viewed the gospel message(s) previously preached in Rome as being critically deficient, as if Paul viewed his own presentation of the gospel as being drastically dissimilar to or an indispensable improvement upon what the Roman believers had already embraced. There is simply no indication in the letter that Paul viewed “his” gospel as essentially different from what the Roman house churches had already accepted, especially when one considers that the many co-workers Paul mentions in Romans chapter 16—principally Prisca and Aquila—would have been intimately familiar with Paul’s teaching and were probably freely imparting it in Rome already.

Paul obviously viewed his preaching of the gospel as bringing some added value to the table. Otherwise it is hard to see why he would want to preach his gospel in Rome or even bother to write the letter. Yet it was probably Paul’s aim to strengthen the gospel foundations that had already been laid in Rome (cf. Rom 16:25), to supplement previous

⁷ All translations of Scripture are taken from the English Standard Version (published in 2016 by Crossway) unless otherwise indicated.

⁸ Cf. Bird, *Romans*, 40; and Schreiner, *Romans*, 58–59.

teaching (and address relatively minor problems of disunity), to remind the believers there of what they already knew (cf. Rom 15:15), and to respond to certain charges laid against him and his gospel rather than to lay a completely new apostolic foundation for the church. If this view of the situation is correct, then our original question remains potent: “Why would Paul be eager to preach the gospel to *Christians* in Rome, to those who have already believed the gospel?” Paul explains himself in the following two verses.

The Gospel as God’s Power for *Final* Salvation (Rom 1:16)

The paradigm of inaugurated eschatology has become so widely accepted in New Testament scholarship that commentators on Romans hardly feel the need to defend or explain it anymore. Virtually all commentators freely acknowledge that salvation in Romans is a concept that has both past/present and future dimensions. For example, Paul declares in Rom 5:1, “since we *have been* justified [an aorist participle, Δικαιωθέντες] by faith, we have peace with God” and in Rom 8:24 he writes, “in this hope [that is, in the hope for bodily resurrection and a new creation] we *were* saved [an aorist passive verb, ἐσώθημεν].” No commentator or theologian of whom I am aware contests that salvation, broadly conceived, has a past/present dimension in Romans.

The arguably stronger “tense” of salvation in Romans, however, is future salvation, the sense in which believers are not yet saved but certainly will be. In Romans chapter 5, Paul states, “Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more *shall we be saved* [a future passive verb, σωθησόμεθα] by him from the wrath of God” (5:9).⁹ Or as Paul writes in Romans 13:11, “Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation (σωτηρία) is nearer to us now than when we first believed.” If salvation is nearer now, that means it has not yet arrived. A believer’s final salvation arrives long after they first believe, when they wake from sleep, when their body is raised in the new creation.

Once again, the paradigm of inaugurated eschatology is widely accepted now in New Testament scholarship. Yet giving a nod in the direction of this already/not yet tension does not provide theological sharpness when considering any singular occurrence of the verb σώζω or the noun σωτηρία. In his commentary on Rom 1:16, Douglas Moo acknowledges that “salvation” in Paul’s letters “is usually the deliverance from eschatological judgment that is finalized only at the last day,”¹⁰ but he does not tease out the implications of this insight with regard to Rom 1:15–17. Likewise, Schreiner declares “the future sense [of salvation] is clearly intended here [in Rom 1:16],”¹¹ but previously asserts that “the power of the gospel lies in its effective work in calling believers to salvation,”¹² which seems to equate salvation in Rom 1:16 with effectual calling.¹³

In Rom 1:16 Paul writes, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation (δύναμις γὰρ θεοῦ ἐστὶν εἰς σωτηρίαν) to everyone who believes, to

⁹ Cf. Obehetan et al., “Implementasi Injil Adalah Kekuatan Allah Berdasarkan Studi Surat Roma 1:16–17,” *Jurnal Luxnos* 9, no. 2 (2023), 287.

¹⁰ Moo, *Romans*, 70.

