

## Romans 1:16-17 Sermon Outline

### What Is the Gospel?

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Text: “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 to faith; as it is written, ‘BUT THE MAN RIGHTEOUS BY FAITH SHALL LIVE.’”<sup>1</sup>

Introduction: These verses set forth the theme of the whole Epistle to the Romans. If we understand them properly, we are well on the way to understanding the whole epistle. If we misunderstand them, we shall be fatally handicapped. Let us, therefore, examine them in detail, piece by piece. I have four main points (and many subpoints!):

- first, that although the gospel is scandalous, Paul is not ashamed of it;
- second, that the reason Paul is not ashamed of it is that it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes;
- third, that it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes because in it is revealed the righteousness that is from God and received entirely by faith; and
- fourth, that if we obscure these truths, if we fail to proclaim them clearly and boldly, the gospel will lose its scandal—but it will also no longer even be the gospel.

#### I. Paul Is Not Ashamed of the Gospel

My first main point is that Paul is not ashamed of the gospel. “I am not ashamed of the gospel,” he wrote. The gospel is scandalous. Why? Because to the Greek it is foolishness, and to the Jew it is a stumbling block. Why is it foolishness to the Greek and a stumbling block to the Jew? Because the Greek wants something philosophically sophisticated, complex, high minded, but the gospel makes anyone who believes it lowly minded (Philippians 2:3), and the Jew wants some challenging work to do, but the gospel makes anyone who believes it count his works no better than filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). The gospel is scandalous because it destroys all human pride, whether of intellect or of conduct. While the Greek says, “Tell me what complex philosophy I must understand to be saved (from ignorance),” and the Jew says, “Tell me what great works of righteousness I must do to be saved (from condemnation before God),” the gospel replies, “You need neither understand some complex philosophy nor do any great works to be saved. Indeed, if you try to save yourself by either of these methods, you will most surely be damned! Instead, humble yourself. Admit that you are helpless. Admit that you can do nothing to save yourself. Admit that all your knowledge and all your good works, apart from the gospel, the good news of salvation in Christ, are worthless. Stop believing in yourself—in your own ability to save yourself by wisdom or by good works. *Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved!*” Believe! Believe! Only believe! *That* is the gospel. Add anything to it, and the

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<sup>1</sup>The translation here is adapted from the *New American Standard Bible* (1995 edition), the final clause being rearranged by this author. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations below are from the *NASB*.

scandal disappears. But when the scandal disappears, it is because the gospel has also disappeared.

## II. Why Paul Is Not Ashamed of the Gospel

My second main point is to answer this question: Why is Paul 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.*” The gospel is the power of God. Consider the key words in this brief statement.

The *gospel* is the power of God. What is the gospel? Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4: “Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” What do we learn about the gospel here?

First, Paul finds it necessary to *remind* the Corinthians of the content of the gospel. It is possible for those who have heard and believed it to neglect it, to become confused about it, or even to forget it. The gospel must be preached again and again, week after week, month after month, year after year, to God’s people, for it is the natural human proclivity to obscure it. We—even ministers and theologians—need constant reminders.

Second, the Corinthians have *received* the gospel. They have *believed* it. They have not just entertained it, contemplated it, had their ears tickled by it. They have *believed* it. To receive *is* to believe, as John 1:12 implies: “But as many as *received* Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even [*i.e.*, that is, *or* in other words] to those who *believe* in His name.”

Third, because they have received the gospel, the Corinthians *stand* in the gospel. They do not fall; they do not retreat; they do not wither and die. No, they *stand* in the gospel. The Corinthians have been *saved by* the gospel. They have not been given the opportunity to save themselves. They have not been given a chance to be saved by a church or anyone else. They have been *saved by* the gospel.

These things were true of them only if they *held fast* the word preached to them. But what did it mean to *hold fast*? It meant to believe—to believe, and to continue believing, the gospel, the word Paul had preached to them. Could one believe and then not hold fast? No! John 2:19 says, “They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.” To say otherwise would mean that their believing had been in vain. But it had not been in vain. To “believe in vain” meant, it is likely, to believe without just reason and authority. But Paul goes on here to give the Corinthians precisely that. The gospel he declares to them is *according to the Scriptures*, as to both the dying and the rising of Christ, and the resurrected Christ was seen by many eyewitnesses, some of whom were still alive when he wrote. No, their faith was not in vain.

