

The Theology of Paul in a Nutshell

A Fresh Look at the Phrase “From
Faith to Faith” (Rom 1:17)

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“Faith” as a Key Term in Early Christian Identity

“FAITH” (ΠΙΣΤΙΣ) TOOK CENTER stage in the religious language of the early Christian movement. In every layer of the New Testament, πίστις appears as a pivotal theological term, and it became the central identity marker of the Jesus movement. An “explosion” in talk about faith happened in early Christianity.¹ No Jewish, Greek, or Latin text uses πίστις or πιστεύειν as intensively as the New Testament. For decades, there was a striking mismatch between the significance of faith and scholarly efforts to elucidate it. In Pauline studies, the topic of the “righteousness of God” absorbed all energy; only the enigmatic phrase πίστις Χριστοῦ received substantial attention.

In the past decade, however, things seem to have changed. There is a renaissance of scholarship on faith. A significant number of monographs and compendia have been published that focus on this key concept of early Christianity. Teresa Morgan’s monumental study *Roman Faith and Christian Faith* stands out among the most recent publications. With Roy A.

1. Cf. Klaus Haacker, “Glaube II. Altes und Neues Testament,” *TRE* (1984) 13:277–304, at 297.

Harrisville's *The Faith of St. Paul* and Nijay Gupta's *Paul and the Language of Faith*, two more slender and very worthwhile volumes were added.²

The most ink is still spilled in the *πίστις Χριστοῦ* debate, which for some is a "matter of life or death."³ In this essay, I wish to draw attention to another enigmatic Pauline "faith"-phrase: the expression "from faith to faith" (*ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν*, Rom 1:17). The phrase intrigued commentators of the early church and continues to puzzle interpreters.⁴ It is found in the *propositio* of Paul's Letter to the Romans.

Arguably, each explanation of these four words that has been put down on papyrus, paper, or PC keyboard discloses as much about its author as it discloses about Paul. For most, if not all, interpreters, this phrase encapsulates the whole or, at least, the central facets of Paul's theology in a nutshell. This means it encapsulates the central facets of *their* respective theology of Paul. I am reminded of a paragraph in one of Ernst Käsemann's essays, in which Käsemann reflects on the contingencies of our purportedly "objective" exegetical work: "Occasionally it becomes necessary to elucidate for ourselves, by means of a concrete example, the course and condition of exegesis in our own generation. This is a fruitful and sometimes exciting under-taking, since it brings forcefully to mind not only the problems of the particular text but also the problems of exegesis in general."⁵ While

2. Teresa Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and the Early Churches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Roy A. Harrisville III, *The Faith of St. Paul: Transformative Gift of Divine Power* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019); Nijay K. Gupta, *Paul and the Language of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020). See my overview in Benjamin Schliesser, "Faith in Early Christianity: An Encyclopedic and Bibliographical Outline," in *Glaube: Das Verständnis des Glaubens im frühen Christentum und in seiner jüdischen und hellenistisch-römischen Umwelt*, ed. J. Frey et al., WUNT 373 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 3–50.

3. J. L. Martyn, "The Apocalyptic Gospel in Galatians," *Int* 54 (2000) 246–66, at 250.

4. Charles L. Quarles, "From Faith to Faith: A Fresh Examination of the Prepositional Series in Romans 1:17," *NovT* 45 (2003) 1–21, at 1. The manifold interpretations from the early church to the present are listed and discussed, e.g., in Quarles, "From Faith to Faith," 2–5; Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 176–80; Robert M. Calhoun, *Paul's Definitions of the Gospel*, WUNT 2/316 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 169–85; 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), 64–67.

5. Ernst Käsemann, "A Critical Analysis of Philippians 2:5–11," in *God and Christ: Existence and Province*, ed. R. W. Funk, trans. A. Carse, JTC 5 (New York: Harper, 1968), 45–88, 45.

Käsemann has in view the “Christ hymn” in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, this is also true for the basic thesis of Paul’s Letter to the Romans, Rom 1:17.

“From Faith to Faith”: Exegetical Options

Four exegetical questions are debated when it comes to Paul’s well-known words in Rom 1:17: δικαιοσύνη γὰρ θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ ἀποκαλύπτεται ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν, καθὼς γέγραπται, Ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται.

1. Should we refer the prepositional expressions “from faith” (ἐκ πίστεως) and “to faith” (εἰς πίστιν) adverbially to the verb “reveal” (ἀποκαλύπτεται) or adjectivally to the phrase “righteousness of God” (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ)?
2. What is expressed by the combination of the prepositions ἐκ and εἰς (e.g., emphasis, growth, progress, movement)?
3. Should we assume two different implied subjects for πίστις, one for ἐκ πίστεως, the other for εἰς πίστιν, or did Paul have in mind one and the same subject of faith?
4. Should we adopt two distinguishable meanings of πίστις or one and the same meaning? This relates to the bigger question of what “faith” is for Paul.