¹¹ Schreiner, *Romans*, 64.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Cf. also the ambiguity in Bird, *Romans*, 41.

the Jew first and also to the Greek.” We must press the question, “Which aspect of salvation does Paul intend in this verse: initial salvation or final salvation?” Of course, it is theoretically possible that Paul intends to be ambiguous and capture both dimensions simultaneously, but this must be argued and not simply assumed. The distinction between initial and final salvation does not disappear at the mere mention of the concept of inaugurated eschatology, as if some kind of wand has been waved.

My contention in this article is that Paul had *final* salvation primarily or exclusively in mind when he wrote verse 16 and asserted that the gospel is the power of God for salvation. This interpretation can be defended in three ways.

First, the phrase “I am not ashamed of the gospel” (Οὐ γὰρ ἐπαισχύνομαι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) hints at a future eschatological framing for verse 16. The standard Indonesian translation of the Bible, *Terjemahan Baru*, obscures this point by rendering the Greek phrase as “I have a solid confidence in the gospel” (aku mempunyai keyakinan yang kokoh dalam Injil). To interpret this bold assertion we must ask why Paul might be tempted to be ashamed of the gospel. There could be several reasons. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, Christ crucified was “a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (1:23) and thus the gospel was nonsensical and even inherently offensive to the majority of the ancient world. So perhaps Paul would be tempted to feel ashamed to ascribe intellectually to a message so contrary to the wisdom of this world.

Furthermore, Paul wrote to Timothy, “Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord (μὴ οὖν ἐπαισχυνθῇς τὸ μαρτύριον τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν) . . . but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God” (2 Tim 1:8). Paul’s preaching of the gospel necessarily entailed suffering and thus he may have been tempted to shrink back from preaching the gospel out of a natural desire to avoid or lessen physical, emotional, and social suffering.

In addition to those two reasons, it could be that Paul’s declaration “I am not ashamed of the gospel” is countering rumors and allegations concerning Paul that are swirling about in Rome. Repeatedly in chapter 1 and chapter 15 Paul labors to assure the Roman believers of his previous intentions to visit them, the gist of his message being, “No, I really do want to visit you; in fact I’ve planned to come to you many times and have been prevented from doing so” (cf. Rom 1:9–11, 13, 15; 15:22–24, 28–29, 32). His emphatic pleading might suggest that some in Rome were saying that Paul was scared to visit and teach there. Perhaps the accusation was that Paul was embarrassed by what he was teaching elsewhere and could not quite bring himself to openly declare his gospel in the imperial capital, the center of the Gentile world. If there is any hint of whispering of that kind, Paul flatly denies the charges and says, “I am not ashamed of the gospel I preach!”¹⁴

There is one more possible interpretation of Paul’s assertion. Interestingly, if one searches for occurrences of the related verb κατασχύνω in the letter, one would find Romans 5:5, “hope does not put us to shame,” and Romans 9:33 and 10:11, which basically say the same thing: “Whoever believes in Jesus *will not* be put to shame (a future

¹⁴ Longenecker, *Romans*, 161–63 foregrounds this explanation.

passive indicative form of κατασχύνω in both instances).” In these references an eschatological dimension to Paul’s understanding of shame can be detected.¹⁵ Paul could be claiming in Rom 1:16 that he is not ashamed of the gospel because he knows that believing in the gospel will not bring him into shame and condemnation at the final judgment. If this kind of eschatological shading is discernible at the start of verse 16, it would strengthen the possibility that Paul is referring to final salvation later in the verse.

Stronger evidence to consider for reading σωτηρία in Rom 1:16 as final salvation is a parallel passage in 1 Cor 1:17–18, which includes some of the same key concepts that are present in Rom 1:16–17, including “gospel / preach the gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον/εὐαγγελίζω), “power of God” (δύναμις θεοῦ), and “salvation/save” (σωτηρία/σώζω). Paul writes,

¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. ¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved (a present passive participle, σφζομένοις) it is the power of God.