Fourth, this gospel was the *most important thing* Paul delivered to the Corinthians. He taught them also about the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. He taught them about obedience to God’s holy and perfect law. He taught them about the gifts of the Spirit. He taught them about love, that greatest of the Christian virtues. But the *most important thing* he delivered to them was the *gospel*.

Fifth, what was the gospel? It could be summed up in three propositions.

(1) *Christ died for our sins* according to the Scriptures. Consider what this involved. Christ

*died for our sins*. He substituted Himself for *us* in suffering the Father's holy and awful wrath against sin. He did not die for all, but for His Bride, the Church. This is a crucial element of the gospel. If I believe simply that Christ died for sinners, I do not believe the gospel unless I believe that Christ died for *this* sinner—for *me*! Galatians 2:20 says, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved *me* and gave Himself for *me*"! He became the *propitiation* for our sins. By satisfying God's just demand for punishment of sin, He enabled God to be propitious toward us, that is, to treat us with pity, without compromising His own justice. As Paul put it in Romans 3:25-26, God displayed Christ "publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness, at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." He accomplished *expiation* of our sins. Isaiah 53:6 says, "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him." In fulfillment of the scapegoat typology of Leviticus 16, Christ bore our sins away from us, becoming sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21). Thus He delivered us from God's wrath and made us the objects of God's pitying pardon. Christ died for the ungodly, for us sinners who were enemies of God, to reconcile us to God and save us by His life (Romans 5:6, 8-10).

Christ died for our sins *according to the Scriptures*. His death for our sins fulfilled the promises of God, stretching all the way back to the Garden of Eden, to send a Savior who would crush the serpent's head. As Paul explained in 2 Corinthians 1:20: "For as many as are the promises of God, in Him they are *yes*"! This phrase, *according to the Scriptures*, is important to our understanding of the gospel. The Scriptures are *God's Word*, and, like the word spoken in creation, are powerful (Genesis 1). Further, the Scriptures particularly about the gospel are God's *promise*. Our whole salvation hangs on the truth that *God keeps His promises*. It is not that *we keep our promises*, but that *God keeps His*. Though it is our *faith* that saves us, it is not our *faithfulness* that saves us. It is *God's faithfulness* that saves us.

(2) *Christ was buried*. His death was confirmed. There was no pretense here. He really died. He really suffered the wrath of the God who said that the wages of sin is death (Romans 3:23).

(3) *Christ was raised on the third day* according to the Scriptures, the Father thus vindicating Christ and setting His stamp of approval on Christ's atoning work. Paul explained in Romans 1:4 that Christ "was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead." His resurrection showed that He had power to save us. Romans 6:5-8 says, ". . . if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him." Thus, Christ's resurrection delivers us from the power of sin and death.

Christ's resurrection, too, was *according to the Scriptures*, that is, a fulfillment of the promise of God. As Paul put it in Acts 13:34-35, "As for the fact that He raised Him up from the dead, no longer to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: 'I will give You the holy and sure blessings of David.' Therefore He also says in another Psalm, 'You will not allow Your Holy

One to undergo decay.” The promises of God, both to Christ and to believers in Christ, are the foundation of our confidence, our whole assurance of salvation.

So what *is* the gospel? It is the message that Paul delivered to the Corinthians as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, and that He was raised from the dead on the third day according to the Scriptures. That is the good news! That is the gospel. And the gospel *is* the power of God. That *message* is the power of God. It is not *about* the power of God. It *is* the living and powerful Word of God, as powerful as the Word God spoke when “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” Consider each of the crucial terms in this description of the gospel.