These questions might appear quite abstract at first glance, but they have consequences for any interpretation of the contested expression, its immediate and wider context, and Paul’s theology as a whole. Any satisfying reading of Rom 1:17 should be able to answer (at least) these questions consistently. After all, we are dealing with the programmatic thematic verses of Paul’s most theological and systematic letter.⁶ I will pick up these four questions when developing my own proposal.

Not surprisingly, the choir of interpreters is polyphonic.⁷ In his recent book on the beginning of Romans, Marcus Mininger lists no fewer than sixteen different interpretations, and one could easily add more. Such

6. Cf. Ben Witherington III, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 47: “It would be hard to overestimate the importance of a *propositio* in a rhetorical discourse.”

7. I will not discuss unlikely conjectures, such as the one by J. Hugh Michael, “A Phenomenon in the Text of Romans,” *JTS* 39 (1938) 150–54, at 151 (“vertical dittography”: “Has ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν ever been satisfactorily explained? If we remove ἐκ πίστεως the obscurity disappears”).

inventories are valuable in a discipline that increasingly suffers from “exegetical amnesia.” Oftentimes, what is presented as novel interpretation has unacknowledged spiritual fathers and mothers. I wish to highlight six interpretations found in the history of interpretation: (1) Salvation-Historical, (2) Rhetorical, (3) Psychological, (4) Missional, (5) Theological, and (6) Christological. I call my own approach, presented at the end, Apocalyptic.

Salvation-Historical: Progression from One Faith to Another Faith

One of the first authors that we can discern from the patristic past to address this phrase is Tertullian. In his pamphlet against Marcion, Tertullian argued that “judgment, wrath, law, nature, truth, Gospel, and Christ must all pertain to the same God”—and he implies they did not for Marcion.⁸ The revelation of God’s righteousness is a key element of the gospel, and it is God who transfers “from faith of/in the law to the faith of/in the gospel” (*ex fide legis in fidem evangelii*).⁹ It is not surprising that Tertullian’s interpretation fits well into a theological struggle over the salvation-historical continuity or discontinuity of the Christian faith with Judaism. Origen, too, was in constant debate with Marcion’s disruptive theology and also highlighted the theme of continuity between law and gospel. He explains Rom 1:17 as follows: “Even the first people were in faith because they believed God and Moses his servant, from which faith they have now gone over to the faith of/in the gospel [*fidem evangelii*].”¹⁰

In his homilies on Romans, Chrysostom takes a different but related stance. Chrysostom characterizes ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν as a “brief expression” (βραχὺ ῥῆμα) that encapsulates “a vast sea of stories/histories.” Referring to Heb 11, which Chrysostom deems a letter from Paul, he claims that the expression “from faith to faith” calls to mind the spectrum from the faith of Rahab to the faith of Abraham. Both prostitute and patriarch are paradigms for Paul’s basic conviction that “for the one who shall live, it is not possible to live in any other way but through faith.” Faith, Chrysostom adds, is the badge of those who believed in Old Testament times—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rahab—as well as the badge of New Testament believers.¹¹

8. Judith M. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 255.

9. Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 5.13.2.

10. Origen, *Commentarii in Epistulam ad Romanos* 1.15.

11. Chrysostom, *Homiliae in epistulam ad Romanos* 2.6. Chrysostom’s explanation

We could add other voices from the patristic past. The fathers' interpretations are multifaceted, creative, partly contradictory—and easy to criticize from our purportedly advanced exegetical standpoint. Above all, in contrast to Hebrews, Paul does not construe a continuous salvation-historical trajectory from the old to the new covenant but emphasizes the disruption in the Christ-event (cf. Rom 3:21).¹² Still, what can be learned from Tertullian and Chrysostom? They all imply a movement from the one πίστις to another, and they unreservedly advocate two different shapes or shades of πίστις within a single expression. Both these features should be kept in mind in the further discussion.

Rhetorical: Faith and Nothing but Faith

Michael Wolter, author of a recent two-volume commentary on Romans, lists several interpretations of Rom 1:17 and concludes with striking confidence: “It is not hard to come to a decision. . . . We should assume that Paul had an interest of being understood by his readers and that he was capable of stating clearly how he wished to be understood.”¹³ Therefore, all explanations suggesting two different subjects of πίστις can easily be discarded. In short, ἐκ and εἰς signify origin and goal. By identifying origin and goal as the same with his expression, Paul sought to express totality. “Whoever occupies starting point and end point, has it all. . . . Faith and nothing but faith, everywhere, from beginning to end.”¹⁴ The distinctly cognitive emphasis of Wolter's understanding of faith leaves no room for reflection on the experience of believing existence, let alone psychological or empirical aspects.¹⁵ Many other commentators from various theological backgrounds

has been revived by Quarles, “From Faith to Faith,” 18–21 (“from the faith of the old dispensation to the faith of the new” [21]), though Calhoun comments “that Quarles has not accurately represented what John says” (Robert M. Calhoun, “John Chrysostom on ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν in Rom. 1:17: A Reply to Charles L. Quarles,” *NovT* 48 [2006] 131–46, at 131).