Notice that Paul does not write that “to us who *were* saved it [i.e., the word of the cross or the gospel] *was* the power of God.” Rather, the gospel *is* the power of God to those who are *being* saved. The present tense of the participle σφζομένοις is intentional and significant, expressing the same idea as Rom 1:16: the gospel is God’s power for those who are in the process of being saved and who will be saved in the final judgment. No other verses in Paul’s letters share this same collocation of key concepts. Paul’s statements in 1 Cor 15:1–2 come close, though: “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved (a present passive verb, σφζεσθε), if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.” These verses also stress the process of salvation and the need for enduring faith in the gospel.

The third and decisive consideration is the logical connections between verse 15, verse 16a, and verse 16b, marked by two occurrences of the conjunction γάρ: “So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. *For* (γάρ) I am not ashamed of the gospel, *for* (γάρ) it is the power of God for salvation . . .” In my view, scholars tend to downplay or dodge the logical implications of this grammatical structuring. For example, Longenecker claims that the first γάρ in Rom 1:16 “probably appears here simply as a transitional conjunction to indicate the continuation of Paul’s writing,” though he admits that the next two occurrences of this conjunction in 1:16b and 1:17a function to connect what follows them to what precedes them “in a causal or explanatory fashion.”¹⁶ Moo states that “v. 16a explains (note the ‘for’ [*gar*]) why Paul is eager to preach the gospel in Rome (v. 15),” but he then blunts the logical force of his observation by suggesting that “the language of v. 16a implies a shift in focus” and that Paul makes a

¹⁵ Cf. also Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26; Rom 6:21; 1 Cor 1:27–29; 2 Tim 1:12, 16–18; 1 Pet 2:6; 3:16.

¹⁶ Longenecker, *Romans*, 158.

“transition” in verse 16.¹⁷ Moo views the epistolary material of 1:1–15 and 15:14–33 as a frame for Paul’s “theological treatise” in Rom 1:16–15:13. Schreiner writes, “It is probable that the thanksgiving formally ends at verse 15, although verse 16 is connected vitally with verse 15 by γάρ (*gar*, for) so that the disjunction between verses 15 and 16 should not be overplayed.”¹⁸ None of these commentators pursue what Paul could have meant if γάρ in Rom 1:16a is allowed to bear its full logical weight. Paul Achtemeier rightly discerns the logical structure of Rom 1:15–17 but does not, in my view, adequately explicate it, since his brief comments basically restate the text.¹⁹

So if we adopt the possibility that the first γάρ in Rom 1:16 retains its usual causal or explanatory function, how then should we understand Paul’s logic? If Paul’s point in verse 16b was that the gospel is God’s power for initial salvation, and thus that Paul is not ashamed of its power to *convert* people, then we would expect that these ideas would ground a desire to preach the gospel to those in Rome who had not yet believed. Yet since Paul’s eager desire was to preach the gospel to those who already had believed, I would contend that verse 16b makes much more sense if we understand that Paul is viewing the gospel as God’s power for final salvation. He is thus not ashamed to preach it in Rome to those who have already heard it because of its power to *sustain* believers, to strengthen and enrich their faith. The way in which Paul builds his layered argument in these verses points to the future dimension of salvation in verse 16b.

The phrases “to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” can be read within either the typical interpretation of “salvation” as past/present or my own interpretation of it as future; these phrases neither support nor undermine what I am proposing. Although modern Christian readers tend to take Gentile faith and Gentile salvation for granted, in the first century faith in the God of Israel was undergoing perhaps the most innovative and shocking development in the history of world religions. The phrase “to the Jew first and also to the Greek,” in particular, alludes to a much larger story, a Scriptural drama in which the God who created all people chose one nation for the sake of revealing himself to all nations. And now this new Jesus movement, which had started as a revival of true faith within Israel, was spreading to Gentiles as well. The gospel is embedded in salvation history and only makes sense within a narrative of God’s plans for the whole world.

The Revelatory Power of the Gospel for the Benefit of Faith (Rom 1:17)

If the gospel is God’s power for final salvation, as this article has proposed, then how is it that this power is unleashed in the lives of believers? Paul adds another layer to his argument in verse 17, again introducing his explanation with the conjunction γάρ: “*For* (γάρ) in it (αὐτῷ) [i.e., the gospel] the righteousness of God (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ) is revealed.” Yongbom Lee has creatively suggested that the personal pronoun αὐτῷ refers

¹⁷ Moo, *Romans*, 67.