First, it is the *power* of God. It is not an insufficient, possibly fallible coaxing. God does not proclaim the gospel and then sit back hoping that some might believe it but unable to do anything to ensure that any will. No, by proclaiming the gospel He actually generates faith in those He elects to save. That is, He regenerates us by the Word (1 Peter 1:23)—yet not by mere vibrations upon the eardrum, but by the Word accompanied by the Spirit, as God explained to Ezekiel in the vision of the dry bones: “He said to me, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ And I answered, ‘O Lord GOD, You know.’ Again He said to me, ‘Prophecy over these bones and say to them, “O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.” Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones, “Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life. I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am the LORD.”’” So I prophesied as I was commanded, and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, sinews were on them, and flesh grew and skin covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then He said to me, ‘Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, “Thus says the Lord GOD, ‘Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they come to life.’”’” So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath [that is, the Spirit of God] came into them, and they came to life” (Ezekiel 37:3-10).

No, the gospel is the sufficient, effective, transforming *power* of God acting on the human soul, imparting life to the dead, light to the benighted, understanding to the ignorant, wisdom to the foolish, belief to the unbelieving—all of which are aspects of regeneration, the new birth.

Second, it is the power of *God*. It is not the power of man. It is not the power of the church. It is the power of *God*, and therefore it is irresistible, it never fails, and all the glory and praise for it go to God alone.

Third, the gospel is the power of God *for salvation*. The gospel saves from sin. It saves from guilt. It saves from condemnation. It saves from the wrath of God. It does *not*, in this life, save from poverty, illness, natural calamity, war, crime, ignorance, a bad marriage, sorrow, etc.

Fourth and finally, the gospel is the power of God for salvation *to everyone who believes*. *Only* those who believe are saved by this gospel that is the power of God. To those who do not believe, not only is the gospel not the power of God, it is not even the gospel, not *good news*. It is *bad news*. Jesus said in John 3:18b, “he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:18, “For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God,” and in 2 Corinthians 2:15-16 he added that the preachers of the gospel are “a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those

who are perishing: to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life.” There is coming a “day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus” (Romans 2:16).

But it is not only the case that *only* those who believe will be saved. No! *All* those who believe are saved by this gospel that is the power of God. As Jesus said in John 3:15-16: “*whoever* believes will in Him have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that *whoever* believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” Again, in John 6:47 He said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes *has* eternal life.”

The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, *to the Jew first and also to the Greek*. It is the power of God for salvation *first* to the Jew who believes. As Paul would explain later in His epistle, there was much advantage to being a Jew, for to the Jews were entrusted the oracles of God, and as Jesus had said to the Samaritan woman at the well, “Salvation is of the Jews.” It is the power of God for salvation first to the *Jew* who believes. It is not reserved for Gentiles but is as freely offered to Jews as to any others. It is the power of God for salvation first to the Jew who *believes*—not to the Jew who does not believe. Being a Jew does not exempt anyone from the truth that *the gospel saves only those who believe*. In John 8:24 Jesus said to the Jews, “*unless you believe that I am, you will die in your sins.*”<sup>2</sup> Paul wrote in Romans 2:28-29, “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.”

It is also the power of God for salvation *also* to the Greek who believes. Romans 10:11-13: “For the Scripture says, ‘Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; for ‘Whoever will call on the name of the LORD will be saved.’” It is the power of God for salvation for the *Greek* who believes. Romans 3:28-30: “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.” It is the power of God for salvation also for the Greek who *believes*—not for the Greek who does not believe. Being a Greek does not exempt anyone from the truth that *the gospel saves only those who believe*. What about those who have never heard? As Paul wrote in Romans 2:12, “all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law.”

### III. Why the Gospel Is the Power of God for Salvation

My third main point is to answer the question, Why is the gospel the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes? Paul gives the answer immediately: “*For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘BUT THE MAN RIGHTEOUS BY FAITH SHALL LIVE.’*” But it is not immediately clear what that means and how it explains why the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. Let us therefore consider it

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<sup>2</sup>I have deleted the supplied word *he* following “I am” in the *NASB* because it is not in the Greek and its absence makes clear that this was an implicit claim to Deity on Christ’s part.

piece by piece.