12. Cf. Mininger, *Uncovering the Theme of Revelation*, 74. For Paul, Abraham is not merely a model of pre-Christian faith but the “pre-existent” type of Christ-faith (cf. Benjamin Schliesser, *Abraham's Faith in Romans 4: Paul's Concept of Faith in Light of the History of Reception of Genesis 15:6*, WUNT 2/224 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007], 405).

13. Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 2 vols., EKK 6/1 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2014), 1:126 (here and elsewhere my translation).

14. Wolter, *Römer*, 126.

15. Michael Wolter, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. R. L. Brawley (Waco:

use the universalizing paraphrases “faith from beginning to end,”¹⁶ “faith and ‘nothing but faith,’”¹⁷ or “faith from start to finish”¹⁸ to explain the expression ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν. From there it is only a short jump to the equivalence of “from faith to faith” with *sola fide*, which is obviously quite popular among Protestant exegetes but not exclusively so.¹⁹

The soteriological emphasis of this reading arguably fits the rationale of the letter. It seems questionable, however, on philological grounds. Charles Quarles’s study of parallels to the ἐκ-εἰς prepositional series in extra-biblical Greek, in the Septuagint (e.g., LXX Ps 83:3), and in Paul (2 Cor 2:16; 3:18) has concluded persuasively that it never functions as an idiom of emphasis.²⁰ Moreover, the idea that a revelatory event such as “God’s righteousness” would be based on human faith and its contingencies, even if it is unaltered faith (*sola fide*), is quite unlikely to be Paul’s.

Psychological: From Initial Faith to Mature Faith

Compared to German-speaking scholarship, English-speaking exegesis seems less reluctant to factor in the contingencies and dynamics of Christian existence, i.e., the everyday life and struggle of believers. The first monograph on “faith” in English, written by William H. P. Hatch in 1917, embraces a holistic view on faith: “Faith is from the beginning much more

Baylor University Press, 2015), 85: Christian faith “views certain matters as genuinely factual because these matters—and this foundation makes its *assumption* of reality first and foremost a *certitude of faith*—coincide with reality according to God.”

16. Today’s English Version; Good News Translation; and, with variation, the Complete Jewish Bible and New International Reader’s Version.

17. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 76.

18. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 263; Craig S. Keener, *Romans*, NCCS (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 29.

19. Cf., among many more, Hans Lietzmann, *An die Römer*, 3rd ed., HNT (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1928), 31; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 1:100; Eduard Lohse, *Der Brief an die Römer*, KEK 15 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 78. See also the paraphrase in Gupta, *Paul and the Language of Faith*, 168: “In this gospel God’s righteousness has been brought to full light that expects complete and exclusive truth, just as it has been written in Scripture, ‘The righteous will live by trust.’”

20. Quarles, “From Faith to Faith,” 13; cf. 21: “If the prepositional series functions as an idiom of emphasis, the idiom is apparently one that Paul himself invented.”

than belief or conviction, for it involves the feelings and the will as well as the intellect.”²¹ On Rom 1:17 he comments: “Although faith is of divine origin and a gift of God, nevertheless it is not at first perfect or complete. There is room for it to grow in strength and power, and apparently this growth may be indefinite.” He continues, “Such a growth seems to be indicated by the difficult phrase ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν in Rom. 1,17. . . . ἐκ πίστεως refers to the acceptance of the gospel under the influence of the Spirit and εἰς πίστιν to the mature faith of the Christian.”²² This type of interpretation recurs quite frequently in present-day English-speaking commentaries, although remarkably it has almost disappeared from German-speaking scholarship, with the exception of a few Catholic exegetes.²³

It is all the more remarkable since Martin Luther was one of the most prominent advocates of this view. After dumping patristic and scholastic interpretations, he writes, “The words ‘from faith to faith’ therefore signify that the believer grows in faith more and more, so that he who is justified becomes more and more righteous (*in his life*). This he adds in order that no one might think that he has already apprehended (Phil. 3:13) and so ceases to make progress (*in sanctification*); for that indeed means that he begins to fall behind.”²⁴ Luther regards the expression ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν as a reflection of the fact that faith is never perfect. John Calvin agrees when he writes that the expression “marks the daily progress of every believer.” “The more our knowledge of true religion increases, we see the grace of God with greater clarity and more familiarity, as though He were coming nearer to us.”²⁵

The “psychological” reading that takes into consideration the progression from the initial acceptance of the gospel to a mature faith is attractive,

21. W. H. P. Hatch, *The Pauline Idea of Faith in Its Relation to Jewish and Hellenistic Religion*, HTS 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917), 35.