¹⁸ Schreiner, *Romans*, 62.

¹⁹ See Paul Achtemeier, *Romans* (Interpretation; Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1985), 35–36.

to “everyone who believes” (παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι) in verse 16,²⁰ but I concur with every other commentator and translation that αὐτῷ more naturally refers to the gospel, which is the implied subject of the verb ἐστιν.

What is the logical relationship between verses 16 and 17? Longenecker claims that Rom 1:17a provides a second reason that Paul is not ashamed of the gospel.²¹ In other words, he views the γάρ of Rom 1:17a as connecting to Rom 1:16a rather than directly to 1:16b.²² This article argues for a different understanding of the logical structure of these verses, that verse 17a directly supports verse 16b, the plausibility of which will be demonstrated below.²³

What exactly is revealed in the gospel? Pauline scholars have been debating the meaning of the phrase “righteousness of God” in the letter to the Romans and the precise function of the genitive θεοῦ for centuries.²⁴ For various reasons that cannot be propounded here, I side with those who view θεοῦ as a possessive genitive, in Rom 1:17 at least.²⁵ Paul refers to righteousness as an attribute of God. Another major option, θεοῦ as a genitive of source—righteousness from God—is possible but, in my mind, it coheres better with the way in which verses 15–17 have usually been interpreted in the Reformed tradition, as a statement of Paul’s doctrine of justification *in nuce*. Here is a paraphrase of how the logic of these verses has been typically understood:

¹⁵ So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome and those who have yet to believe who are in your midst. ¹⁶ For I am not psychologically ashamed of the gospel, nor do I shrink back from proclaiming it despite hostility toward it in the world. I am not ashamed of the gospel for God works through it with converting power—that is, to forgive people of their sins and grant them eternal life when they first repent and believe—and this converting power, of course, can be experienced by Jews and Greeks alike. Anyone can be saved (or justified) through the gospel. ¹⁷ The reason that the gospel has converting power is that in it God clearly offers the gift of the status of righteousness, a gift that must be received by faith and faith alone. This concept is supported in the Scriptures, as articulated in the verse that declares, “Those who receive the status of righteousness through their faith are the ones who will live eternally.”

In my view, most if not all of this paraphrase is theologically true. God does powerfully convert sinners through their initial hearing of the gospel (see, e.g., Eph 1:13 or 1 Thess 1:4–10); Paul does conceive of justification and righteousness as gifts to be received (cf.

²⁰ See Yongbom Lee, “God’s Righteousness Is Revealed in Every Believer from Faith to Faithfulness (Rom 1:17): A Possible Reading,” *The Bible Translator* 72, no. 1 (2021): 99–116.

²¹ Longenecker, *Romans*, 167.

²² So too Kruse, *Romans*, 69.

²³ Cf. Scoggins, “Romans 1:18,” 417–18.

²⁴ Longenecker, *Romans*, 168–76 and Moo, *Romans*, 73–78, provide helpful overviews.

²⁵ For a persuasive and thorough discussion of this matter, see Marcus A. Mininger, *Uncovering the Theme of Revelation in Romans 1:16–3:26: Discovering a New Approach to Paul’s Argument* (WUNT 2/445; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 99–107.

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Rom 3:24; 5:15–17); believers receive this gift (or blessing), not by working for it as a worker earns his wages but, as it were, with open and empty hands (cf. Rom 4:3–6). Nevertheless, we must ask whether the exposition of Rom 3–5 and theological concepts drawn from Paul’s other letters are crammed, in cryptic fashion, into Rom 1:16–17. Is it tenable to overload these two verses with theological freight that is unpacked only later in the letter?