First, what is this “righteousness of God” that in the gospel “is revealed from faith to faith”? Is it God’s essential righteousness? Certainly not, for God’s essential righteousness is not good news to the sinner—it is the terrible threat of a holy and awful judgment to come. This righteousness revealed in the gospel is apparently, because of the similar language Paul applies to it, the same as the righteousness of God of which Paul writes in Romans 3:21-22 as a “righteousness of God *through faith in Jesus Christ*.” But God is not righteous by faith in Jesus Christ; He is righteous in His very essence. It is instead a righteousness *from* God, and it is a righteousness of which God *approves*.

Now, is it an *infused* and *inherent* righteousness, that is, a righteousness that, by the gracious working of God’s Holy Spirit, has become inherent in the believer and displays itself in righteous deeds and therefore is the ground of God’s declaring the believer righteous? No. This is the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification, and it confuses justification with sanctification and can give assurance of justification to no one, since no one in this life attains to the perfection that is God’s standard. Rather, it is an *imputed*, *forensic*, and *alien* righteousness, that is, a righteousness credited to the believer’s account, *declared* by God, and *external*, or *alien*, to the believer. That it is *imputed* Paul makes clear in Romans 5:17-19: “For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the *gift of righteousness* will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.” Again, in Romans 4:2-6, 8-9, he wrote, “[I]f Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was *credited* to him as righteousness.’ Now to the one who works, his *wage is not credited* as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who *justifies the ungodly*, his faith is *credited as righteousness*, just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God *credits* righteousness apart from works: . . . Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD will not take into account. Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, ‘Faith was credited to Abraham for righteousness.’”

It is also a *forensic* righteousness. That is, it is a declarative act, a judge’s verdict, not a constitutive act. It is *justification*, not *sanctification*. Romans 5:18 says, “So then as through one transgression there resulted *condemnation* to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted *justification* of life to all men.” Likewise, Romans 8:33-34 says, “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies . . .” Notice the juxtaposition of *charge* and *justifies*. Justification no more constitutes a man righteous than does charging with a crime constitute a man guilty. Both are *declarative*, *forensic* acts. As C. E. B. Cranfield put it, “[*dikaioun*], as used by Paul, means simply ‘acquit’, ‘confer a righteous status on’, and does not in itself contain any reference to moral transformation. This conclusion is surely forced upon us by the linguistic evidence. It would also seem to be borne out by the structure of Paul’s argument in Romans.”<sup>3</sup>

This righteousness is also *external*, or *alien* to the believer. In Philippians 3:9 Paul writes that

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<sup>3</sup>C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 1:95.

he counts all his own righteousnesses mere rubbish that he “may be found in Him, *not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law*, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.” This means that in the gospel there is revealed to us a righteousness that comes *to us from God* and that we receive *entirely by faith*, that is, *from faith to faith*. This righteousness is entirely from God. It is not from man, whether from the individual believer, by any works he might do, or from the church.

It is not from the believer’s works. Philippians 3:2-11: “Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers [that is, not the workers of evil, but workmen who are evil—might not Paul have meant here those who are evil because they promote the false gospel of works? That seems likely, in that it appears that Paul here uses a literary technique for emphasis in which each phrase denotes the same thing but describes it in a different way, in this case, the three phrases denoting the Pharisaical Judaizers.], beware of the false circumcision; for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh, although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me [including that righteousness which is in the law!], those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, *not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law*, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

It is not from the church’s works, i.e., from the sacraments. Paul explained in Galatians 5:5-6, “For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.” In Galatians 6:14-15 he added, “But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.”

We receive this righteousness *entirely by faith*, that is, *from faith to faith*, Paul using the phrase apparently not to denote progress or movement from one category of faith to another (say, from Old Testament faith to New Testament faith, or from the preacher’s faith to the hearer’s faith, or from initial faith to persevering faith) but to *emphasize* that we receive this righteousness *only by faith*. But what *is* faith?