22. Hatch, *Pauline Idea of Faith*, 48n4 (cf. Phil 1:27; 2 Thess 2:13).

23. Cf., along these lines, William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 5th ed., ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), 28 (“starting from a smaller quantity of faith to produce a larger quantity”); Robert Mounce, *Romans*, NAC 27 (Nashville: Broadman, 1995), 72; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 263 (“from a beginning faith to a more perfect or culminating faith”); Otto Kuss, *Der Römerbrief*, 2nd ed. (Regensburg: Pustet, 1963), 24 (“von dem Glauben des Anfangs, der entscheidenden Bekehrung hin zum Glauben der immer neu geforderten Bewährung”).

24. Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. J. T. Mueller (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1976), 41.

25. John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. R. Mackenzie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 28.

as it resonates with Christian experience. Yet does it also resonate with Paul's theology? For Paul, the life of the believer is certainly "a continual movement":²⁶ there is lack of faith (1 Thess 3:10), progress (Phil 1:25), and growth (2 Cor 10:15). But if this is what he had in mind, the use of the word "reveal" (*ἀποκαλύπτεσθαι*) is quite awkward if not impossible.²⁷ After all, Paul is remarkably uninterested in rummaging in the psychology of individual faith. He is concerned with the question of *if* someone is "from faith," not *how* someone is living out faith.

Missional: Progression of Faith

An increasing number of commentators focus not so much on individual growth but rather on the effect of the proclamation of the gospel. According to John Taylor, "'From faith to faith' is Paul's excited report of the success of the gospel and the growing number of believers, and in particular of the advance or growth of faith among the Gentiles."²⁸ Those readers of Paul who follow this type of interpretation specify the missional progression of faith in different terms: from righteousness based solely on faith to the universal proclamation of faith-righteousness,²⁹ from small beginnings to all nations,³⁰ from the church among the Jews to all nations,³¹ or from one cultural expression of the gospel to other cultures' expressions of it.³²

26. Even Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. K. Grobel (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 325.

27. Cf. Frédéric Godet, *Commentaire sur l'épître aux Romains*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Sandoz, 1883), 1:213: "Mais l'expression ainsi comprise ne convient nullement au verbe *est révélée*, et, ce qui est plus grave, cette idée manque absolument d'à-propos dans le contexte."

28. John W. Taylor, "From Faith to Faith: Romans 1.17 in the Light of Greek Idiom," *NTS* 50 (2004) 337–48, at 346.

29. Ulrich Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer*, EKK 6/1 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1978), 1:88: "Die Gerechtigkeit Gottes ist *begründet* durch Glauben (nicht durch Werke); darum *zielt* sie auf den Glauben, d.h. daß alle zum Glauben kommen. Mit εἰς πίστιν wird also die Wirkung der Verkündigung der ἐκ πίστεως empfangenen Gottesgerechtigkeit in ihrer universalen Zielrichtung markiert."

30. Hans Binder, *Der Glaube bei Paulus* (Berlin: Evangelische, 1968), 50.

31. Taylor, "From Faith to Faith," 347.

32. Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 144: "In view of Paul's use of 'faith' in 1:5, 8, 12, and 16 as appropriation of the gospel that allows cultural variations to stand side by side with equal validity, it is most likely that the progression in this verse refers to missionary expansion of the gospel, which relies on the contagion of faith. . . . Paul wishes to affirm that the revelation of

They all agree that Paul points to the geographical and numerical increase of converts to which he himself contributes in his missional activity: "He is talking in macro terms of the plan of God that is now being realized through him."³³

The proposal has much to commend it. But like the previous proposal, it suffers from neglecting the revelatory dimension indicated by the verb "reveal" (*ἀποκαλύπτεται*) in the first part of the verse. The *ἐκ*-phrase describes the source and grounds of the revelation of righteousness and the *εἰς*-phrase, its goal. Paul does not simply have in mind the successful proliferation of faith but the dynamics of a revelatory event from the divine to the human sphere.

Theological: From God's Faithfulness to Human Faith(fulness)

Karl Barth's revolutionary commentary on Romans was published one hundred years ago. Barth read Paul's Letter to the Romans and his ideas and words—such as *πίστις*—with a "joyful sense of discovery."³⁴ His discoveries were the results of longer explorations. For example, after pursuing a long and convoluted path (which we can actually trace by reading his handwritten notes and his letters to his friend, Eduard Thurneysen), he arrived at a fresh interpretation of *ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν*. According to Barth, something new has arrived in the gospel, and this materializes in our "free union with God, in which the faithfulness of God finds faith in the human being or in which God believes again in the human being and encounters faithfulness" (*ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν*).³⁵

The devastating reaction of the New Testament guild to this new proposal took him by surprise.³⁶ In the second edition of his commentary, he offered a lengthy response to his critics: "As a matter of fact, Rudolf

divine righteousness in the gospel proceeds only on the basis of faith. Acceptance of the gospel of Christ crucified does not require conformity to a particular cultural tradition or to a specific theology. Although the faith of many Roman believers differs from Paul's, it serves equally well in advancing the gospel."