Claiming that Rom 1:16–17 is Paul’s thesis statement has allowed commentators to pull all manner of double-meanings and subtle doctrinal nuances out of these verses, like Mary Poppins pulling a seemingly endless number of objects out of her magical handbag. For example, Kruse writes, “a ‘both and’ approach might be the best way forward”²⁶ and Moo sheepishly asserts,

In what might seem to be a dubious attempt to have our cake and eat it twice, we would argue that this base concept [of the ‘righteousness of God in Rom 1:17 as one of his attributes] includes, or at least implies, both God’s activity and, more remotely, the status of those who experience God’s righteousness.²⁷

Likewise, Frank Thielman provides a telling caveat: “Normally, such a ‘thick’ reading of a brief expression would seem oversubtle, but since 1:16–17 is a tightly packed summary of what is to come in the letter, Paul was probably thinking of all these meanings at this point.”²⁸ These commentators seem to be aware that they are not interpreting Rom 1:16–17 according to their normal hermeneutical practices.

It is my contention that even if Romans 1:16–17 can legitimately be read as thesis verses, these verses should not be isolated from their immediate context nor should Paul’s argument at later stages in his letter be read back into them, as interpreters have done to support both Reformed readings and “apocalyptic” readings. Rather, if we focus on how Paul’s logic flows from verse 15 to verse 17, this might suggest a very different paraphrase:

¹⁵ So I am eager to preach the gospel to you believers in Rome who have already heard and embraced the gospel. ¹⁶ For I will not be ashamed on the last day for having preached this message, for God works through it with sustaining power—that is, to bring to completion the process of salvation so that everyone who has believed in it will finally and fully be saved. Those who believed in the gospel at first were Jews, in accordance with God’s promises to Israel, but their number has now expanded to include Gentiles as well, in accordance with God’s unfolding plan for the whole world. ¹⁷ The reason that the gospel has sustaining power is that in it, God clearly reveals his righteous character—he is trustworthy!—and

²⁶ Kruse, *Romans*, 71.

²⁷ Moo, *Romans*, 77. Cf. Longenecker, *Romans*, 176, 185–86; David Alinuridin, “Konsep Kebenaran Allah Menurut Rasul Paulus di dalam Surat Roma,” *Veritas* 17, no. 1 (2018): 6.

²⁸ Frank Thielman, *Romans* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 82.

this revelation is made for the benefit and expansion of human faith. This concept is supported in the Scriptures, as articulated in the verse that declares, “Those who are righteous will live their days and, in the end, find life through their faith in the character and promises of God.”

Several decisions underlying this paraphrase warrant comment. First, as stated above, I believe that God’s righteous character is what is primarily revealed in the gospel. All the disparate threads of God’s plans for the world, woven throughout human history and often coming to expression in prophecies and promises, are intertwined and knotted together in the gospel. The gospel vindicates God’s character and powerfully demonstrates his trustworthiness. At various times throughout salvation history it may have looked as if the forces of sin and death were winning and that God’s purposes for the world had been thwarted, but the gospel is the spectacular public display of God’s triumph, for those with eyes to see.²⁹

Note that at this point in the letter, Paul does not yet explain *how* the gospel demonstrates God’s righteousness. While laying the groundwork in Rom 1:18–3:20, Paul does not bring his argument to a resolution until Rom 3:21–26, a passage that has many connections to Rom 1:16–17. Yet Paul’s fuller explication of the gospel in Rom 3:21–26 should not unduly influence the interpretation of Rom 1:16–17. In my view, Paul leaves a couple loops open in Rom 1:16–17 that he does not tie off until later.

This manifestation of God’s character in the gospel is for the benefit and global expansion of human faith. The Greek idiomatic expression ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν, which can be translated literally as “from faith to faith,” has been the subject of heated debate. The Indonesian verse *Terjemahan Baru* renders this Greek phrase as “starting from faith and leading to faith” (bertolak dari iman dan memimpin kepada iman), although the meaning of this Indonesian paraphrase is still not immediately clear. The authors of two key journal articles have done independent and exhaustive searches of the construction ἐκ+Α+εἰς+Α in Greek literature and have both concluded that the idiom refers to the increase or expansion of human faith, perhaps indicating the movement from Jewish faith in Jesus to Gentile faith in him by building off of the phrase “to the Jew first and also to the Greek” in the previous verse.³⁰

Charles Quarles advocates for Chrysostom’s interpretation of the phrase as referring to the movement from “the faith of the Old Testament believer to the faith of the New Testament believer.”³¹ Taylor’s critique of Quarles’s reading and his own analysis are more convincing. He interprets ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν as “faith that started with the origin of the church among the Jews and is now, Paul sees, spreading to the nations.”³² In Taylor’s examination of the construction ἐκ+Α+εἰς+Α in Greek literature he could not find a single instance “where ‘A’ in both cases had a different sense from

²⁹ For the neglected but important theme of revelation in Romans 1–3, see Mininger, *Uncovering the Theme of Revelation in Romans 1:16–3:26*.

