

ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ: CHRIST'S FAITHFULNESS TO WHOM?

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In my previous paper on the genitive construction *πίστις Χριστοῦ*¹ and the absolute use of *πίστις* in Paul's letters, I wrote²:

During the last fifteen or so years, the subjective reading of the phrase has gained a stronger foothold.... Within the debate, however, one important piece of evidence still continues to be overlooked or undervalued: the *peculiarly illuminating use of πίστις in Galatians 3:23 and 3:25*. (Italics added)

Since increasing weight is now placed on Galatians 3:23-25 in exegetical attempts by recent scholars tackling the interpretation of this genitive construction³, my above remark may now look rather stale. However, it has not lost its propriety, because most scholars still seem to be unaware of the essential nature of the word *πίστις* in these verses. In these circumstances my scheme—a *holistic understanding* of Pauline faith—remains the only viable approach to obtaining the real force of the apostle's teaching. Both proponents of the objective genitive (“faith in Christ”) and of the subjective genitive (“faith[fulness] of Christ”) have attempted to interpret these verses in their own ways, but their efforts do not appear to have been successful. My aim in this paper is to point out some of the fundamental shortcomings in the existing major interpretations proposed and thus shed light on the root of the problem with Galatians 3:23, 25 and other places where *πίστις* appears in the absolute state, and restate the adequateness of my interpretation from a renewed angle.

I. Arguments for the Objective Genitive

Advocates for objective reading take the phrase *ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ* in Galatians 3:22 in the sense of “through faith in Jesus Christ” and the purposive clause *ἵνα ἐκ πίστεως δικαιωθῶμεν* in Galatians 3:24 as meaning “that we might be justified by faith.” The problem is how to maintain a logically consistent interpretation also for Galatians 3:23 and 25, where we

¹ This phrase is found in different forms in seven places of his letters.

διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (Rom 3:22, Gal 2:16a)

διὰ πίστεως Χριστοῦ (Phil 3:9)

ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (Gal 3:22)

ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ (Rom 3:26)

ἐκ πίστεως Χριστοῦ (Gal 2:16b)

ἐν πίστει ... τῇ τοῦ νιοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ (Gal 2:20)

² “Absolute Use of ΠΙΣΤΙΣ and ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ in Paul,” *AJBI* (Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute) 23 (1997) 64-82. Here, 64f. (http://www2.rikkyo.ac.jp/web/sota/AJBI_23_64-82.pdf)

³ Douglas A. Campbell, *The Quest for Paul's Gospel: A Suggested Strategy* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2005) 225-230; Hung-Sik Choi, “ΠΙΣΤΙΣ in Galatians 5:5-6: Neglected Evidence for the Faithfulness of Christ,” *JBL* 124 (2005) 467-490; Ardel B. Caneday, “The Faithfulness of Jesus Christ as a Theme in Paul's Theology in Galatians,” in *The Faith of*

find Πρὸ τοῦ δὲ ἐλθεῖν τὴν πίστιν (“However, before the *pistis* came”) and εἰς τὴν μέλλουσαν πίστιν ἀποκαλυφθῆναι (“for the *pistis* which was to be revealed”⁴) in 3:23, and ἐλθούσης δὲ τῆς πίστεως (“But now that the *pistis* has come”) in 3:25. If ἡ πίστις in these verses is taken simply as “faith,” then it comes down to insisting that human believing has just come, and has been revealed indeed, as an eschatological event. However, faith did exist before Christ, as is evident from the case of Abraham (Gal 3:6, 9).

To clear this problem, advocates of the objective genitive seem to be able to adopt at least two alternatives, aside from their effectiveness.

One is to take the definite article τὴν (v. 23) anaphorically and relate it with πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (“faith in Jesus Christ”) just referred to in verse 22. This alternative, however, does not work well. If it is carried through, τὴν πίστιν in Galatians 3:23 has to be distinguished sharply from any qualitative or generical faith, as Burton did.⁵ In fact, the latter is at least as old as Abraham according to Paul and therefore cannot be spoken of as “having (recently) come.” In this connection we need to take a close look at interpretations by two advocates of the objective genitive: James D. G. Dunn and Hans D. Betz. While the former accepts the anaphoric interpretation (though in a somewhat different way from Burton’s version), the latter presents a non-anaphoric interpretation.

On Galatians 3:23 Dunn comments:

Paul does not necessarily deny that others believed as Abraham believed prior to the coming of Christ, but affirms that God’s purpose and promise have been realized in Christ (cf. iii.19), so that he is now the natural and proper focus for the promise-releasing-and-fulfilling faith. Prior to that we were held in custody under the law.⁶

This interpretation is potentially exposed to at least four criticisms. First, while taking the definite article anaphorically, Dunn writes, “Paul does not necessarily deny that others believed as Abraham believed prior to the coming of Christ.” This explanation appears to spoil the Greek article of its strict anaphoric force he sees here. If “this faith” refers to “‘the faith’ just referred to” (v. 22), then it logically cannot be Abraham’s or others’ faith. It must be Christians’ faith in Jesus Christ and nothing other.

