

**The Gospel for All Peoples and *Pistis Christou*:  
A Doctrine Only for Healing the Troubled Consciences  
of Western Guilt-Oriented Peoples? Part 1**

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**Abstract**

Does *pistis Christou*, in crucial contexts in Paul's letters, mean "faith *in* Christ," "faithfulness of Christ, or "steadfast-faith of Christ"? I choose the third of these alternatives. It correlates well with the biblical doctrine of the active and suffering obedience of Christ. Moreover, the "steadfast-faith of Christ" is not merely for guilt-oriented peoples (Rom 3:29-31). It is essential to Paul's "gospel" and is paradigmatic for all nations (Rom 2:16). Paul was Christ's chosen emissary and was given a message and power to proclaim that divine gospel to idol worshippers. Consequently, anyone proclaiming another gospel must be cursed (Gal 1:6-9, 2:7-8).

**Key Words:** Christ's steadfast-faith, conscience, contextualization, guilt-innocence cultures, justification, Pauline gospel

**Introduction**

Does *pistis Christou*, which appears in crucial contexts in Paul's letters, mean "faith *in* Christ," "faithfulness of Christ, or "steadfast faith of Christ"? Is this doctrine only for Western guilt-oriented people-groups but not for all peoples (Rom 3:29-31)? Is it an essential aspect of what Paul calls "my gospel" for both the Jews and idolatrous peoples (*ta ethnē*) (Rom 2:16)?

Many have weighed into this debate about what Paul's phrase actually means, particularly the genitive *Christou* (Bird and Sprinkle 2010; Easter 2010). Some exegetes argue that the phrase teaches that we are to put our complete confidence *in* the Lord (the objective-genitive). Others assert that Paul means Christ's faithfulness to his Father, which is the first of the two subjective genitive views. The second subjective genitive view is that Christ's completed righteousness was his steadfast-faith, and because of it our Father resurrected Christ to ever live to guarantee our eternal life (Heb 7:25; Rom 4:25, 5:1, 9-10, 8:34). This last view is my own persuasion, and this article responds point-by-point to Dr. Trevin Wax's opposite conclusions in one of his blog articles (Wax 2011).

I was introduced to the overall debate over Paul's use of *pistis Christou*, and in particular the subjective view, in the early 1980's in a class on Romans at Talbot Seminary taught by Prof. W. Bingham Hunter, now at Phoenix Seminary. As I studied about the active work of Christ, I learned to trust the finished faith-obedience of Christ to the legal covenant of the Garden, and my roller-coaster faith was stabilized. Christ released my over-active, accusing conscience from a heavy load of worthless works. I learned that he had already cleansed my conscience once and for all from these "dead works to serve the living God" (Heb 9:14 NASB, ESV, 10:1-17). Christ's finished obedience constituted me righteous (Rom 5:17-19; 1 Cor 1:30; Heb 9-10). The translation of *pistis Christou* as "steadfast faith of Christ" helped bring theological and emotional stability to my then troubled spirit.

Over the decades, I have been studying three passages that have substantiated this "steadfast-fast" perspective and have brought continued comfort (Rom 3:20-26; Gal 2:15-17, 19-21; Phil

3:8-9). Each passage juxtaposes the righteousness that our Lord gained by his steadfast-faith with the self-righteousness of external obedience. Paul characterizes the first as “Spirit,” good works done in the power of the indwelling Spirit of Christ, and contrasts “Spirit” with “letter”: “But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in [*the freshness*] of the Spirit and not in [*obsolescence*] of the [*external*] letter” (Rom 7:6 NASB; see also 2:29 and 2 Cor 3:4-7). These “letter” works always spring from powerless and hostile human “flesh,” devoid of the Spirit (see Rom 8:3, 7-9).

### **Paul’s Informing Theology of Justification and Peace**

Furthermore, the translation “steadfast-faith of Christ” should have *prima facie* acceptability based upon Paul’s paradigmatic statements in both Romans 1:16-17 and Galatians 3:11 where he cites Habakkuk 2:4: “The righteous — *ek pisteōs* will live.” This is the *Crux Interpretum* according to Douglas A. Campbell’s classic article (Campbell 1994). That passage and its precursor, Genesis 15:6, provide the informing theology behind Paul’s teaching on justification before our kind and just God, who forbids “justifying the wicked” (e.g., Ex 23:7; Prov 17:15).