³⁰ See Quarles, “From Faith to Faith,” and especially Taylor, “From Faith to Faith.”

³¹ Quarles, “From Faith to Faith,” 21.

³² Taylor, “From Faith to Faith,” 347.

among those available for the word.”³³ This makes it highly unlikely that the phrase means “from Christ’s faithfulness to human faith,” as much as that interpretation has theological appeal in abbreviating Paul’s exposition in Rom 3:21–26. Compare Moo’s judicious remarks on this matter:

The Greek word *pistis* can perhaps mean ‘faithfulness’ as well as ‘faith,’ and a reference here to Christ’s faithfulness would fit a pattern that many discern in other Pauline texts (see esp. 3:22 and our comments there). However, while this view is theologically unobjectionable, we think the context here favors a reference to human faith alone. The cognate verb “believe” in v. 16 certainly has this meaning. And the same prepositional phrase *ek pisteōs* occurs in the Hab. 2:4 quotation that immediately follows, where the reference to human believing is, we think, pretty clear.³⁴

The key point in Rom 1:17 is that the righteous character of God is revealed *for* faith. A person will not trust in God unless he considers God to be trustworthy. So the gospel has power to sustain people until they are finally saved because the gospel enables and empowers faith. I thus read the construction ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν as functioning adverbially, modifying ἀποκαλύπτεται. Marcus Mininger, in his published dissertation, has argued very persuasively to this end.³⁵ However, unlike Mininger, I read these four words as an idiomatic expression with the accent falling on the second phrase, εἰς πίστιν, which is a use of the preposition εἰς that replaces a dative of interest/advantage, not a dative of destination per se. There is a strong parallel in Rom 3:22, in which the righteous character of God is revealed (πεφανέρωται) for the benefit of all who believe (εἰς πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας). Paul is not using the phrase ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν as the equivalent of a dative of means/instrument, contra Terry Wardlaw, who argues that “the attribute of God’s righteousness is revealed in each act of human faith”³⁶ or by habitual acts of trust.

My interpretation thus sidesteps Douglas Campbell’s critique in his seminal article, “Romans 1:17—A *Crux Interpretum* for the ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ Debate,”

To make the eschatological disclosure of God’s saving power conditional upon the believer’s faith would be to press the role of anthropocentric faith rather too far In short, it would be to make the coming of the eschaton dependent on individual faith, and this is theologically (and practically [!]) ludicrous.³⁷

Campbell here seems to assume that if both instances of πίστις in Rom 1:17 are read as references to human faith, then the righteousness of God (understood by Campbell as God’s saving power) would have to be revealed *by* human faith, reading the phrase ἐκ

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Moo, *Romans*, 79.

³⁵ See Mininger, *The Theme of Revelation*, 67–71.

³⁶ Wardlaw, “A Reappraisal of ‘From Faith to Faith,’” 115.

³⁷ Campbell, “Romans 1:17,” 273.

πίστεως εἰς πίστιν as if it were functioning as a dative of means/instrument. Yet this is not the only possibility. As I've mentioned above, I think the most natural way to read this phrase within the flow of Paul's argument would be to interpret human faith as the purpose for which God's righteousness is revealed. God's righteous character is revealed for the benefit of anthropocentric faith, not by means of anthropocentric faith.

Paul completes his argument with a citation of Hab 2:4. Not only does this verse introduce a major theme of Romans, that the work of God throughout Old Testament history is consistent with and culminates in his working in the gospel, but the verse also highlights the importance of faith in the lives of God's people. It will be helpful to review briefly the preceding context in Habakkuk.