Secondly, if Abraham and others believed even before the revelation of the faith, how does their faith relate with “this faith,” that is “faith in Jesus Christ”? Dunn’s attempt to find an answer to this question is worked out in terms of the “contrast between promise and law” and “law (for Israel) and faith.”⁷ He writes that “the law’s role as protective custodian lasting till faith such as Abraham had exercised could be expressed with reference to the fulfilled

Jesus Christ: The Exegetical, Biblical, and Theological Studies, ed. Michael F. Bird and Preston M. Sprinkle (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2009) 185-205; Martinus C. de Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011).

⁴ This εἰς should be taken as indicating a goal (purely telic sense).

⁵ Ernest De W. Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1921) 198. A different type of anaphoric reading proposed by Douglas Moo is grammatically questionable. He maintains that “the ‘faith’ that ‘comes’ in 3:23 and 25 might refer back to the participle τοῖς πιστεύοντις at the end of verse 22 rather than to πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ earlier in the verse.” Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013) 47.

⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (London: Black, 1993) 197.

⁷ Ibid., 198.

promise,” and that “Faith (the faith of Abraham, and faith in Christ) brackets the interim epoch of the law.” His anaphoric interpretation is pressed to end with a quasi-identification of “the faith of Abraham” and “faith in Christ.” In reality, however, they differ significantly in several respects.

Thirdly, as Dunn’s inclusion of “the coming of Christ” in his explanation shows, the “coming of the faith” is naturally to be related with the coming or revelation of Christ in some sense or another. Needless to say, faith in Christ is possible only after he has come, but the mere fact of his coming cannot generate faith. In someone’s having faith in Christ the existence of Christ who has come and his *faithworth* for the believer are taken as a given, and his or her faith has been generated through the gospel of Christ (Gal 1:7, 11-12). So whenever faith in Christ is materialized in any believer, a *correlative* of his or her faith, Christ’s *faithworth*, must exist in this faith relation between the believer and Christ. The concept of *faithworth* is indispensable for logically understanding Paul’s teaching on faith. Can it be identified with the “faith [fulness] of Christ” in the sense insisted on by recent proponents of the subjective genitive? Of course not. For Christ’s *faithworth* does not mean Christ’s faith[fulness] toward God per se, but the worth Christ has for the believer in the faith relation. It is a *correlative* of faith.

A fourth and final question as to Dunn’s interpretation is equally of fundamental nature. Paul seems to think the coming or revelation of τὴν πίστιν as a *singular* (but *not necessarily external*) event that has created a decisive shift in salvation history. In addition, revelation “denotes a disclosure given from heaven, with heavenly authority, usually of heavenly secrets.”⁸ If so, is it correct to think with “faith in Christ” that it has now been *revealed*? Can the “coming of this faith” (Gal 3:23) be taken as “a disclosure given from heaven”? It is by no means synonymous with “many people having now come to believe in Christ.” Since ἡ πίστις is here an object of *revelation*, we cannot think that human faith in Christ itself has been revealed. What has occurred is a singular event involving repeated occurrences of faith in Christ in believing people living in history. Dunn explains this revelation further as “the coming of the era of faith, the human response that is the necessary complement to the coming of the seed (3:19)”⁹. Similar as it may look, the concept of “human response” is not the same as that of “*faithworth*.” In any case, the coming of the *era* of faith should be distinguished from the coming of faith in Christ.

So then should we understand “faith” here to be something like a “metonym for Christ himself” and affirm that “‘Faith’ and ‘Christ’ are interchangeable in this passage”?¹⁰ Certainly not. The coming of πίστις is related with the coming of Christ, because unless otherwise faith in Christ cannot take place. However, it does not follow from this that “Paul speaks of ‘Faith’ (*pistis*) in a personified way, as a virtual synonym for Christ (3:24).” This type of interpretation is a shrewd substitute for the anaphoric exegesis and suffers from the latter’s failure. To grasp what Paul says correctly we must adopt a totally different exegetical scheme.

Next let us look at Betz’ interpretation. Showing no interest in an anaphoric exegesis of

⁸ Ibid, 53.

⁹ Dunn, “ΕΚ ΠΙΣΤΕΩΣ: A Key to the Meaning of ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ,” in *The Word Leaps the Gap: Essays on Scripture and Theology in Honor of Richard B. Hays*, ed. J. Ross Wagner, C. Kavin Rowe and A. Katherine Grieb (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 364.

¹⁰ De Boer, *Galatians*, 82, 103, 149, 193, 238f. Here, 149, 238. He contends that “‘Faith’ here is something that belongs to or defines Christ himself.”