Faith is belief. It is trust. Sometimes when we say, “I believe,” the object we have in mind—what we believe—is a statement, for example, “Jesus Christ died for my sins.” Then we mean, “I count that statement true, trustworthy”—in this case, I count it true that Jesus Christ died for my sins. Sometimes the object we have in mind is a person, for example, “I believe Jesus Christ.” Then we mean, “I count that person’s statements true, trustworthy,” and more, “I count him true, trustworthy, faithful”—in this case, I count all that Jesus Christ says and does as trustworthy. Sometimes we say, “I believe *in* someone,” for example, “I believe *in* Jesus Christ.”

Then we mean, “I trust Jesus Christ in all He says and does.” Believing in a person simply means believing that he is trustworthy, that all his statements and promises will be true and righteous and good, and all His deeds righteous and effectual, so far as he is able to make them so—and in the case of God, that is absolute. Hence, when we say, “I believe the gospel,” we mean, “I count it true that Jesus Christ died for my sins (with all that that implies) according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, and that He rose again from the dead according to the Scriptures. Hence, I do not trust anything I or anyone else can do to atone for my sins or reconcile me to God.” Or to use the words of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*’s answer to the question, “What is faith in Jesus Christ?”: “Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace whereby we *receive and rest upon him* alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.” In other words, faith in Jesus Christ is believing in Him, believing that He is alone trustworthy for our salvation, that all the statements and promises about Him as he is offered to us in the gospel are absolutely true, righteous, and good.

Faith, however, must not be confused with *faithfulness*. That I have faith means that I believe something, that I trust someone. That I am faithful means that someone should believe or trust me. Second Timothy 2:11-13 says, “It is a trustworthy [*pistos*] statement [that is, a statement worthy of trust, worthy of believing]: For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; if we endure, we will also reign with Him; if we deny Him, He also will deny us; if we are *faithless* [*apistoumen*, unbelieving], He remains *faithful* [*pistos*, that is, He remains trustworthy, worthy of believing], for He cannot deny Himself.” It is not *our* faithfulness that saves us, but *God’s*—indeed, specifically Christ’s.

Nonetheless, this definition of faith does not entail a fruitless faith. It is essential to distinguish essence, or definition, from effect, or fruit. A necessary fruit of faith is good works, but the fruit is not itself part of the definition. Though faith alone, apart from the works of the law, justifies (Romans 3:28), the faith that justifies is never alone but always bears fruit in good works (James 2:14-26). What counts for something—namely, for justification—is not a fruitless faith but “faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6). As the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 14.2, puts it, “By this faith, a Christian *believeth to be true* [that is faith itself] whatsoever is revealed in the Word . . . and *acteth* [that is the fruit of faith—good works] differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come. But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.” In short, we have not “bare assent” or “bare faith” but “bearing faith”—that is, faith that bears fruit in good works.

Mistakenly redefining works from *fruit of faith* to *constituent of faith* (e.g., by saying that faith *equals* obedience) makes it impossible to say, with the Apostle Paul, that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law (Romans 3:28). Legalism (e.g., Roman Catholicism) teaches that faith plus works leads to justification. Antinomianism teaches that faith without works leads to justification. Evangelical Protestantism, the historic Reformed faith, teaches that faith leads to justification plus works.

How are we to understand the quotation of Habakkuk 2:4, commonly translated “the just shall live by faith” (*AV, NKJV*) or “the righteous [man] shall live by faith” (*NASB*), with which

Paul concludes this statement? Does *by faith* modify *shall live*, yielding the sense, “It is by faith that the righteous man will live”? Does *by faith* modify *the righteous man*, yielding the sense, “The man who is righteous by faith is the man who will live”? While I think it more likely that *by faith* modifies *the righteous man*, it is possible that Paul left the ambiguity precisely because *both* senses are true at once: “The man who is righteous by faith, that man will live by faith.”

