

Helen, our church's trustworthy and nearly indispensable administrative assistant, now and then accuses me of playing loose and fancy with God's word. She usually makes such chiding remarks when I have decided to use a legitimate but contested translation of God's word. We encounter one of those variants today. Our journey through the bible finds itself in Romans, and in Romans 3 we have a whopper of a variant reading. It is an alternative translation that changed my attitude on the book of Romans and the apostle Paul more broadly. Of what do I speak??

In Romans 3.22 and 3.26 it is the interpreter's choice to translate that God's goodness has been disclosed "through faith in Jesus Christ", or "through the faith of Jesus Christ" (διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ). Do we see the difference? In one case we are asked to believe in Jesus Christ, with the specific details of what that means to be filled in by the preacher of the day. In the other case we are invited to believe that Jesus had faith. I think the overwhelming textual evidence points to the reading I have had printed in our bulletins. Consider, for example, the way in which the faith of Jesus Christ better parallels Romans 1.16-17 which tells of the righteousness of God being revealed in faith for faith. In chapter 3 we read Paul saying that Jesus' faith has been for our faith. Jesus believed so that we might grow in belief. And this modest adaptation to the translation spoke to a question that periodically surfaced for me as a young person

So Patrick, do believe in Jesus Christ? I have never appreciated the question and have always felt my response to be somewhat inadequate; probably because I never understood the motivation behind the question. How does a person say kindly, I believe in Jesus but probably not in the way you mean. And it feels rude to answer with the sincere words of a father out the gospel of Mark chapter 9: I believe help my unbelief (Mk 9.24). The truth of the matter is that I am still coming to know the depths of Jesus Christ. The longer I follow after Jesus Christ, trying to imitate him, the more humble I become in assertions about the Christ. He loves the unlovable. He disciplines the undisciplined. He forgives the unforgivable. He affirms the faith of those deemed faithless. He dies that others might find life. This kind of thing isn't easy. I try to love the unlovable and I find myself getting resentful. I try to disciple the undisciplined (in myself and others) and I get frustrated. I try to practice forgiveness, and true forgiveness is not easy. Jesus does this; I struggle to do this. What, really, does it mean to believe in this cosmic Christ who exceeds our capacity for understanding? And then I began biblical studies and ran across this alternative and valid translation which made a lot sense to me.

It is the faith of Jesus Christ, not my faith, on which this whole Christian story hangs. This translation allowed me to relinquish control of ideas I should or might have about Jesus and let Jesus be the Christ he is. It is Jesus who believes us into a place of loving ourselves; tarnished though we are. It is Jesus who believes the Christian body into a semblance of wholeness; fractured as the church often appears. It is Jesus who believes enemies into peace treaties; as nasty as our quarrels and wars can be. God's righteousness (which is a central concern to Romans 3) is evident through the faith of Jesus Christ whom God put forward as an answer to human unfaithfulness. The unfaithfulness of a fallen humanity is countered and overcome by the faithfulness of Christ (R.B Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ* (SBL dissertation Series 56), Scholars Press, p. 173). In Christ Jesus reconciliation has happened. It becomes a reality for all those who allow that atoning work of Jesus to fill the valleys and smooth out the rough places. This makes theological sense to me.

It is about the faith of Jesus and less about me. Significantly, this shift of focus to the faith of Jesus Christ, rather than our faith, is the keystone by which our diverse church will survive with its diversity intact.

The churches of Rome had a problem. Gentiles Christians and Jewish Christians were having a terrible time getting along. I follow those biblical scholars who pose that there were multiple churches in Rome to which Paul addressed his letter. There were some gentile congregations and some Jewish congregations and some blended congregations (see Reta Halteman Finger's book *Paul and the Roman House Churches*). One of their friction points was around food issues. Yes they were having problems at potlucks. Apparently when the churches got together some of the households brought less than kosher meat, and this created hard feelings. The well meaning Gentile was bringing his sausage on bun to share with the religious community and 100% of the Jewish brethren boycotted his offering. 100%. It was like a conspiracy. He had spent considerable time and money assembling his hot dish; what a slap in the face. And if you have known the shame of returning home with an untouched potluck dish, like I have, you know it jades the spirit. Suffice it to say that the gentiles were getting fed up, so to speak, with Jewish pickiness. Or consider it from the other side: you are Jewish with sensitivity not just to pork, but also meat offered to an idol. Any God fearing Jewish Christian would never dare tucking into the meat tray not knowing the source of the food, its species, or how it was butchered. Everyone knows that. Why, being aware of the Jewish food allergies, would those Gentiles bring such a dish to potluck? Is it mockery? Is it spite? You can see how the frustration would mount. Food was a massive controversy for the fledgling church. Paul gets to some practical advice on this topic for the Roman congregations in chapters 14-15.