Campbell further states that “the rather extraordinary statistical profile” of phrases combining “through” or “by” with the genitive of “faith” are always within a context contrasting “[*pistis Christou*] (whatever that means) with [*erga nomou*] (whatever that means),” yet always in a “‘sloganizing’ fashion.” Paul’s “dominant phrase” is “*ek pisteōs*” though “*dia* [through]” plus the genitive is a synonym. “Both are most often translated “by” or “through faith” (e.g., Rom 3:22 and 26),” even though the grammatical construction is derived from the LXX of Habakkuk. “The occurrence of this phrase correlates perfectly with Paul’s citation of Hab 2:4,” Campbell explains. “Paul uses [*ek pisteōs*] twenty-one times in his extant letters, but only in those two that also cite the scriptural text containing that exact phrase (*in fact, a scriptural text trimmed by Paul to that exact phrase*). This cannot be mere coincidence – there is almost certainly some causal connection.” This correlation includes a connection with Paul’s use of the disputed phrase *pisteōs Christou* as well (Campbell 1994:268).

In other words, when Paul speaks about “by/through trust/faith,” he is trimming down the paradigmatic wording of Habakkuk 2:4. Paul means in short-hand that we who were absolutely faithless and unable to please God (Rom 8:9; Heb 11:6), are justified by the gift of the “steadfast-faith of Christ” given to those who trust him. The complete trustworthy-trusting summarizes Christ’s righteousness. The result is that we who are thus justified by faith in union with Christ can continually live by faith just like he did. O. Palmer Robertson’s exegesis is correct: “‘The Justified (by Faith) Shall Live by His Steadfast Trust’ – Habakkuk 2:4” (see parallel Ps 112:6-7). He translates the Hebrew as follows:

Behold!  
 The proud—  
     his soul is not upright in him;  
 But the justified—  
     by his steadfast trust he shall live (Robertson 1983:60).

Ultimately, then, “my righteous one,” as the LXX and the writer of the book of Hebrews render the passage, is a person who lives by his steadfast-faith. Citing several others, Campbell states: “Our suggestion concerning [Rom 1:]17a therefore necessarily involves reading Hab 2:4 as a messianic proof-text” (Campbell 2011:281; see Robertson 1983:60). Only Christ’s never-

failing trust produced his justifying righteousness before the Father, warranting his resurrection, which is the fruit of the resurrection of all the just/righteous in him (Rom 4:24-25; 1 Cor 15:20; see, Col 3:1-4). In other words, to corollate other passages, the Father developed Christ's always-righteous heart so that he learned steadfast faith-obedience (see e.g., Rom 1:5) through being tested in the fire of suffering up to and including the cross. His listening and always trusting heart never failed to follow the will of his beloved Father (Heb 5:8; Rom 5:18-19; Phil 2:8). Because he passed the probationary test, God justified him (Rom 4:24-25; Is 53:10-11; perhaps 1 Tim 3:16).

Now contrary to what some interpreters may assert, Christ is called the "Righteous One" in other NT passages (e.g., Acts 3:14, 7:52; 1 Jn 2:1). He *alone* is the Righteous One, who lived by steadfast, never-failing, righteousness-revealing faith (Hab 2:4; Heb 10:36-39). We are justified by the gift of the Righteous One's steadfast-faith-gained righteousness. That faith is a free gift to those in rebellion, received *in* the righteousness [en dikaiosunē ... Iēsuou Christou] of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ (2 Pet 1:1b Greek; 1 Tim 1:14; 2 Tim 1:13, 2:25; Eph 2:8). The result is that now justified believers will be living in righteousness by means of the gift of persevering faith found only in Christ (Rom 8:4; 2 Pet 1:3-5). "But my righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back" (see Heb 10:36-39).

Some interpreters may object that we are justified by Christ's blood and his active obedience, not by his steadfast-faith (e.g., Rom 5:9; 18-19) (see Taylor 2012; McMahan n.d.). However, significantly, the root meaning of obedience in both Hebrew and Greek [*shama*, *hupakoē*] is "listen" or "listen intently to." Our Lord, "born under the law," the legal covenant, completely "listened to" that law by never failing to trust and follow his Abba (Gal 4:4-6). The Second Adam came into the human world to redeem us both from the curse of and the obligation to perfectly fulfill the original legal covenant, which demanded perfect obedience (Gal 4:5, 3:13): "Here am I ... I have come to do your will, [O] my God" (Heb 10:7 NIV; see Jn 5:56, 14:31, 17:4).

In this initial discussion, I find then the translation "steadfast-faith" and not "faithfulness of Christ" or "faith in Christ" peace-bringing and conscience-stilling in the Holy Spirit, just as Paul states (Rom 9:1; see Heb 9:14 ESV, 10:2 NIV). "My Righteous One" [Jesus] thus lived by faith and the Father declared him righteous when he raised him from the dead: "He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification" (Rom 4:25 NASB; see, Hab 2:4; Rom 1:17; Heb 10:38). Our "peace with God" (Rom 5:1), "peace belonging to God" (Phil 4:7) and the "peace of Christ" serve as the ultimate arbitrator or umpire in our hearts as we exegetically seek to discern valid insights (Col 3:15).