$\tau\eta\pi\sigma\tau\iota\tau\iota\varsigma$ in Galatians 3:23, Betz develops a seemingly *ad hoc* interpretation of the unit (3:19-25). He explains the coming and revelation of $\tau\eta\pi\sigma\tau\iota\tau\iota\varsigma$ as referring to the beginning of “the period of the faith” in the wake of “the coming of Christ” and concludes that “It [=faith] became a general possibility for mankind only when God sent his son and the Spirit of his son.”¹¹ According to Betz, “ $\pi\sigma\tau\iota\tau\iota\varsigma$ (“faith”) describes the occurrence of a historical phenomenon, *not the act of believing of an individual*” (italics mine).¹² This may be for avoiding the illogicality of insisting that human believing has now been revealed, but it is strange to exclude “faith” or “the act of believing of an individual” from this “historical phenomenon.” For it certainly consists in a holisticity that involves at least God’s sending his son *and* faith held by individuals who have heard the Gospel and come to believe in God and Christ (Gal 3: 2, 5).¹³ Without the latter the faith phenomenon cannot be a phenomenon, however rich God’s grace to send his son is. For it to remain as more than a mere “possibility,” it must be actualized in human beings in their act of believing.

If the faith phenomenon is holistic, how should we understand the word $\pi\sigma\tau\iota\tau\iota\varsigma$ in Galatians 3:23 and 25? Should we begin with the lexical *sense* of $\pi\sigma\tau\iota\tau\iota\varsigma$ that describes human beings’ act of believing or other? There is no logical necessity to do so. In my view $\pi\sigma\tau\iota\tau\iota\varsigma$ is a *term* (or even a *name*) to refer to this *eschatological faith phenomenon as a whole*. We should not confuse the referent of a term with its sense. This phenomenon involves the singular coming of God’s son Christ to the world, the repeated preaching of the gospel by Christ’s missionaries, the repeated occurrences of faith in Christ and God created by the word of preaching in people living in history (believers), and the bestowal of the Spirit to them¹⁴. Note that most of these are not parts of the *sense* of the word $\pi\sigma\tau\iota\tau\iota\varsigma$ but are *constituents of the phenomenon referred to by the term $\pi\sigma\tau\iota\tau\iota\varsigma$* . (How they are connected with each other is a difficult question rejecting easy answers.)

That $\pi\sigma\tau\iota\tau\iota\varsigma$ here is a term to refer to the holistic faith phenomenon and that it involves three of the four constituents can be confirmed from Paul’s descriptions in the first chapter of Galatians (1:11-12, 13, 15-16, 23. Citation from RSV).

Gal 1:11-12 For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τὸ εὐαγγελισθὲν ὑπ’ ἐμοῦ; see also τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ Χριστοῦ in v. 7) is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ (δι’ ἀποκαλύψεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ).

Gal 1:13 For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God (ἐδίωκον τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ θεοῦ) violently and tried to destroy it (ἐπόρθουν αὐτήν).

Gal 1:15-16 But when he who had set me apart before I was born ... was pleased to reveal his Son to me (ἀποκαλύψαι τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἐν ἐμοὶ), in order that I might preach

¹¹ Hans D. Betz, *Galatians*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 176. Betz maintains that “Before Christ’s coming, faith existed only exceptionally in Abraham and in Scripture as a promise.”

¹² Ibid, 176n120.

¹³ The *pistis* in the phrase ἐξ ἀκοῆς $\pi\sigma\tau\iota\tau\iota\omega\varsigma$ in Gal 3:2 and 3:5 should also be interpreted holistically. See my “Absolute Use of ΠΙΣΤΙΣ,” 71f.

¹⁴ In “Absolute Use of ΠΙΣΤΙΣ” I failed to include the Spirit bestowed to believers in the *pistis* phenomenon. I admit that at that time I myself was unaware of the need to distinguish the sense of $\pi\sigma\tau\iota\tau\iota\varsigma$ from its referent and that some discrepancies have resulted from this unawareness between my former and present papers.

him (ἴνα εὐαγγελίζωμαι αὐτὸν) among the Gentiles ...

Gal 1:23-24 [T]hey only heard it said, “He who once persecuted us (ό διώκων ἡμᾶς) is now preaching the faith (εὐαγγελίζεται τὴν πίστιν) he once tried to destroy (ἥν ποτε ἐπόρθει).” And they glorified God because of me.

First, Paul declares in Galatians 1:11-12 that “the gospel preached” by him originated from “a revelation of Jesus Christ.” Whether “of Jesus Christ” is a subjective genitive or objective is difficult to determine. If it is taken in line with the affirmation in 1:1, “Paul an apostle ... through Jesus Christ and God the Father” (Παῦλος ἀπόστολος ... διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ θεοῦ πατρὸς), it may look natural to construe it subjectively as a “revelation from Jesus Christ.”¹⁵ On the other hand, in the light of 1:16 which clearly states that it is God who does the revealing it could be better taken as an objective genitive (Christ is the content of the revelation). In any case, we find here an unmistakable connection between these three: the gospel of Christ, the revelation of Christ and his gospel to Paul, and Jesus Christ. As indicated above, the revealed *pistis* as an eschatological phenomenon involves the singular coming of Christ to the world. Without this no “revelation of Jesus Christ” would have occurred to Paul. For in that case there would have been neither *revelator* nor *revelatum* that could enter into a relation of faith with Paul. In other words, Paul’s reception of the gospel through a “revelation of Jesus Christ” should be regarded as belonging in one and the same *pistis* phenomenon.