#### IV. The Scandal of the Gospel

*This* is the scandal of the gospel: that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law (Romans 3:28). As the Westminster *Shorter Catechism*, Q. 33, puts it, “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.” Lose this understanding of the gospel—view the gospel as saying that justification means moral transformation rather than imputation of Christ’s righteousness, or that faith means faithfulness and *includes* rather than *produces* good works, and you lose the scandal of the gospel. It then begins to make sense to the natural man, who cannot receive the things of the Spirit, for they are foolishness to him (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Conclusion: These verses not only set forth the theme of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans but also are the deep and strong taproot of the Reformation. The late James Montgomery Boice, drawing on F. W. Boreham’s *A Bunch of Everlastings or Texts That Made History*, writes that Martin Luther’s son, Dr. Paul Luther, told the story of his father’s visit to the Church of St. John Lateran in Rome, where

there is a set of medieval stairs said to have originally been the stairs leading up to Pilate’s house in Jerusalem, once trod upon by the Lord. For this reason they were called the *Scala Sancta* or “Holy Stairs.” It was the custom for pilgrims, like Luther, to ascend these steps on their knees, praying as they went. At certain intervals there were stains said to have been caused by the bleeding wounds of Christ. The worshiper would bend over and kiss these steps, praying a long time before ascending painfully to the next ones. Remission of years of punishment in purgatory was promised to all who would perform this pious exercise.

Luther began as the others had. But, as he ascended the staircase, the words of our text came forcefully to his mind: “The just shall live by faith.”

They seemed to echo over and over again, growing louder with each repetition: “The just shall live by faith,” “The just shall live by faith.” But Luther was not living by faith. He was living by fear. The old superstitious doctrines and the new biblical theology wrestled within him.

“By fear,” said Luther.

“*By faith!*” said St. Paul.

“Bear fear,” said the scholastic fathers of medieval Catholicism.

“*By faith!*” said the Scriptures.

“By fear,” said those who agonized beside him on the staircase.

“*By faith!*” said God the Father.

At last Luther rose in amazement from the steps up which he had been dragging himself and shuddered at his superstition and folly. Now he realized that God had saved him by the righteousness of Christ, received by faith; he was to exercise that faith, receive that righteousness, and live by trusting God. He had not been doing it. Slowly he turned on Pilate's staircase and returned to the bottom. He went back to Wittenberg, and in time, as Paul Luther said, "He took 'The just shall live by faith' as the foundation of all his doctrine."

This was the real beginning of the Reformation, for the reformation of Luther necessarily preceded the reformation of Christendom.<sup>4</sup>

Brethren, I end on a sad note. I believe this gospel is being subtly obscured today, to greater and lesser extent, by some in the Reformed community who would redefine faith to be not simply believing the gospel but faithfulness, to be not the tree that bears the fruit of works but to include in its very definition the works themselves. Chief among such, in Reformed circles, is former Westminster Seminary (Philadelphia) professor and retired Christian Reformed Church pastor Norman Shepherd, whose book *The Call of Grace* exemplifies this position. But some others seem to me to be, more or less clearly and emphatically, teaching likewise. Among them are, chiefly, Steve Schlissel, pastor of Messiah's Congregation in New York City, and John Barach, pastor of Covenant Reformed Church, Grande Prairie, Alberta, Canada, but also Steve Wilkins, pastor of Auburn Avenue PCA in Monroe, Louisiana, and Douglas Wilson, pastor of Christ Church in Moscow, Idaho. I say this with no glee. I have tried diligently to understand their writings in a different way—an orthodox way—but I have failed. Neither do I presume myself an ecclesiastical court, whose task it properly is to determine whether a minister has departed from the faith. Yet I believe these men have so spoken and written as to create reasonable doubt of their orthodoxy, where there should be absolutely none. I urge you, particularly if you are pastors and teachers, and future pastors and teachers, charged with shepherding the flock of God and defending it from false teachings, to examine their teachings for yourselves and see whether they are indeed compromising the gospel.

The gospel I have proclaimed today is nothing new. It is historic Protestantism. It is the historic Reformed faith. It is the confessional orthodoxy of Heidelberg, Dordt, and Westminster. If we become unclear as to the real meaning of the gospel, we shall have betrayed not only Luther and all the other Reformers and the Apostle Paul but, more importantly, God Himself, who has entrusted the gospel to us. May it never be!

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<sup>4</sup>James Montgomery Boice, *Romans: Volume 1: Justification by Faith. Romans 1-4* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 123-4.