### **Further Exegetical Answers to Common Objections**

Further reasons for the "steadfast-faith" view are similar to those Wax finds wanting, and some are those he missed. First, the notes for the *New English Translation* (NET) explain the translators' reasons for rendering the phrase "faithfulness of Christ." They are substantially correct except that they make little distinction between "Christ's faith" and "Christ's faithfulness." Few would disagree that our Lord was "*pistos*" [faithful] (Heb 3:2). Yet, "*pistis*" with a genitive of a human person is most likely always a subjective genitive. Wax neglects to take account of this grammatical point. The NET Bible notes provide the following justification: "An increasing number of NT scholars are arguing that [*pistis Christou*] ... and similar phrases in Paul ... involve a *subjective* genitive and mean 'Christ's faith' or 'Christ's faithfulness.'" The note then gives the decisive argument for the subjective genitive view: "Noteworthy among the arguments

for the subjective genitive view is that when [*pistis*, faith or trust] takes a personal genitive it is almost never an objective genitive (cf. Matt 9:2, 22, 29; Mark 2:5; 5:34; 10:52; Luke 5:20; 7:50; 8:25, 48; 17:19; 18:42; 22:32; Rom 1:8; 12; 3:3; 4:5, 12, 16; 1 Cor 2:5; 15:14, 17; 2 Cor 10:15; Phil 2:17; Col 1:4; 2:5; 1 Thess 1:8; 3:2, 5, 10; 2 Thess 1:3; Titus 1:1; Phlm 6; 1 Pet 1:9, 21; 2 Pet 1:5) (NET, nt. 27, Romans 3:22).

Second, a crucial parallel passage with respect to this issue is Romans 4, which unmistakably speaks about the “faith of Abraham.” The parallelism in this passage is between those who are “of the circumcision” and those who are “of the faith of ... Abraham.” The passage compares self-oriented, external works to dependent trust in another: “So that [Abraham] might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised” (Rom 4:11-12, see 16, NASB).

Here plainly “of the faith of Abraham” [*tēs pisteōs tou ... Abraám*] means the steps of steadfast-faith that Abraham possessed in his life beginning with at least his justification (Gen 15:6) and perhaps even before (e.g., Heb 11:8). The meaning of this subjective genitive construction is not that someone is to put faith *in* Abraham, but they are to follow the steps *of* Abraham’s faith. “In [*Spirit-given*] hope against [*natural*] hope, he trusted” (Rom 4:18). If the “faith of Abraham” is his trust in God and his promises, then “the faith of Jesus” means our Lord’s absolutely unwavering faith. Since, first, if he never sinned and always listened intently with complete trust in his Father (he obeyed), and, second, if to lack trust is sin (Rom 14:23; Heb 11:6), then our Lord’s faith was a completed steadfast-faith from birth up to and including his crucifixion and death (Phil 2:8).

Consequently, we who put our trust in Christ alone are declared righteous *because of* his steadfast-faith-obedience to his Father (Rom 3:22, 5:18-19; Gal 2:16). Paul agrees: “One completed-righteousness brought justification of life ..., also through the listening-obedience of the one man the many will be [constituted] righteous” (Rom 5:18-19, my translation). C.E.B Cranfield also agrees: “Since [*henos*, one] is masculine in its three occurrences in v. 17 and also in its two occurrences in v. 19, and since the whole subsection is concerned with the relation of the one man Adam and one Man Christ to the many... it is surely better to take [*henos*] here as masculine,” therefore, referring to the completed righteousness of the one man, Jesus Christ. (see Cranfield 2004:289).

In the context, Christ’s “intense listening” (trusting-obedience) had to be to every aspect of his Father’s tôranic instruction. This was his lived-out righteousness (see Rom 5:12-21; Gal 4:1-6; Ps 112:1, 5-7). Receiving Christ’s faith-filled righteousness is God’s only biblically ordained means to come to peace of conscience before the God of all peoples (Rom 2:16, 3:28-31). Who can now accuse in God’s court? Who can condemn? The Father has justified us and the Son now intercedes for us. Who can then separate us from God’s love (Rom 8:33-35, see NLT, CSB)?