33. Taylor, "From Faith to Faith," 346.

34. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E. C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 13.

35. Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (erste Fassung) 1919*, ed. H. Schmidt, Gesamtausgabe 2, Akademische Werke 16 (Zurich: Theologischer, 1985) 23.

36. See Benjamin Schliesser, "'Exegetical Amnesia' and Πίστις Χριστοῦ. The 'Faith of Christ' in 19th Century Pauline Scholarship," *JTS* 66 (2015) 61–89, at 83–88.

Liechtenhan,” who was married to Karl Barth’s cousin, Johanna, “was the spiritual father of this innovation.” Barth continues:

He had first drawn my attention in a private letter to the possibility of translating it thus. . . . The protest has been so general that I have cut down the number of passages in which the rendering occurs. . . . My purpose in retaining the translation at certain points is to direct attention to a particular nuance [*Schillern*] of the word which would be missed were it rendered monotonously by faith, just as it would were I sufficiently pedantic to translate it always by *faithfulness*.

Incidentally, we have a letter by Rudolf Liechtenhan to Barth, dating from May 5, 1917, in which he writes: “here [sc. in Rom. 1:17], I want to understand *πίστις* as divine attribute, though I am not able to adduce a *dictum probans* of a reputable exegete. . . . Human *πίστις* is characterized by the fact that human beings rely on the divine *πίστις*.”³⁷ In his exegesis of Rom 1:17, Barth retained this novelty, much to the dismay of his critics.³⁸

Now, is it correct that no “reputable exegete” has argued along these lines? By no means! The distinguished cloud of witnesses who understand *ἐκ πίστεως* in terms of “the faithfulness of God” includes authorities such as Ambrosiaster. He wrote, “What else does *from faith to faith* mean, but that the faith of God consists in what he has promised, and the faith of the person consists in believing the one who promises? Thus, the righteousness of God is revealed from the faith of God who promises in the faith of the person who believes [*ex fide dei promittentis in fidem hominis qui credit ei*].”³⁹ Ambrosiaster’s explanation was included in the *Glossa ordinaria*, which in turn was the source for a host of ensuing exegetical works.⁴⁰

37. Karl Barth Archiv 9317.87; quoted in Barth, *Römerbrief (erste Fassung)*, 18–19n12. See also Rudolf Liechtenhan, “Zur Frage nach der Treue Gottes,” *KBR* 34 (1919) 192–93. Karl Barth could actually have encountered this exegetical option in Johann Albrecht Bengel’s *Gnomon*, which he used intensively. Cf. John Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament by John Albert Bengel*, ed. and trans. A. R. Fausset (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1858), 3:17: “from the faith of God who makes the offer to the faith of men who receive it” (“*ex fide Dei offerentis in fidem hominum accipientium*”).

38. Cf. Barth, *Romans*, 41.

39. Theodore S. De Bruyn et al., *Ambrosiaster’s Commentary on the Pauline Epistles: Romans*, Writings from the Greco-Roman World (Atlanta: SBL, 2017), 23.

40. Cf. the collection of sources in Heinrich Denifle, *Die abendländischen Schriftausleger bis Luther über Justitia Dei (Röm 1,17) und Justificatio: Quellenbelege*, vol. 1 (Mainz: Kirchheim, 1905).

The initial resistance of scholarship to Barth's purported innovation gave way to increasing appreciation. Barth's reading is endorsed by James Dunn but also by Richard Hays and N. T. Wright. Dunn writes that the "phrase can and probably should be taken as a play on the ambiguity of the word faith/faithfulness, in the sense 'from *God's* faithfulness (to the covenant promises) to man's response of faith."⁴¹ The fact that Hays and Wright agree with Dunn in this regard is an astonishing footnote in the πίστις Χριστοῦ debate, to which we will turn shortly.

It is understandable that among these scholars Barth's reading met with resounding approval as it places emphasis on the activity of God and, vice versa, on human dependence on God's initiative. Nonetheless, the thesis has a weak spot: Why should Paul have failed to give any indication in the context that he has divine faithfulness in mind? "While the Greek *ek pisteōs* can certainly mean 'by faithfulness,' a reference here to divine faithfulness would require other indications in the context; and it is just these that Paul fails to provide in his interpretative gloss."⁴² Even in his Habakkuk quote, Paul deliberately omitted any indication of the author or subject of faithfulness, in contrast to both the Greek and the Hebrew versions of Hab 2:4.

