

Passages Worth the Dig

Romans 1:16-17

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

I first considered this passage when I was in high school. I went to a public school, and among the 600 people in my class, most were not too interested in Biblical matters. It was a rarity to see someone carry a Bible around.

To me, this passage meant that I shouldn't be embarrassed to carry my Bible. After all, I thought of the “gospels” as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Since Paul wasn't ashamed of “the gospel,” so I shouldn't be either. This was the verse I went to when I wanted to feel better about having a Bible nearby amongst those who might think it odd.

It wasn't until I got to Lipscomb for college that this passage took on a whole new meaning. Dr. Harvey Floyd, one of my Greek professors, taught on this passage in ways that opened flood gates, dousing us all in the living water that flows from a proper understanding of this passage. Dr. Floyd wanted us to dig into the Scriptures deeply. Through his teaching and encouragement, many of us embraced this passage for its transformative teaching. We were changed. That change still holds 40 years later. This lesson reflects a debt of gratitude to Dr. Floyd, with too many ideas and examples from him to ever adequately cite them. In a real sense, this lesson itself is properly attributed to Dr. Harvey Floyd, who passed into God's eternity in 2018.

Vocabulary

A most challenging and enjoyable part of studying languages involve nuances of vocabulary. Those nuances take on enhanced significances when considering a foreign language that is separated by thousands of years of history and culture. The way Paul used terms doesn't always cleanly translate into a single English word.

Weston Fields taught me to always be careful when saying an ancient foreign word “means” any word in English. Ancient words always had nuanced meanings. Rarely does an ancient word transfer to just a singular modern word. Weston uses the phrase, “semantic range,” or one might say, “range of meaning.” This is a recognized effort to do

vocabulary justice. It recognizes the broad range of the original language (in today's case, Biblical Greek).

A non-Greek example familiar to many is the Hawaiian word "aloha." Aloha can mean "hello," but it can also mean, "good-bye." To translate it with the same English word each time is an error waiting to happen. Happily, English has adopted the word so that one needn't translate it but simply write it: "She said, 'Aloha!'"

This also becomes an issue in reverse. The English language has a broad range of vocabulary which doesn't always bode well for using an English word in place of a Greek word. For example, the same Greek word group (dikē - δικη) is variously translated in English with:

- words based on "just" (descended from the Latin heritage of English) like "justice," "justification," or "justify.
- words based on "right" (descended from the German heritage of English) like "righteous" or "righteousness."

These vastly different English words all work to translate the same Greek word and idea.

This makes it important in any Biblical study endeavor to make sure one understands the depth and breadth of the vocabulary being used. How one does this involves more than many think. An obvious first step often is a simple look in a lexicon (a name given to ancient dictionaries that translate ancient languages into modern ones) to see what meanings are given. Some lexicons give simple definitions. Others give more thorough definitions, explaining how the word developed, how different uses give different nuances, and even giving examples of how the words are used. This assists the scholar in finding the more accurate ideas and meaning of the word in question.

Another third very useful step or tool for determining meanings of words involves looking at other places where a specific author might use the word. In today's passage, for example, a key word is "gospel." One should look at other places where Paul used the same word to better inform one's understanding of how Paul might use it in a passage.

These tools are important, but they are not the only ones available in understanding vocabulary and meaning of a passage. Sometimes within the passage itself one gets a fuller idea of what the word might mean in its particular usage. Occasionally, one can understand what is meant with a word by seeing it contrasted in the Scripture. In this sense, if Paul says, "It is A, not B." then we better understand what "A" means by looking

at how it is used elsewhere. But one can also understand that Paul is contrasting “A” with “B,” so “A” is *not* “B.” This heightens one’s understanding of “A.”

In today’s passage, the meaning of the verses is greatly enhanced by understanding the vocabulary. In fact, I would argue the impact of Romans 1:16-17 *cannot* be appreciated as fully if one doesn’t recognize and consider the meanings behind the vocabulary.

The Passage

Scripture does not inform of the origins of the church at Rome. It is clear that there were Jews from Rome in Jerusalem during Pentecost. Acts 2:10 explains that “visitors from Rome” were among those who heard the apostles speaking in tongues and heard Peter’s first sermon that first opened the kingdom of God to mankind on Pentecost when God added to his church “about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41). It is also clear that there was a thriving Christian community there at the time Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, even though Paul had never personally been to the Empire’s capital.