The prophet Habakkuk likely received his oracle and wrote it down during the reign of King Jehoiakim, around the year 606 BC. Jehoiakim was a wicked king and led Judah into sin. Habakkuk complains to God about the iniquity and violence in the land which causes the Law to be "paralyzed" and justice not to go forth (1:4).

God responds that he is sending the Chaldeans (or Babylonians) against Judah to punish them for their sins (1:6). Though Habakkuk recognizes that this judgment is just (1:12b), he continues his lament because punishing Judah with a Babylon invasion does not solve the deeper problem of the lack of righteousness within Judah. A foreign invasion will not change the heart of the people, so the Law will continue to be paralyzed, and Israel will not become the righteous nation they were called to be. Furthermore, how could a holy God tolerate the wicked Babylonians who worshipped their own might as their god (cf. 1:11) and who were mercilessly devouring nations before them like a ravenous fisherman who gorges himself on the catch of his net (1:17)?

God answers Habakkuk by telling him to wait for his promised vision to be fulfilled: "If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay" (2:3b). The next verse says, "The righteous will live by faith." As Moo explains, "Hab. 2:4 is God's response to the prophet's complaint about God's inaction and injustice. It instructs the person who is already righteous how to face the difficulties of life and, especially, the apparent contradictions between God's promises and what takes place in history."³⁸ In other words, the righteous remnant among the wicked nation of Israel will survive by trusting in their righteous God to act for their deliverance; the righteous will not be swallowed by the invading Babylonians. Mininger thus rightly discerns that within the context of Romans "the Habakkuk quotation clearly communicates the idea of avoiding the future eschatological wrath of God and instead obtaining full, eschatological life."³⁹ This eschatological orientation fits seamlessly with my view that the gospel is God's power for final salvation. In the meantime, however, the righteous simply need to wait on God.

Thus, while I agree that "the righteous one" (ὁ δίκαιος) could function as a Messianic title (e.g., cf. Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14—but never in Paul's letters unless here) and while I incline toward reading πίστις Χριστοῦ as "the faithfulness of Christ" in Rom

³⁸ Moo, *Romans*, 81.

³⁹ Mininger, *The Theme of Revelation*, 112.

3:22, I think it is a bridge too far to state that Paul read Hab 2:4 as a Messianic text, which obviously would have run counter to its original context. As Taylor has pointed out, even if the participle ἐρχόμενος in LXX Hab 2:3 refers to a person rather than the “vision” (as in the MT), then it would refer to the coming of God, not the Messiah.⁴⁰ The other NT references to Hab 2:4 in Gal 3:11 and Heb 10:38–39 also undermine the “Christological” reading.⁴¹ Paul’s use of Hab 2:4 in Rom 1:17 is best understood as a claim that the righteous person will live by faith, by waiting for God to deliver on his promises in accord with his character.

Throughout the history of God’s people, this has been the constant refrain. Abraham was commanded to wait for an heir (cf. Gen 15:4; 17:19, 21; 18:14). The nation of Israel on the edge of the Red Sea was commanded to wait: “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. . . . The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent” (Exod 14:13–14). David did not take matters into his own hands but waited for God to elevate him to the throne (cf. 1 Sam 24). As the prophet Isaiah wrote so powerfully, “From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him!” (64:4; cf. 25:9). While I have highlighted the passive aspect of saving faith in repeated exhortations to wait for God, this does not thereby imply that true faith is not also active and dynamic (cf. e.g., Gal 5:6; 1 Thess 1:3). The difference between “faith” and “faithfulness” (or even “allegiance”) in Paul’s conception of πίστις is not a line that should be drawn too sharply.⁴²

To sum it up, the righteous have always trusted in God to deliver them and waited for him to do so. In quoting Hab 2:4 in Rom 1:17 Paul is tapping into this deep Old Testament theme in order to accentuate the vital role of persevering faith: the gospel is God’s power for final salvation to everyone who *believes* and God’s righteousness has been revealed in the gospel for the sake of our *faith*. Like the righteous of old, Jew and Gentile followers of Jesus expectantly and unwaveringly wait on God until he fulfills all his promises and brings about their ultimate deliverance.