Therefore, when people in, for example, honor-shame cultures come into contact with the law of God either through conscience or Scripture, and *they will eventually do so if they read the whole Bible*, Scripture also teaches them to never let Satan and his demons accuse within their spirit (Rev 12:10). Nor should conscience be allowed to accuse any more (Rom 2:16), nor should “Moses” (Jn 5:45). God has justified-and-forgiven us (Rom 4:6-8, 5:1) and will work change by the Spirit’s grief (Eph 4:30; Is 63:10), the sorrow leading to repentance (2 Cor 7:10). He does not

use fear of man (Prov 29:25), honor or shame before a social group, nor a condemning conscience but Christ's Spirit alone. For example, serving another god, whether Islam's Allah, self, money, or one's belly, dishonors the Creator and excites his just-zeal (wrath) against those who suppress his truth (Rom 1:18, 25). It is both a guilt *and* dishonor issue. However, if this issue is not addressed, a legal conscience leads to a crushing legalism, despair, or antinomianism.

A second reason for holding a subjective view is that the rendering "steadfast-faith of Christ" avoids unnecessary repetition in key passages. For example, the best translation of Romans 1:17b could well be "out of [Christ's] steadfast-faith to [our persevering] trust." On the other hand, the alternative translation "faithfulness of Christ" propounded by N T Wright and others is ambiguous. It leaves the door ajar for a man-centered covenant nomism to break in, a doctrine similar to the Pharisee's Second Temple Judaism that Jesus condemned (Lk 10:28-37, 16:14, 18:9-14; Mt 15:1-9, 23:1-39), Tridentine Roman Catholicism, and similar religious expressions as, perhaps, some forms of Islam. D. A. Carson agrees: "In dominant Jewish understanding, God's justifying of Abraham is entirely appropriate: Abraham deserved it, for he was 'faithful'" (Carson 2010). To hold the view "faithfulness of Christ" leads to the Galatian error. The crucial passages listed in the first section would all include extraneous words, which, because of the cost of materials in Paul's day, he could very well have been reticent to use. For example, note Paul's extreme parsimony of words in Romans 5:12-21. The superfluity evaporates with a subjective genitive: "We have trusted in King Jesus so that we might be justified by the steadfast-faith of Christ and not by works of the law" (Gal 2:16).

Third, translating *pistis Christou* as "steadfast-faith of Christ" is theologically attractive. I agree with most of Trevin Wax's original positive sentiments for a subjective genitive, though I substitute steadfast-faith for faithfulness: 1) The subjective genitive and "the theme of 'union with Christ'" make better sense of many passages, even Galatians 2:20. 2) "When incorporated into Reformation categories of theology, '[steadfast-faith] of Christ' bolsters support for the doctrine of imputation. "We are justified by [Christ's] ... perfect [trusting] obedience to the Father's will, his faithfulness unto death on behalf of his covenant people." 3) "Philippians 3:9 seems to put more emphasis on Christ's [steadfast-faith], rather than our faith, as the means of supplying our needed righteousness." (In other words, "not having a righteousness of my own derived from the law, but one that is through Christ's [steadfast-faith] – the righteousness from God based on that faith" would be the best rendering of the verse.) Wax concludes: "Anything that appears to give more glory to Christ is attractive to me" (Wax 2011). I agree.

Consequently, when Paul places *pistis Christou* in contrast with the "works of the law," he juxtaposes our faithful King's steadfast-faith over against the absolutely powerless and faithless human flesh that attempts to keep external obligations of the "letter" (e.g., Rom 7:6). Yet, the "mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set upon the Spirit is life and peace." A mind depending upon the flesh is "hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*," and hence cannot please God by steadfastly trusting and following his instruction (Rom 8:2-9 NASB; Gal 3:12-14; Heb 11:6).

### **Counsel Against "Steadfast-Faith" View**

So then what about the reasons that swayed Dr. Wax in the opposite direction? First is an argument from silence: "None of the early church fathers provide a possessive or subjective genitive reading of *pistis Christou*" (Wax 2011). However, arguments from silence are notoriously weak and could very well be based upon the logical error of appeal to authority over the actual mean-

ing of the text as intended by the author. Furthermore, tradition and a surrounding cultural worldview create a myopia that genuinely blinded both the early and Medieval church, who left behind the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith by grace solely on the ground of Christ's obedient-faith. With scarcely any discussion of these topics, it is not surprising that they were silent about this exegetically derived doctrine.

Second, Wax believes the "repetition" problem is not as big a problem as it first appears. The problem remains, however, even though in Romans 3:21-22, "Paul probably intends to place the emphasis on the 'all,'" as Wax explains (Wax 2011). In other words, the "righteousness of God," won by our Lord's steadfast-faith, is genuinely open for all people-groups as a gift by grace on the basis of Christ's blood. No distinction exists among humans because all have sinned [in Adam] and presently all lack his glory. Consequently, any human is able to be declared righteous only upon trust in the the finished, faith-wrought righteousness of our now indwelling King. His redemption and satisfaction of his Father's just wrath are complete (Rom 1:18-2:16, 3:22-27).