A second nagging issue for the churches of Rome had to do with ethnicity. From the Jewish perspective history was important. The study of history was a type of theology. History told the story of God's faithfulness to a generally unfaithful people. History outlined God's desire that all humanity might become a covenant people, and the Jews, naturally, had a special place in that divine mission. Family blood lines, ancestral customs, Jewish traditions were a part of this attention to history. One could see how Jewish worshippers might slip into a tracing of family ties to see if they were sixth or seventh cousins. Surely Gentiles felt left out of this game. Possibly Gentiles felt undervalued as a people who had no pedigree, no connection to Israel, no biblical training. Ethnicity was a serious issue for the young church. Paul gets to some practical advice surrounding this question in chapters 9-11.

The resolution to these challenges, Paul suggests, is that God and Jesus have faith in us. Our unity comes from the faith of God and Jesus. Jesus is our unity: not food, not ethnicity, not anything else. This, in a nut shell, is Paul's message in Romans. And now we move to the discipleship of the text for our moment in time.

Urban Case Study One: food allergies

The idea of vegetarianism, or eating only humanly raised animals, are foreign concepts in the place that I am from. The idea of being gluten intolerant was unknown to my zweibach addicted people. I am not going to label either the herbivores or the celiac among us as weak, but the reality of the urban scene is that herbivores and the celiac and the conscious meat eater gather at the same table as the omnivore. How then do we navigate this dietary variety? We make sure a

gluten free bread is an option when we celebrate communion. When people invite us out a common question is if we have food allergies, and we are grateful for this because Patty has a gluten sensitivity. It is a simple question but it allows for us to share our dietary restrictions. Conversely, Patty and I are more than happy to cook vegetarian when inviting people over for a meal and we stock only meat that has been raised humanely. I am grateful for my vegetarian friends who allow me to bring my hamburger, steak, or pork chop to a cook-out. Most of us agree that food choice is a matter of personal conviction rather than a faith statement.

God and Jesus have faith in us. And because they have faith in us we have been able to see our way through dietary differences that might arise among us. We have been strengthened to accommodate to others because Jesus Christ has accommodated us. The faith of Jesus undergirds our efforts to be accepting.

Urban Case Study Two: ethnicity

During the introduction of visitors on a Sunday in our former congregation a visitor stood up, gave his name, gave his parents name and proceeded to detail his Mennonite connections. It was awkward. You see, over half our congregation at Faith Mennonite did not migrate through the Ukraine or Frei-statt Danzig. Other visitors that morning had not such a lengthy list of references. We had to make clear that they were welcome even if they didn't have those historic connections. God was drawing these non-ethnic Mennonite back to organized religion had and his church because of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. Most of our people were deeply concerned with peace issues and God. They understood a Mennonite church one place to live out these interests. They didn't know the Funk family from the 19th century, Molotschna Colony, or what any of that might have to do with being a people of peace in the Twin Cities. Mennonite fascination with ethnicity, family history, and cultural traditions has the potential to confuse people being drawn to Jesus Christ. 4 part singing, German language, RJC connections, family history, Mennonite history all have the capacity to disaffect someone drawn to Mennonite theology but not an ethnic Mennonite. History can be a treasury, but it must not get in the way of our present living. Too often aspects of our cultural tradition become idols or points of division. Our focus must remain on Jesus, following after the Christ, and sharing the hope we have been given.

God and Jesus have faith in us. And because they have faith in us we will be able to see our way through the transition to a non-ethnic, or less ethnic, Nutana Park Mennonite Church. We will be people who gather on account of God's grace, the inspiration of Jesus, a desire for mutual support, a thirst for ministry in our world—not on account of a clan lineage or family expectation.

Clearly there are tensions within the church and our church institutions which I have not named. Regrettably it seems there are more case studies than we have time for. With have disagreements about leadership in some off our institutions and political bodies. If the Canadian Mennonite is accurate in its reporting we have differences in opinion about the configuration of the future Mennonite Church Canada. And there are other areas of difficulty. Jesus Christ is the answer to the tensions we face in our homes, our congregations, our institutions. Our faith and hope are built on Jesus Christ. Paul, in Romans 8, tells us that as learn to dwell in God's faithfulness we

will find that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Remember the faith of Jesus is the antidote for those times of anxiety or fear which come upon us all.

Jesus is the keystone because he his patience allows us to be filled with his Spirit at the pace we can take it in. Jesus is the keystone because he has an ability to minister despite our immaturity and long after our faith wears out. Jesus is the keystone because he loves friend and enemy in ways we can not imagine. Jesus is the keystone because he will not let us be separated from God's love. This is the belief of Jesus Christ. It is his faith for our faith. And this is good news. Amen.

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