Christological: From Christ's Faithfulness to Human Faith

The Habakkuk quote brings us to a more recent variation of the theological reading. The christological variation had tentatively entered the stage of scholarship at the end of the nineteenth century and has now overtaken almost all other competing readings, at least in English-speaking scholarship. In 1891, Johannes Hausleiter published his small book by the title *The Faith of Jesus Christ*. He argued that Paul reads his basic proof text, Hab 2:4, as a messianic prophecy that has been brought to fulfillment through the

41. J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, WBC 38A (Dallas: Word, 1988), 48. Cf. Richard B. Hays, "Πίστις and Pauline Christology: What Is at Stake?" (1997), in *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11*, 2nd ed., Biblical Resource Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 272-97, at 279: ἐκ πίστεως in Rom 1:17a "refers to God's faithfulness eschatologically revealed in the gospel, so that the phrase ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν means 'from [God's] faithfulness for [our] faith.'" N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 2:1470: "God's righteousness is revealed, on the basis of the faithfulness of God, for the benefit of those who have faith."

42. Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*, 2nd ed. (London: T. & T. Clark, 2015), 52.

life and death of Jesus. Aware of his major breach with his Lutheran tradition, he writes: “It is with reluctance that I part with Luther’s explanation of the prophecy, for it has poured out streams of blessing.” Haußleiter now reads: “The righteous one [i.e., Jesus]—by faith he will live.”⁴³

In recent years, Douglas Campbell became one of the christological reading’s most prolific supporters. In a debate with Richard Hays, he declared that Rom 1:17 is “‘the Thermopylae’ of the πίστις Χριστοῦ debate in Romans.” He said that one has to defend the christological reading of the prophecy “with blood and tears.”⁴⁴ He criticizes Richard Hays for relating ἐκ πίστεως in Rom 1:17a to God’s faithfulness and ἐκ πίστεως in Rom 1:17b to the Messiah.⁴⁵ This split interpretation cannot be upheld, according to Campbell. His latest comments succinctly sum up his view:

“Fidelity” in Habakkuk 2:4 speaks of the way Jesus obeyed his Father and endured the cross like a martyr. . . . Paul doesn’t just talk about Jesus’s faith in his letters. He talks a lot about Christian faith too. . . . So how do these faiths connect together? It’s pretty straightforward. In the same way that we get our love from Jesus’s love and our obedience from Jesus’s obedience we get our faith from Jesus’s faith.⁴⁶

How convincing is this reading? There is no doubt that for Paul “faith” is always christological. Πίστις is always πίστις Χριστοῦ. But I would disagree with the proposal that Paul had the “faithfulness of Christ” in mind, whether in Rom 1:17 or anywhere else in his letters. For Paul, entering the realm of faith always includes the idea of prior ungodliness,⁴⁷ and he highlighted Abraham as the type of such faith. Faith came with Christ, but it is not

43. Johannes Haußleiter, *Der Glaube Jesu Christi und der christliche Glaube: Ein Beitrag zur Erklärung des Römerbriefes* (Erlangen: Deichert, 1891), 40.

44. Douglas A. Campbell, “Romans 1:17—A *Crux Interpretum* for the πίστις Χριστοῦ-Debate,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 113 (1994) 265–85, at 269n16.

45. Cf., in addition, Richard B. Hays, “‘The Righteous One’: An Eschatological Deliverer: A Case Study in Paul’s Apocalyptic Hermeneutics,” in *Apocalyptic and the New Testament*, ed. J. Marcus and M. L. Soards, JSNTSup 24 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1988), 191–215. Notably, N. T. Wright disagrees with Hays on this matter, as this interpretation “is probably a bridge too far. Certainly nobody could guess that from the context of Romans 1.1–17” (Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2:1470).

46. Douglas A. Campbell, *Paul: An Apostle’s Journey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 296.

47. Cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, “On the Πίστις Χριστοῦ Question,” in *On Romans and Other New Testament Essays* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), 81–97, at 96: “Faith is the attitude of one who knows and confesses that he is a sinner.”

Christ's faith that came. Paul *does* describe Christ as being obedient in Rom 5, yet he nowhere indicates that "we get our faith from Jesus's faith." Christ's obedience to death does not lead to a corresponding obedience of the many but to the grace of the many (Rom 5:15). Additionally, the messianic reading of the Habakkuk quote depends on taking "the Righteous One" as a christological title. Nowhere in Paul is this title attested, and this indeed is "an embarrassment for this hypothesis," as Francis Watson points out.⁴⁸

A Fresh, Apocalyptic Reading: From the Event of Faith to Individual Faith

The foregoing summary and critique of the six types of interpretation has laid the groundwork for my own thesis: with the expression ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν, Paul has in mind the dynamic transition from the event of faith to the individual appropriation of faith, from a divine act to human acceptance, from source to destination.⁴⁹ In order to corroborate this thesis, I will return to the four crucial questions presented at the beginning of the discussion.