In other words, the best translation of Romans 3:22 is, "even God's righteousness through Jesus Christ's steadfast-trust, [given] to [any and] *all* who trust [in him]." The righteous only live by persevering faith. "All" is indeed important but not for the reason Wax gives. Certainly, it is true that "Paul uses repetition intentionally. In an oral culture, this is a common technique at getting across one's point" (Wax 2011). However, the context of the paragraph, chapter, section, book, and biblical theology in general must govern the meaning. Here the repetition of faith twice is redundant and not necessary.

Third, it is accurate that "grammatically, there are other places where the genitive refers to Christ as the object." Wax lists one (Phil 3:8) (Wax 2011). I have no doubt that several other examples of an objective genitive with Christ as object can be discovered. Again, context, including the overarching theological and intertextual contexts, determine the meaning of *pistis Christou*. Plus, in Pauline contexts *pistis* with a personal genitive "is almost never an objective genitive."

Fourth, Wax correctly states that we should not do exegesis with a bias toward "what is theologically attractive." Most of us can agree that "the key issue is 'what did the author intend to communicate?'" and not "how does this boost what I already believe?" (Wax 2011). On the other hand, I would like to emphasize two points. First, all of us exegete from a worldview that predisposes us to see data in a certain way. Second, there are three tests of truth: a) Does one's perspective of the data correspond to what the author originally intended, information that can be discovered in the grammar and syntax? b) Does one's perspective cohere to the whole system of teaching that God has given us in Scripture? If not, perhaps the system is incorrect and the Spirit can lead into a complete paradigm shift. By entering into such a shift, one can discover more of the mind of Christ than in the previous system. Believers already possess a new mind in him and, if the new systemic Scripture-view is correct, one can discover fresh insights by applying the new lenses as led by the Spirit (1 Cor 2:16). c) Does one's perspective work to actually produce the stable fruit of the Spirit in one's life? This is a form of the Hermeneutical Spiral that can help us refine what we believe as it can here.

## Conclusion

This doctrine of justification through the imputed *faith-wrought* righteousness of Christ is pervasive throughout Paul's gospel-oriented corpus. I affirm what T. Wax rejects. Over the years, I

have become more persuaded that *pistis Christou* should be rendered the “steadfast-faith” or “persevering-trust” of Christ. Again, Paul juxtaposes Israel’s lack of faith and their reliance upon the strength of the flesh [“letter”] over against their King’s complete trust in the strength of the Spirit up to his death on the cross (e.g., Phil 2:9-10; Heb 9:14). The Mosaic covenant *now* is totally devoid of the Spirit (Rom 7:5-6, 13-18), so that the Spirit *now* is always connected to Christ’s steadfast-faith-wrought righteousness, as he lives “in us” and we “in him” (Gal 3:1-14; Rom 8:2). The Torah *now* is external “letter” *only*, but Christ’s Spirit works from the inside out to accomplish all the righteous requirements of the tōranic-instruction as believers walk *in steadfast-trust* by the Spirit in union with Christ (Rom 7:6, 8:4-7; Col 2:14; Heb 7:18, 10:1-4; Gal 3:12-14, 4:1-7, 9; 2 Cor 3:3-7). A faith-walk always works its way out into works of love as it did with our Lord (Gal 5:5-6; Eph 2:10).

This teaching that all true righteousness is a trust-wrought righteousness is necessary for anyone’s long-term growth in grace in any tribe, people, and language. Only Paul’s gospel honors God and delivers from shame – “I am rejected” (see part 2). It also rescues from eternal guilt – “I have done wrong,” *and* from our experience of guilt-and-obligation motivation. He saves from fear of man (part 2), *and* our terrifying fear of his wrath, death, and Satan (Heb 2:14, see part 3). All must stand before an absolutely just Creator, whose justice is satisfied *only* in Christ (Rom 1:18-2:16; Jn 16:8-11). Trust-wrought righteousness provides an essential foundation to experience the long-term resurrection power and saving-life of the indwelling Christ for growth in holiness. This good news is for all ethno-cultural groups, not just “guilt” oriented Westerners (Rom 6:15-23, 8:1-17). If our King’s universal community fails to stand on this rock, it has lost an essential key for her existence. The sole authority we possess is not the consensus of scholars – this is an illicit appeal to authority – but the revealed gospel itself.

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