Secular history does not provide the church’s origins in Rome either. Around 119AD, Suetonius Tranquillus (c.70AD – post 130) wrote a history of the lives of the Caesars. Suetonius’s credentials give credence to the accuracy of his writings. Under Trajan, who ruled the Roman Empire from 98 to 117, Suetonius served as Director of the Imperial Archives. Later, Suetonius was the personal secretary to the Roman Emperor Hadrian in 119 – 121, and it was during this time that Suetonius finished his work on the lives of the Caesars.

The *Lives of the Caesars* is still available today. Book five tells of Claudius, who ruled the Empire from 41 to 54AD. This was the stretch of time that included Paul’s second missionary journey. Suetonius has an important passage buried in the middle of Claudius’s actions while emperor (The Latin is important, so I add it here):

Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome.

*Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit.*¹

In the English translation of John Carew Rolfe, one of the top classical translators of the early to mid 20th century, the Latin name “Chresto” is reproduced in its basic Latin form

¹ Loeb Classical Library, *Suetonius II*, LCL vol. 38 (Harvard University Press 1997 ed.) translated by J. C. Rolfe at 25.4.

as “Chrestus.” Rolfe then added in a footnote that this was “another form of *Christus*,” or “Christ” in English.

Most scholars understand this to be referencing Christ, although a small few think that there may have been another Jew in Rome by such a name at the time of Paul. “*Chrestus*” is not a typical Jewish name. For that matter, it is not a common Greek or Latin name either. It is a Latinized derivation of the Greek word for “anointed” (*Christos* - Χριστός), not the Hebrew word, which would be *Mashiach*. Instead, it seems to be an alternate spelling of *Christus*, or “Christ.”

The earlier Roman writer Tacitus (c.55AD – c.120) wrote of Jesus’ death and his followers, using the spelling *Christus* during the era of Nero, the emperor who followed after the death of Claudius in 54AD. Nero used the group as a scapegoat to quell the rumors that Nero himself had caused the great fires in Rome which were used to prepare the neighborhood for Nero’s new buildings.

Therefore to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices², whom the crowd styled Christians [“*Christianos*”]. *Christus* [“*Christus*”], the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue.³

Of course, there was no real dictionary at the time, and standardized spelling is much more a modern novelty than a historical fact. In the pre-dictionary days, spelling was often based on pronunciation. The African lawyer turned theologian Q. Septimus Florens Tertullian (c. 150AD – 222) recognized as much in his defense of the faith written less than 100 years later:

“Christian,” [“*Christianus*”] so far as translating goes, is derived from “anointing.” Yes, and when it is mispronounced by you “Chrestian”

² A major indictment against Christians at the time included cannibalism, based upon the suggestion they consumed the body and blood of a person at closed feasts. This was a public misunderstanding of the concept of the Eucharist, which was celebrated in private by the church. The public just heard the rumors that associated the Lord’s Supper with the body and blood of Christ. For more, see the martyr lessons in the class’s church history series available at www.Biblical-literacy.com.

³ Loeb Classical Library, *Tacitus Annals Books XIII-XVI*, LCL vol. 322 (Harvard University Press 1997 ed.) translated by John Jackson at 15.44.

["Chrestianus"] (for you have not even certain knowledge of the mere name)...⁴

The historical accounts dovetail perfectly with the Biblical and add some important context to the narrative provided by Luke in the book of Acts. Luke's history recorded that Paul's first encountered Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth, sometime during his stay there from 50 – 52AD. Scripture adds that this came about because of the actions of Claudius, the emperor.

And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them." (Acts 18:2)

Scripture is also clear that the Jews were later allowed to return to their homes in Rome, because by the time Paul writes his Roman letter, Priscilla and Aquila have returned and he sends them his greetings (Rom. 16:3).