Secondly, simple comparisons of Galatians 1:23 with Galatians 1:13 and 1:16 tell us more about this point. According to Betz, *πίστις* in Galatians 1:23 (in the absolute state as in Gal 3: 23 and 25) is understood as “the content of faith (*fides quae creditur*) rather than the act of believing” and this old view is inherited by other recent advocates of the “faith-in-Christ” interpretation¹⁶. Here, too, Betz and others believe that determining one or other sense of the word in context is exegetes’ key question. It is inconceivable to them to search for the (external) referent of *πίστις*. Why should we not take the four arthrous occurrences of *πίστις* (Gal 1:23; 3:23, 23 and 25) by the same token? Just as in Galatians 3:23 and 25, so for Galatians 1:23, too, we should consider that *πίστις* refers to the eschatological phenomenon, the *Pistis* (in my terminology), involving human beings’ act of believing. Paul mentions expressly and positively what the Judean believers were hearing about his conversion (if not a verbatim report). It seems that Paul thought his faith terminology to be the same as that in their report in Galatian 1:23, or even that he learned it from his predecessors¹⁷. All theories aside Paul was a late comer to this new movement. While insisting the independence of his apostleship (Gal 1:1) and gospel (Gal 1:11-12) from any human authority, Paul did not contend over teachings on faith in this letter.¹⁸ What concerned him was Galatian believer’s deviation from the true gospel of Christ (Gal 1:7), and not faith.

Double parallelisms of Galatians 1:23 with Galatians 1:16 and 1:13 should be noted

¹⁵ Richard Longenecker, *Galatians*, WBC 41 (Dallas: Word, 1990) 23f.

¹⁶ Betz, *Galatians*, 81n235. Frederick F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: a Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 105; Dunn, *Galatians*, 84; Moo, *Galatians*, 114.

¹⁷ Concerning this possibility special attention should be paid to the episodes with references to “faith” in the first eleven chapters of Acts. They are likely to contain some traditions going back to the earliest days of the Jerusalem church.

¹⁸ Gal 5:6b, ἀλλὰ πίστις δι’ ἄγαπης ἐνεργουμένη, certainly reflects the apostle’s notion of true faith, but he is not discussing any differences between spurious and true faiths here. Cf. 1 Cor 15:2, 14, 17; Matt 8:10, 15:28; Luke 7:9, 8:13, 25, 17:6; Acts 8:13; Jas 2:17, 19, 26.

carefully in this connection. De Boer explains the parallelism between Galatians 1:16 (“preaching God’s Son”) and Galatians 1:23 (“preaching the faith”) as follows:

The parallel indicates that “the faith” in 1:23 may refer to “the faith of the Son of God” (2:20) or “of [Jesus] Christ” (2:16), which would mean that Paul is using the word “faith” in 1:23 as a metonym for the Son of God or Christ, as he does in 3:23-26.... To preach “the faith” is to preach “God’s Son” or “Christ.”¹⁹

This reasoning is very questionable. The parallelism between “preaching God’s Son” (Gal 1:16) and “preaching the faith” (Gal 1:23) is not identical to one between “preaching *the faith of God’s Son*” and “preaching the faith.” Whether “the faith” in Galatians 1:23 refers to “the faith of God’s Son” cannot be determined from this parallelism. Moreover, phrases virtually identical to “preaching God’s Son” are found also in 2 Corinthians 1:19, 4:5 and Philippians 1:15, without any parallelism or other indication that dictates us to read the sense of Christ’s faith or faithfulness there. In my view, $\tau\eta\nu\pi\sigma\tau\iota\nu$ in Galatians 1:23 is not a metonym for Christ in Paul’s idiom. On the contrary, “Christ” in Galatians 1:16 is a metonym for the *Pistis*. As with Betz’ interpretation, de Boer’s also suffers from the presupposition that determining one or another sense of $\pi\sigma\tau\iota\varsigma$ is decisive in exegesis.

The parallelism seen between Galatians 1:23 and 1:13 is even more important for understanding “the *pistis*” in the absolute state. Two impressive Greek verbs found in Galatians 1:23 also appear in Galatians 1:13: One is $\delta\iota\omega\kappa\omega$ (“to persecute”) and the other $\pi\sigma\theta\epsilon\omega$ (“to destroy”; cf. Acts 9:21). So this section is considered to be framed by 1:13 and 1:23 where this set of verbs play an important role. Paul’s wording shows that the “us” (v. 23) parallels with “the church of God” (v. 13) and “the faith” (v. 23) with “the church of God” (v. 13, literally “it” [$\alpha\dot{u}\tau\eta\upsilon$]). The former parallelism is easily understandable, while the latter urges us to ponder the reason. If “the faith” simply means “the content of faith” or “the gospel” as Betz and others maintain, how can it be parallel with “the church of God”? The latter denotes an assembly of believers! You cannot explain it away by insisting that this use of $\pi\sigma\tau\iota\varsigma$ goes back to a report among “the churches of Christ in Judea” (v. 22) and therefore is not Pauline. For this is the first occurrence of $\pi\sigma\tau\iota\varsigma$, one of the most important words in this letter, and the section from 1:12 to 2:14 in which these two places belong is Paul’s *narratio* according to Betz’ analysis. Then, if this use of $\pi\sigma\tau\iota\varsigma$ is to be distinguished from the other uses of the word without a modifier (in 3:2, 5, 7-9, 11-12, 14, 23-26; 5:5, 6; 6:10), Paul’s referring to his past persecution of “the faith” would have seemed out of focus in the eyes of his Galatian readers and his *narratio* would have been much less successful.