The Practical Implications of My Interpretation

There is a tendency among scholars, preachers, and lay Christians alike to think of the gospel as something that brings a person to the starting line of the race of faith, not as something that pulls or pushes one across the finish line. We see clearly the importance of the gospel for our initial salvation; we do not see so clearly how the gospel might be important for our daily lives after we have become Christians.

If anything, theologians might assert that the gospel functions as a check on believers, preventing them from falling into legalism. Remembering that we were saved by grace alone and not by anything we did should remind us not to attempt to earn God’s favor by our good deeds. The gospel reminds us that we have already been accepted by

⁴⁰ Taylor, “From Faith the Faith,” 339.

⁴¹ Cf. the discussion in Oropeza, “Updating the *ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ* Debate,” 117–21.

⁴² See Bates, “The External-Relational Shift in Faith,” 176–202.

God and are loved by him. So within this paradigm, if the gospel has any continuing relevance for believers, its relevance is primarily in causing us to look backward to our conversion, the decision we made for Christ, and let what God did in the past stop our tendency to re-establish our relationship with God on a different basis, a basis of our own making.

While there is some merit in this typical perspective, it fails to comprehend the full ongoing relevance—let alone, power—of the gospel for those who have already believed. And the *power* of the gospel should not be neglected. While Beverly Roberts Gaventa has helpfully drawn attention to Paul's use of the term "power" (δύναμις) in Rom 1:16, she does little to explain its meaning in this verse.⁴³ The interpretation offered in this article points a way forward.

For Paul, faith is the wellspring or engine of obedience. Note the prominent phrase "obedience of faith" (ὁπακοήν πίστεως) in Rom 1:5. I interpret the genitive πίστεως as a genitive of production,⁴⁴ meaning that obedience is the product, or fruit, of faith. A person will never endure to the end and finally be saved without it. So a critical question for the believer becomes, "How do I sustain and fortify my faith in God?" Paul's answer is that one needs to know at increasingly deeper levels and in adverse circumstances the true character of God, that he is trustworthy. If a believer is fully convinced that God is faithful to fulfill all his promises and has the power to do so, then he will grow strong in his faith, as Abraham did (cf. Rom 4:20–21).

And how might that believer see and comprehend God's true character? Paul's answer is that the gospel is the climax and pinnacle of God's self-revelation; the gospel reveals how God has been faithful—and wise, gracious, loving, and just—in advancing all his purposes and rescuing his people. The gospel is like a many-faceted jewel that is intended to be taken up, turned this way and that, and admired by both the newest and the most mature of believers. The gospel is the ultimate ground, basis, and fuel for our faith in God. Thus the gospel deserves continual study and an ever-deepening appreciation, even by those who have already comprehended it and believed in it to some degree.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued for a novel interpretation of Romans 1:16 in which the gospel is seen as God's power for the believer's final salvation, not his or her initial salvation per se. While supported through various exegetical considerations, the interpretation offered in this article is most persuasively demonstrated through a careful examination of the logical structure of Romans 1:15–17, in which each phrase introduced with the conjunction γάρ explains or supports the immediately preceding phrase. Paul is eager to preach the gospel to those who have already believed in Rome because the gospel is God's power for their final salvation. The power of the gospel lies within its ability to reveal the righteous character of God; thus, the gospel has *revelatory* power. When God

⁴³ See Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "Places of Power in Paul's Letter to the Romans," *Int* 76, no. 4 (2022): 293–302.

⁴⁴ Cf. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 104–6.

is revealed as trustworthy, faith grows, and a lifetime of God-glorifying obedience can only be the fruit of such faith. This compact series of logical maneuvers is indeed at center stage of Paul's letter to the Romans.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank the managing editor of *Predica Verbum*, Dr. Farel Yosua Sualang, M.Th, for inviting this article submission and displaying such patience during successive rounds of revision. The author would also like to thank the two anonymous peer reviewers who offered helpful comments and suggestions. Any remaining errors and deficiencies remain the sole responsibility of the author.

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