This information tells a great deal behind the situation at Rome that gives vital context to the situation into which Paul wrote Romans. Paul addressed in his letter.⁵ Consider the likely situation at Rome:

- Jews from Rome hear Peter preach in Jerusalem and return to Rome, likely starting the church (Acts 2:10).
- The church grows to include a large number of both Jews and Gentiles.
- Since the Jews began the church, one may reasonably surmise, the Jews held the core leadership positions.
- When Jews were forced to leave Rome over Christ (or "Chrestus"), this would have included the Jews who were in the church, like Aquila and Priscilla.
- During the time the Jews were gone (likely several years), the converted Gentiles were the leaders that controlled and directed the congregation.
- After the death of Claudius (Oct. 13, 54AD), Jews were allowed back into Rome.
- The church's first members, the early authority and leadership, returned likely ready to resume their positions of leadership.

⁴ Loeb Classical Library, *Tertullian Apology*, LCL vol. 250 (Harvard University Press 1997 ed.) translated by T.R. Glover, at 3.5.

⁵ While Paul had not yet visited the church in Rome, Paul clearly knew many people there. Reading Paul's personal notes in chapter 16 of the letter impresses one with the number of people and church workers in Rome who were close to Paul.

- Yet, the Gentile Christians no doubt recognized that God had continued working in the church while they were its leadership and core constituency.

One readily understands how such a church could have issues that needed answers and insight from the Lord.

Into this situation came this letter from Paul. Paul had left Ephesus and worked his way back to Corinth. Around 57AD, Paul wrote to the Romans from Corinth, a port city with a western harbor that constantly sent ships to the coast of Italy and the *via appia* road that led straight to the capital city. Paul wrote to set the church on its core foundations.

Paul's letter addressed the equal standing of Gentile and Jew in the church, setting aright any lingering issues or doubts that might have arisen from the Jewish departure and return. Paul gave insight into the position of the Gentile and the Jew before God. Paul knew that as the believers understood their respective place before God, their personal interactions and church roles would logically follow.⁶

Within this historical framework, one should read Romans. Then at Romans 1:16-17, one reads Paul's theme for his larger letter. Since Paul's letter addressed the basis for Jews and Gentiles to stand before God, with an agenda of seeing that the Jews and Gentiles live in harmony in the church, one reads his central premise,

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for the gospel is the power of God to salvation for 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, "The righteous shall live by faith."

To best understand this passage, it is imperative one understand Paul's vocabulary.

"Gospel"

⁶ Some scholars believe that Paul used the Greek word *parakaleo* (παρακαλέω) to signify his ultimate intent behind his letters. This word is generally translated "I appeal..." or "I urge..." It has been likened to a college student who writes home with a number of details before reaching his true purpose of, "please send money!" One sees this word used by Paul in ways that underscored his concerns. In Romans, it comes in 12:1 as Paul appealed for the Romans to all present themselves to God appropriately, each appreciating the gifts given each, which were never parceled out by the Spirit based upon ethnicity – Jew or Gentile. Paul again used the word in Rom. 15:30 and 16:17 as Paul reiterated his appeal for unity. These indicate the importance of this letter in addressing the Jew/Gentile issue that likely arose from the departure and then reunion of the Jewish believers.

A first word that jumps out from this passage is “gospel.” The passage makes clear that the “gospel” is very important. What could be more important to anyone than God’s power to save people? One should want to know what Paul means by this term!

The Greek word translated “gospel” is “*euangelion*” (εὐαγγέλιον). A simple dictionary meaning for the word is “glad tidings” or “good news.”⁷ If one considers the nuances of meaning written in more theological dictionaries, one reads,

the content of good news (in the NT a reference to the gospel about Jesus) — ‘the good news, the gospel.’ ... In a number of languages the expression ‘the gospel’ or ‘the good news’ must be rendered by a phrase, for example, ‘news that makes one happy’ or ‘information that causes one joy’ or ‘words that bring smiles’ or ‘a message that causes the heart to be sweet.’⁸

From these and similar entries, one gets a basic idea of what “gospel” means, but in some ways these entries are inadequate for helping one understand how Paul is using the word in Romans 1:16-17. It is akin to me telling my wife, “something great happened to me today,” and then leaving it there. Such a comment begs for follow-up. “What happened?” “What was the ‘great thing’?”

Knowing Paul is referencing “good news” leaves one wondering, “just what is the news that is so good?” What is the content of that “good news”? The passage says that the news is the power that God has to save people, but that just intensifies the desire and importance of knowing what that news is! To best answer, “What is the content of this good news?”, one gets greater insight from reading Paul’s other references and teachings about the good news.