The parallelism of “the faith” with “the church of God” need not be construed based on the *senses* of the words. We should attempt a holistic interpretation by searching for the *referent* of “the faith.” Let us see what verbs are used with what objects in these verses.

Persecute	the church of God (v. 13), us (v. 23)
Try to destroy	the church of God (v. 13), the faith (v. 23)
Preach	the faith (v. 23), [the gospel (v. 8, 11), God’s Son (v. 16)]

To persecute and to try to destroy²⁰ are on the same line of action in this context, so the

¹⁹ De Boer, *Galatians*, 103.

²⁰ For the strong nuance of this verb used here see Mark A. Seifrid, *Justification by Faith: the Origin and*

contrast developed here is actually one: negative (harsh persecution) and positive (active preaching). These two sets of verbs indicate attitudes in the opposite direction to each other. Interestingly, only one object is common to the two verb sets: “the faith.” What does this mean? We should note that it comes at the *end* of the section, where Paul’s report on his previous career ends. “The faith” was once the target of Paul’s persecution (v. 13) but now it is the object of his preaching (v. 23 εὐαγγελίζεται). His report, then, has a nature of *narrating God’s victory*. The genitive modifier “of God” (τοῦ θεοῦ) in Paul’s reference to the church is highly important (see also 1 Cor 1:2; 10:32; 11:16, 22; 15:9 [διότι ἐδίωξα τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ θεοῦ]; 2 Cor 1:1; 1 Thess 2:14; Acts 20:28). Since this “assembly of God’s people” (Dunn) was chosen by God himself (cf. 1 Thess 1:4; Rom 8:33; Col 3:12), Paul’s actions to persecute it had actually been directed against God. In spite of this, God revealed his Son to Paul (v. 16), commissioning him to preach the gospel (v. 8, 11), God’s son (v. 16), and the faith (v. 23). God has won a perfect victory, because he not only made Paul cease persecuting Christians but also changed him into a devoted preacher. Galatians 1:24 (“And they glorified God because of me.”) can be read as a report of voices among “us” to praise God’s victory.

Thus, Galatians 1:23, located at the end of the envelope structure, performs an important role in finishing Paul’s narration of God’s victory, and the word “the faith” appears in this very place. So then, how should we interpret it? Should it be construed as a synonym of the “gospel” or a metonym of “God’s son” or taken simply in the meaning of human faith? None of these are satisfactory. Since it comes at the end of the section, these meanings are all too weak to convey its summarizing force. I rather take it as an *umbrella term* to refer to *God’s economy or system for saving human beings*. This economy referred to by the word ή πίστις involves God the Father, Christ the Son of God, the gospel of Christ and preachers of it, and human beings who hear the gospel and come to believe, forming a church. (That the Spirit joins here cannot be known from this section.) This interpretation enables us to look closer at whether ή πίστις in Galatians 1:23 is identical to the same term in 3:23 and 25. I think that there is no reason not to regard them identical, the *Pistis*. While persecuting the church of God, Paul was looking at the *Pistis* from outside; at conversion he was introduced into it, now being able to preach it from inside.

II. *Arguments for the Subjective Genitive*

For advocates of the subjective genitive, too, the four occurrences of πίστις in Galatians 3: 23-25 pose exegetical difficulties. Here let us focus on strategies by two scholars who try to carry through their own subjective genitive interpretation: Hung-Sik Choi and De Boer.

First, Choi’s study.²¹ He correctly stresses that ή πίστις in Galatians 3:23-26 is the subject of “coming.” Appealing to Betz’ observation cited above (Note 11), he points out that “Paul marks the turning point in salvation history with the use of the verb ἔρχομαι.” His conclusion is that “πίστις in 3:23-25 describes an event—the coming and revelation of Christ’s faithfulness—not the Christian’s subjective act of believing.”²² This interpretation, however,

Development of a Central Pauline Theme (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1992) 155n.76.

²¹ Interestingly Choi is criticizing other advocates of the subjective genitive including Hays and R. Longenecker for their “inconsistency.” Choi, “ΠΙΣΤΙΣ in Galatians 5:5-6,” 473.

seems logically confused. If the word *describes* an event, what works is its sense that enables a description or an account of the event in question. Is the whole range of lexical senses of πίστις rich enough to give a description of “the coming and revelation of Christ’s faithfulness”? Neither the idea of the coming/revelation nor of Christ is contained in the senses of the Greek word. Maybe he wanted to say “the word refers to an event.” If so we can agree with him, but in that case another problem arises, that is, what should be counted in the event. It certainly does not come down to the revelation of Christ’s faithfulness or the coming of Christ in his faithfulness. This eschatological event can and should logically involve repeated occurrences of the Christian’s subjective act of believing and repeated missionary activities to preach the gospel, and of course God’s sending of the (Holy) Spirit. This event or phenomenon is *holistic* indeed, and therefore a holistic interpretation is required.