1. What is the syntactical logic? From the perspective of syntax there can be "no question"⁵⁰ that the expression ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν qualifies the verb ἀποκαλύπτεται (cf. Rom 3:22; Gal 3:23). Righteousness is revealed, and "apocalyptically revealed,"⁵¹ "from faith to faith." In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul had associated something else with the verb

48. Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*, 52n59. An additional "embarrassment . . . is the failure of Hebrews 10.37–38 to extend a christologically oriented reading of Habakkuk 2.3–4 into the crucial v.4b." In support for his messianic reading of ὁ δίκαιος in Rom 1:17, Campbell ("Romans 1:17," 282) cites Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14; Jas 5:6; and the anarthrous occurrences in 1 Pet 3:18; 1 John 2:1 (cf. 1 John 2:29; 3:7; 2 Tim 4:8). An interpreter sympathetic to the "messianic" reading, Desta Heliso, grants that "no pre-Pauline Jewish writing cites Hab 2:4 in such a way that the citation can be understood messianically" (*Pistis and the Righteous One: A Study of Romans 1:17 against the Background of Scripture and Second Temple Jewish Literature*, WUNT 2/235 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007], 164).

49. For more detail, see Benjamin Schliesser, "Christ-Faith' as an Eschatological Event (Galatians 3.23–26): A 'Third View' on Πίστις Χριστοῦ," *JSNT* 39 (2016) 277–300; Schliesser, "Glaube als Ereignis: Zu einer vernachlässigten Dimension des paulinischen Glaubensverständnisses," *ZTK* 117 (2020) 21–45.

50. Jewett, *Romans*, 144.

51. This is the programmatic translation in Beverly R. Gaventa, *When in Romans: An Invitation to Linger with the Gospel according to Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 20.

ἀποκαλύπτεσθαι: πίστις. If we accept that ἀποκαλύπτεσθαι in Rom 1:17 is an expression of the cosmic dimensions of Paul's thinking—and I think we should!—we cannot relegate the use of the same verb in Gal 3:23 to the realm of rhetoric. J. Louis Martyn writes fittingly: “Paul's use of the passive verb ‘was revealed’ shows his intention to speak here of God's eschatological act, and thus his concern to refer to the faith that is God's deed in Christ.”⁵² The advent of faith at the end of time—indeed, *as* the end of time—is intimately linked to the advent of Christ. What does this mean for Rom 1:17? Paul says that God's righteousness is revealed on grounds of a divine activity, the eschatological event of πίστις (ἐκ πίστεως), which takes hold of the believers and draws them into its “space of life-giving power” (εἰς πίστιν).⁵³

2. What is expressed by the combination of the prepositions ἐκ and εἰς? The ἐκ-εἰς prepositional series cannot be read as an “idiom of emphasis.”⁵⁴ It should be read as an “idiom . . . of progress, increase or advance”⁵⁵ instead, in which the first phrase describes the source and the latter phrase describes the destination.⁵⁶ Adolf Schlatter explained this insightfully as “the deeper we grasp the causal weight of ἐκ and the teleological weight of εἰς, the more meaningful this sentence is and the more it is able to express the contents and goal of Paul's gospel.”⁵⁷ Accordingly, I take the phrase to encapsulate the revelatory dynamics from divine event (cause) to human appropriation (goal).
3. Who is the implied subject or possessor of πίστις? Here, the Habakkuk quote comes into play. Scholarship on Paul's use of the prophetic text is fraught with disagreement. It is clear, however, that in contrast to both the Septuagint and the Masoretic text, Paul's wording does *not* define the subject of faith/faithfulness. He deliberately altered his

52. J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians*, AB 33A (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 362.

53. Martyn, *Galatians*, 259.

54. Quarles, “From Faith to Faith,” 13.

55. Taylor, “From Faith to Faith,” 345.

56. Cf. Mininger, *Uncovering the Theme of Revelation*, 84–85. Against those who find it implausible that the referent of “faith” should change, Mininger holds: “If the ἐκ- and εἰς-phrases in Rom 1:17a describe the source and destination of *revelation*, as Paul's syntax shows they do, then these phrases would *have* to have different referents, since source and destination cannot be identical when something is revealed.”

57. Adolf Schlatter, *Gottes Gerechtigkeit. Ein Kommentar zum Römerbrief* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1935), 42.

proof text to give the phrase “a generic quality.”⁵⁸ His does not focus on God's faithfulness like in the Septuagint, nor on human faithfulness like in the Masoretic text, nor on the Messiah's faithfulness like in some (post-Pauline) Jewish texts. Again, for Paul, πίστις is always and above all christologically defined (πίστις Χριστοῦ). It is not defined in terms of an attribute or attitude of Christ but rather in terms of an event that coalesces with the Christ-event.