Paul used “gospel” often. Of the 76 times the word is found in the entire New Testament writings, 60 of those are from Paul’s pen. Before reading it in today’s passage (Romans 1:16-17), Paul has already used it twice. In the first reference, Paul used it in a way that helps one understand the content of the gospel. In his first sentence, Paul told the Romans that Paul self-identified as,

...a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the ***gospel*** of God, *which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures*, concerning his Son...

⁷ “εὐαγγελ-έω,” Liddell, Scott, Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (9th edition, Unabridged), (Oxford 1940), at 705.

⁸ “εὐαγγέλιον” Louw, Nieida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (2nd edition), (UBS 1989) at 413.

From this, one rightly understands that the good news was both “promised beforehand” in the Old Testament and that it concerns Jesus as the Son of God. This should not be surprising, after all, Jesus clearly asserted,

And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ [Messiah] should suffer these things and enter into his glory?”

The Old Testament spoke of Christ and spoke it being “necessary” for Jesus to suffer and *then* enter into his glory. To further trace this to its roots, one can consider other teachings of Christ and his apostles surrounding this idea that it was necessary for Jesus to suffer. Consider these passages:

- Matthew 16:21 – “From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”
- 1 Peter 1:10-11 – “Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.”

I’m not sure I ever met anyone who liked to suffer. By its very nature, suffering is something one doesn’t like. The idea that Jesus, the Son of God *must* suffer is worthy of study. Why?

The answer is found, in part, in an extended passage in Isaiah 53.

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he has borne *our* griefs and carried *our* sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for *our* transgressions; he was crushed for *our* iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? ...

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief... because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

The necessity of the gospel is one centered in the actions of Jesus for the salvation of humanity. This good news is that Christ suffered for the transgressions and shortcomings, for the sins of humanity. Not surprisingly then, Paul would inform the Ephesian elders in his tearful goodbye that,

I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:24).

Nothing Paul had, not even life itself, was as precious as testifying to the gospel. Importantly, Paul spoke to the Ephesians in the Acts passage above about the “gospel of the grace of God.” This is one way to speak of what one might hear when listening to the “gospel.” One would hear of the grace of God.

The gospel is both about Jesus and about the grace of God. In this sense, the “grace of God” is not an abstraction. It isn’t a mere attribute of God. It is the gift God gave his people through the death of Christ.⁹

Paul’s many other uses of “gospel” accord with this understanding. In 1 Corinthians 1:17, Paul explained that,

Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

The gospel centered on the cross of Christ.

⁹ When Paul used the word “grace” in this sense, it is often spoken of as “unmerited favor.” Paul was using it as a noun to speak of a specific favor God did for his people, not simply as an adjective to describe God’s nature. The favor God did was the gospel.

Perhaps nowhere is Paul's meaning behind "gospel" illustrated better than in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4. There Paul put it simply,

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word 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 in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures

So in examining Paul's theme to the Romans, and asking the question, what is the content of "gospel," of the "good news" that is God's power to save everyone who believes? It is the cross of Christ. There Jesus suffered in the place of humanity for the sins of humanity. This was Paul's sermon on the "gospel." It enabled Paul to remind the Corinthians that Paul's work among them was,

to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

For Paul, the "good news" was the news about the cross of Christ as the location of the suffering and penalties of sin that was truly everyone's personal responsibility. Christ dying on Paul's behalf, as well as on everyone else's behalf, was the core message of his gospel. Any other message was cursed. As Paul informed the churches of Galatia,

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed (Gal. 1:6-9).

In speaking of Paul's message about the cross of Christ, it is important to realize that Paul also spoke of Jesus's resurrection. As Dr. Floyd would teach us,

Paul often spoke of the death of Christ, but never of a *dead* Christ. Because he wasn't dead.

So, when Paul was under arrest in Caesarea, and awaiting his appeal to Rome, King Agrippa came into town and was visiting with the governor over Paul's case, Gov. Festus.

As Festus explained to Agrippa, the dispute that got Paul into trouble centered on Paul's disputes with the High Priest of Jerusalem along with certain Jewish elders,

About a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted was alive (Acts. 25:19).

Why was it so integral to Paul's good news that Jesus was a resurrected Lord? For that, one must await the rest of this lesson and the other terms in Romans 1:16-17!

To be continued....

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