Choi’s theory is marked by another unremovable flaw. He takes, with many others, τὴν πίστιν in Galatians 3:23 anaphorically to mean pointing back to πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (“the faithfulness of Jesus Christ” in his interpretation) in Galatians 3:22. Then he proposes that ἡ πίστις in Galatians 3:23-26 is “an abbreviation of πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ” (cf. Gal 2:16, 22) and reads ἐκ πίστεως in Galatians 3:24 as “an abbreviation of ἐκ πίστεως Χριστοῦ.”²² Choi’s reasoning for the latter point is based on a rather dubious premise and his whole interpretation is controlled by it. According to Choi, Paul has a tendency to abbreviate long phrases. The evidences he puts forward are: διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (Rom 3:22) to διὰ πίστεως (Rom 3: 25, 31); ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ (Rom 3:26) to ἐκ πίστεως (Rom 3:30); στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου (Gal 4: 3) to στοιχεῖα (Gal 4:9), and ἔργα νόμου (Rom 3:20) to ἔργα (Rom 3:27; 4:2, 6; 9:12, 32; 11: 6).²³ These occurrences certainly deserve full consideration, but it is easily recognizable that this theory does not work in actuality. In fact, he excludes the first occurrence of πίστις in this letter (1:23) from his consideration. Moreover, if ἐκ πίστεως is an abbreviation of ἐκ πίστεως Χριστοῦ, it is natural to think that Paul used the same phrase in a formulaic manner also in Romans. In Romans 1:17 we find two uses of the phrase ἐκ πίστεως (one of them followed by εἰς πίστιν), but in the preceding section there is no mention of ἐκ πίστεως Χριστοῦ. Indeed, it is in 1:5 (εἰς ὑπακοὴν πίστεως) that the word πίστις appears first in this letter.

De Boer also maintains that the shorter phrase ἐκ πίστεως (3:7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 24; 5:5) is for Paul an abbreviated version of the longer one, ἐκ πίστεως (Ἰησοῦ) Χριστοῦ (Gal 2:16; 3:22).²⁴ He presents exegetic reinforcements of this view, even covering those places which are overlooked in Choi’s treatment. First, he points to the fact that the ἵνα clause in Galatians 3:24 is a parallel to that in Galatians 2:16:

- 3:24 ἵνα ἐκ πίστεως δικαιωθῶμεν
2:16 ἵνα δικαιωθῶμεν ἐκ πίστεως Χριστοῦ

Then de Boer reconfirms that “the phrase *ek pisteōs* is the equivalent of *ek pisteōs Christou*.” As he points out, this parallelism is also recognized by advocates of the objective genitive, except that they take it as meaning “by faith in Christ.” So the conclusion that ἐκ πίστεως is an

²² Ibid., 477.

²³ Ibid., 467, 472-78, 482.

²⁴ Ibid., 467n2.

²⁵ De Boer, *Galatians*, 192f. He is not aware of the defection of the abbreviation theory in relation to Romans. He describes, “In Romans, as in other letters, Paul can even unambiguously call such believing in Christ *pistis*, ‘faith’ (e.g., Rom 1:5). In Galatians, however, Paul appears to use the term *pistis* consistently as shorthand for *pistis Christou*.”

abbreviation of ἐκ πίστεως Χριστοῦ may look very sound, irrespective of how the latter is construed. However, if πίστις having no genitive word attached is an *umbrella term* to refer to God's eschatological and holistic saving economy and the genitive Χριστοῦ is an important means of differentiating that reality,²⁶ this parallelism is nothing more than a resemblance on the surface.

For de Boer what is decisive in this matter is the occurrence of πίστις in Galatians 3:23-25. He states:

[In Galatians 3:23-25] Paul uses the term in a personified way: Faith “came” onto the world stage ... (3:23, 25), as Christ himself did (3:19). As a result “we are no longer under a custodian” (3:25), “under the law” (3:23), which was “our custodian until [eis] Christ” (3:24), meaning “until [eis] Faith should be revealed” (3:23). *Pistis* seems here to be not the faith of the believer in Christ, but Christ’s own *pistis*. Paul uses the word “Faith” as a metonym for Christ himself In 3:24, “to be justified on the basis of faith” then means “to be justified on the basis of Christ’s faith” (cf. 2:16b). That conclusion must then also apply to 2:16.²⁷

In my view, this interpretation is logically too weak to be maintained. If “Faith” is used as a metonym for Christ himself, then, strictly speaking, what “came” onto the world stage is Christ, not Christ’s own πίστις or faith. Of course this distinction is superficial from a logical point of view, because the coming of Christ is thought to be the advent of Christ with his *properties*, which certainly include his faith or faithfulness attested in his deeds. However, *relations* between two entities—Christ and believers in this case (typically the state of a person having faith in Christ)—cannot be reduced to properties of either one of them. So Christ’s faith or faithfulness to God as such, however perfect it is, cannot be the “basis” on which believers are justified, *unless* it is connected with the believer in one way or other.