4. What does πίστις mean? The “elasticity and multivalency”⁵⁹ of πίστις is overwhelming. Only in recent years have scholars come to appreciate its wide semantic range again: faith, trust, confidence, honesty, trustworthiness, loyalty, fidelity, faithfulness, assurance, pledge, guarantee, argument, and proof. Paul wanted to communicate properly, and he wanted to be understood. On the other hand, new movements modify language and create new meanings: Undeniably, “conversion entail[s] a linguistic conversion: new wine require[s] new wine skins.”⁶⁰

Associating πίστις with an “eschatological event” seems counterintuitive on first glance, and it has in fact been criticized by Teresa Morgan and others. They argue that it does not fall “within the range of meanings which are in play in the world around them.”⁶¹ But is that so? Hearing the word πίστις, Paul's addressees might have thought of the monumental cult statue of deified Fides on the capitol, which belonged to one of the most significant temple structures of late republican Rome.⁶² It was positioned prominently right next to the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus⁶³ at the southwest part of the hill.⁶⁴ The temple of Fides was large enough for the senate to hold meetings. Paul's addressees might have been reminded of

58. Gupta, *Paul and the Language of Faith*, 163.

59. Morgan, *Roman Faith*, 13.

60. Mark Seifrid, “Quaestiones disputatae: Roman Faith and Christian Faith,” *NTS* 64 (2018), 247–55, at 251, in discussion with Morgan's hermeneutical program of “cultural historiography.”

61. Morgan (*Roman Faith*, 4) quoted against my proposal (Schliesser, “Christ-Faith”) in Peter Oakes, “Pistis as Relational Way of Life in Galatians,” *JSNT* 40 (2018) 255–75, at 262–63.

62. Cf. Christoph Reusser, *Der Fidestempel auf dem Kapitol in Rom und seine Ausstattung: Ein Beitrag zu den Ausgrabungen an der Via del Mare und um das Kapitol 1926–1943* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1993), 78.

63. Cf. Pliny, *Nat.* 35.100; Cato *apud* Cicero, *Off.* 3.104 (“vicina Iovis Optimi Maximi”).

64. Reusser, *Fidestempel*, 61–62.

the words of rhetorician Valerius Maximus calling the “venerable goddess Fides” “the most secure pledge of human wellbeing [*salus*].”⁶⁵ The personification, deification, and veneration of Fides are an expression of the fact that loyalty and faithfulness were integral for the Roman society and identity. Paul knew that *fides* was a “key term in Roman living and thinking,” an important concept in the way Romans went about their daily lives and understood themselves. “Almost all sorts of social ties, relationships of dependence and loyalty (among Romans themselves as well as between Romans and other peoples, but also the gods), were characterized by *fides*.”⁶⁶ Fides, the goddess, epitomizes the outstanding role of *fides* as a decisive identity marker of the Roman culture and reign, as a power that governs individual, social, and religious life.

Paul’s portrayal of *πίστις* as a powerful event that causes the revelation of God’s righteousness is reminiscent of the overarching notion of transpersonal *fides* in the Roman culture, but at the same time recontextualizes it in terms of his apocalyptic eschatology. His language of faith ties in with the cultural fabric of images, impressions, and imaginations of his time, while also featuring innovative ideas for the sake of his argumentative and theological goals. His language of faith, in particular, shows creative innovation.

Conclusion

In his provocative little book *Saint Paul*, the French philosopher Alain Badiou highlights that “Paul is a poet-thinker of the event.”⁶⁷ He is indeed, although I would specify, an *apocalyptic* poet-thinker of the event. In Pauline scholarship we should reevaluate and reappraise the event-character of Paul’s thinking. *Πίστις* is not only “relationship-forming,” as rightly suggested by Teresa Morgan,⁶⁸ but also includes a cosmic, “reality-transforming” dimension. In Paul, *πίστις* transcends both the individual and the

65. Valerius Maximus, *Memorabilia*, 6.6.pr. Generally, references to the personified Fides in literature as well as depictions of Fides on coins are frequent at that time.

66. Carl Becker, “Fides,” *RAC* 7 (1969) 801–31, at 801.

67. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. R. Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 2. See the insightful essay by John M. G. Barclay, “Paul and the Philosophers: Alain Badiou and the Event,” *New Blackfriars* 91 (2010) 171–84.

68. Morgan, *Roman Faith*, 261: “Paul’s main interest is in *pistis* as relationship-forming. . . . As such, he sees *pistis* as dominantly an exercise of trust which involves heart, mind, and action.”

community. It is an eschatological event that occurred at a particular point in the unfolding of the salvation historical drama.⁶⁹ The phrase ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν expresses, in a nutshell, the tension between cosmology and anthropology, which—as Ernst Käsemann once argued—“characterizes the whole of Paul’s theology.”⁷⁰ Cosmology and anthropology are two sides of the same coin: from the event of faith to our participation in faith.⁷¹

69. Cf. Hays, *The Faith of Christ*, 200.

70. Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 33.

71. I am grateful to the participants in the IBR session at San Diego for a valuable dialogue and to Dr. Christina Harker for improving not only the English style of this article but also the line of argument.