Can the Pauline notion of “in Christ” understood in terms of a “participationist eschatology” work in this regard?²⁸ The answer is “No.” Participation is certainly a relation and Paul’s phrase “in Christ” appears many times in this letter (1:22; 2:4, 17; 3:14, 26, 28; 5:6. Cf. 2:16, 20; 3:27, 29; 5:24). However, what we are searching for in Galatians 3:23-25 is something that actualizes such a relation, a “glue,” and there is no clear mention of Christ’s faith or faithfulness functioning as glue in any one of these verses. Just following this section the phrase “in Christ” reappears in 3:26: Πάντες γὰρ νιοὶ θεοῦ ἔστε διὰ τῆς πίστεως ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. With most commentators I take ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ absolutely. So this sentence can be translated: “For through the *pistis* you are all sons of God in Christ Jesus.” It is unreasonable, however, to regard being “in Christ” as the cause of the *pistis*. Rather, the *pistis* seems to be what actualizes the relation (“in Christ” or “participation”). Since this is a recurrence of the same term in the absolute state in 3:23 and 25 and of the phrase ἐκ πίστεως in 3:24, it naturally follows that ἡ πίστις in 3:23 has something to do with such glueing. As was discussed above, the faith(fulness) of Christ itself—or perhaps even Christ *as a person*—cannot play such a role.

Interestingly, a typical objective genitive interpretation that takes ἐκ πίστεως as meaning

²⁶ Ota, “Absolute Use of ΠΙΣΤΙΣ,” 78.

²⁷ De Boer, *Galatians*, 193.

²⁸ See David L. Stubbs, “The Shape of Soteriology and the *Pistis Christou* Debate,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61 (2008) 137-157.

“by faith in Christ” seems to be free from this problem, because, simply put, “faith in Christ” is a *binary relation*. This may be a strongpoint of the faith-in-Christ interpretation, but the question as to which is the glue remains unanswered. Besides, this interpretation does not hold good exegetically, as was shown above. We should give up scrutinizing the word πίστις for its appropriate sense in context and instead adopt a holistic perspective. Since ἡ πίστις is a term to refer to the eschatological reality as a whole, the glueing function is to be found in its components other than Christ. This question is too difficult to be dealt with here, but the Spirit seems to hold the key.

III. πίστις Χριστοῦ: Christ’s Faithfulness toward Humanity

Although I understand the genitive Χριστοῦ subjectively, my view is quite different from existing subjective genitive proposals. I have been maintaining that the πίστις Χριστοῦ formulation denotes *Christ’s faithfulness toward humanity* in the sense of Christ’s being steadfast, truthful, and trustworthy as God’ Christ. Unlike some of the subjective genitive proponents, I take Paul’s expression εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐπιστεύσαμεν (“we came to believe in Christ Jesus”) in its full literal force as referring to Christ as the object of faith. So as far as Christ’s deeds are recognized by his believers as essential for their own justification, the former are a *correlative* of their faith in Christ. In other words, for Christ’s believers his deeds are not such that are done by him alone apart from the faith of human beings.

In my interpretation the genitive construction πίστις Χριστοῦ does not express “faith in Christ” itself, but denotes a *correlative of faith in Christ*, the focus of which lies, according to Paul, in the recognition that Christ is faithful toward human beings in his deeds referred to by the same phrase. In other words, πίστις Χριστοῦ denotes the *faithworth* of Christ’s *specific deeds* referred to by the same phrase in the faith relation into which the believer has been brought by the grace of God. Then might we as well translate πίστις Χριστοῦ “Christ’s faithworth”? No, not that way. The concept of faithworth is more fundamental and comprehensive, for whenever someone believes in Christ for anything preached about him, his or her faith is directed toward the worth Christ has as regards that preaching. πίστις Χριστοῦ or Christ’s *pistis* is a rather *specific term* as will be explained from now on. I will explain in two steps: (1) a contextual comparison of the places where the phrase πίστις Χριστοῦ appears, and (2) the specific referent of πίστις Χριστοῦ in Galatians 2:16-21.

Strikingly, all the seven places having πίστις Χριστοῦ (see Note 1) come in a context discussing or at least touching on all of these: (1) righteousness or justification (Rom 3:21-26; Gal 2:15-21; Gal 3:6-22; Phil 3:5-11), (2) criticism of the law (Rom 3:21; Gal 2:16-21; Gal 3: 10-14, 17-22; Phil 3:6-9), and (3) Christ’s death, redemption or atonement for sins (Rom 3:24-25; Gal 2:19-21; Gal 3: 13; Phil 3: 10). This fact seems to indicate that Paul’s usage of the πίστις Χριστοῦ construction is fundamentally linked to these three-fold references. Furthermore, criticism of the law may show that Paul used πίστις Χριστοῦ as a *polemical term*.²⁹ Giving

²⁹ Generally speaking, Christ’s person and deeds are steadfast, truthful, and trustworthy (i.e., πιστός) for those who believe in him, but such a notion of πίστις (faithworth) is more comprehensive in nature than Paul’s specific uses of πίστις Χριστοῦ, which should be distinguished from the former. Nevertheless, it would be of great value to see whether Paul could appeal to the *concept* of πίστις Χριστοῦ (Christ’s faithfulness in relation to believers) without using the

heed to this fact, I now try to elucidate the meaning of *πίστις Χριστοῦ* in the context of Galatians 2:15-21.

In Galatians 2:15-21 particularly important for our study is Galatians 2:16 and 2:20. They can be translated as follows:

Gal 2:16 Yet knowing that a person is not justified by works of the law, if not through *pistis* of Jesus Christ [not justified], we, too, came to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by *pistis* of Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Gal 2:20 And I no longer live, but Christ lives in me; and what I now live in the flesh I live by *pistis* of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me.

In Galatians 2:15-21, *πίστις Χριστοῦ* is fundamentally linked to justification by God (Gal 2:16-17) and righteousness (Gal 2:21), the law's inability to justify (Gal 2:16, 21), and Christ's atoning or redemptive death (Gal 2:20-21). Now, the first thing to be noted is that *pistis* of (Jesus) Christ (Gal 2:16a, 16b) is the medium (*διά*) or origin (*ἐκ*) of justification, irrespective of what this genitive construction means. Advocates of the objective genitive take "through *pistis* of Jesus Christ" in the meaning of "through faith in Jesus Christ." In that case, what does "faith in Jesus Christ" refer to? Dunn explains it as "acceptance of the reliability of what was said by and about Christ (acceptance of the gospel message ...) and trust in, reliance upon the Christ of whom the gospel thus spoke."³⁰ In light of the three-fold references common to all the seven places, however, this explanation is too broad to be of use to identify the referent of *πίστις Χριστοῦ*.

The expression "who loved me and gave himself up for me" in Galatians 2:20b derives from a pre-Pauline Christological formula that understands "Christ's death on the cross as an act of love and self-sacrifice on behalf of the Christian."³¹ This formula is a close parallel of that found in Galatians 1:4 (τοῦ δόντος ἑαυτὸν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἀμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν "who gave himself for our sins"), and the "for our sins" in the latter implies that Jesus' death was understood even by Paul as an expiatory self-sacrifice to deal with believers' sins. This is followed by ὅπως ἔξεληται ἡμᾶς ἐκ τοῦ αἰῶνος τοῦ ἐνεστῶτος πονηροῦ ("that he might deliver us from the present evil age"). De Boer sees Paul's intent in this series, commenting that "Paul immediately interprets Christ's giving himself 'for our sins' to effect not forgiveness but deliverance from an evil realm."³² This interpretation seems to me too simple, but what is to be questioned here is not its validity but *for whom* and *for what* Paul and others believed Christ the Son of God gave himself up. Of course, the answer is given in the text: "for me" and "for our sins." Paul and others *believed* that Christ died for the sake of human beings. According to de Boer, "'the faith of the son of God'(v. 20c) refers to the Son's own faith, in particular his faithful, atoning death on the cross."³³ Since he correctly includes "atoning" in his description, his interpretation may look quite the same as my own version: "*πίστις Χριστοῦ* denotes Christ's faithfulness toward humanity." What is insufficient, then, in de Boer's exegesis?

phrase in situations where these three-fold references were meaningful for him. Romans 10:8-11, for instance, seems to reflect such a situation.

³⁰ Dunn, *Galatians*, 139.

³¹ Betz, *Galatians*, 125f.

³² De Boer, *Galatians*, 30.

³³ Ibid., 162. Cf. also 175.

The problem is that he and other proponents of the subjective genitive are unaware of the fact that Paul's phrase does not so much refer to "the Son's faithful, atoning death on the cross" itself as denotes the *significance of his atoning death for believers* referred to by the same phrase. Hence, πίστις Χριστοῦ cannot mean anything other than Christ's death *in his faithfulness toward believers*. In other words, Christ's faithfulness is a correlative of Paul's and other Christians' faith in Christ in this regard; it is the *faithworth* of his specific deeds culminating in his atoning death for those who have faith in him. Furthermore, in God's economy for human salvation, the *Pistis*, the phrase πίστις Χριστοῦ denotes the binary relation between Christ and his believers established by the gospel pointing to his atoning death (see esp. 1 Cor 15:3); on the basis of this relation God justifies such people in his holistic economy.

Of course "Christ's faithfulness to God" has a faithworth when it is acknowledged as true (as in Philippians 2:4-11), but it is the faithworth of the statement or proposition that "Christ was faithful to God even unto death on a cross," not immediately that of Christ. We should note that in this case no logical link has yet been established between Christ's faithfulness and the justification of human beings. For however perfect Christ's faithfulness to God is, it is Christ's and *not* the Christian's. I do not find anything wrong with this proposition, but unless it is believed as *his faithfulness to me* in the faith relation involving me, it has no power to justify me.