

Romans 1

1:1–15. The Opening of the Letter

I. Hearing the Voice of Paul

Following the convention of letter writing, Paul opens by introducing himself as the writer, naming his recipients, and greeting them [1–7]. The letter is from **Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ**; it is addressed to **all God's beloved in Rome**, and he cannot identify either of these properly without mentioning **Jesus Christ**, who has **called Paul to be an apostle**, and who has called the members

of the church in Rome **to belong to him** (v. 6). So Paul begins by setting out the key characters in the drama of life that his letter is going to present. They are Paul himself, Jesus Christ, and the Gentile and Jewish Christians in Rome to whom he is writing, and whom he aims to draw into a more harmonious life with each other. Related in some way to Christ are **God our Father** and the Holy Spirit (or “**spirit of holiness**”), although the exact nature of this relationship remains experimental and exploratory at this early stage of Christian belief. Hovering at the edge of the stage is the shadowy figure of a non-Christian Jew, whom Paul is going to draw into an imaginary conversation from time to time. Much further behind in the wings are the apostles of the Jewish-Christian church in Jerusalem, whom Paul is seeking to convince that his version for Gentiles of the **gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son**, has indeed been blessed by God. So he greets his readers and hearers: **Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**.

In order to make the congregation feel that he is indeed *their* apostle, and that the gospel he preaches is indeed the teaching with which they are familiar, he quotes what was probably a liturgical confession about Christ already in use in the church in Rome. It runs: “**who was descended from David according to the flesh, and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead**” (vv. 3–4). Wanting to make contact with his audience, Paul is not bothered about whether being “declared” to be Son of God at the time of his resurrection is a full Christology as he understands it. More important for Paul here is to echo the divine “**spirit**” of holiness in the way that he describes himself as **serving God with his spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son** (v. 9) followed by his expressed wish to share a “**spiritual**” (*pneumatikos*) **gift** with the Romans (v. 11). The inner **power** of the Spirit is to prove to be an important theme of the letter, launched in a “consequential” rhetoric (see Introduction, section 4) from this opening confession about the power of the Spirit in resurrection.

As well as this play on the word “spirit,” another catchword introduced in the very first words is also to take an important role in the ensuing letter: Paul declares himself **called to be an apostle** (v. 1) while the Romans are **called to belong to Christ** (v. 6) and **called to be saints** (“holy ones,” perhaps echoing the “spirit of holiness”) (v. 7). In the course of the letter Paul is to riff on the notion of “call,” finally using it to solve his perplexity over the destiny of the Jewish people.

[8] In the very setting of the scene and its cast of actors, an even more central theme begins to be sounded, in a casual way at first—namely **faith**. Paul has asserted that he has **received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles** (v. 5). Now in a prayer he thanks God that

the **faith** of the Roman Christians is widely known **throughout the world**, and he goes on to express his hope that he and the Roman Christians will be **mutually encouraged by each other's faith** (v. 13). So, in this quiet way, embedded in the language of the introduction (*prescript*, 1–7a), the greeting (7b), his prayer for the recipients (*exordium*, 8–10), and his recalling of the story of their relationship so far (*narratio*, 11–5), a term begins to emerge that is to be at the heart of the teaching of the letter. It is likely that Paul already has the majestic theme of faith already in his mind, and even the lapidary text from the Hebrew Bible that sums it up—**“the one who is righteous will live by faith”** (Hab. 2:4, v. 17). In his “anticipatory” rhetoric (see Introduction, section 4), dictating the letter out loud, Paul plays with variations on the theme of faith on the way to his target. One variant is his coining of the phrase “the obedience of faith” (v. 5), in which the notion of obedience that was customarily attached in Jewish thinking to the Torah, is here associated with faith. This is to be echoed later in another coinage “the law of faith” (3:27); neither phrase appears elsewhere in Paul's writings,¹ and they appear to crop up spontaneously in the flow of his thought.

[9–12] A small indication of the spontaneity with which Paul is thinking his way forward comes in a self-correction, precisely about faith. Having given God thanks for the Christians in Rome, he explains that **God is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you, for I am longing to see you**. The reason is his desire to share with the Romans **some spiritual gift of grace** (*charisma*) **to strengthen you**. Suddenly, however, he realizes that, in his enthusiasm, he has gone too far. He immediately offers a qualification to what he has just said, seeking to avoid the impression that he is claiming spiritual superiority, or criticizing their grasp of the faith, or intending to take them over. He clearly wants to give instruction and advice to this Christian group, but they are not his own converts and so his authority over them is debatable. [12] Thus he hastily adds, **or rather so that we will be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine**.

[13] Despite his self-correction, Paul cannot resist re-phrasing his initial, spontaneous wish to minister in Rome: **I want you to know, brothers** [NRSV and sisters] **that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles**. He believes that such “reaping” is appropriate since they are predominantly Gentiles to whom he has a special commission to proclaim his form of the **gospel**, though he immediately adds another qualification: [14] he is a **debtor** to the Gentile world, which includes both **Greeks and barbarians**—i.e. those who speak Greek and those who do not—both **wise and foolish** (a coupling that is to turn up again shortly in v. 22). This doubtless means that Paul feels himself obligated by the demands of the gospel, but there

is also an element of further self-correction here: the unusual word **debtor**, or “one obliged” (*opheiletēs*) admits a sense of how much he owed to a wide range of people for his outlook, and so also to the Gentile Christians in Rome. At the end of the letter there is to be an even greater modification of his expressed intention in coming to Rome when he explains that he hopes to be helped practically by the Roman Christians in being sent on to Spain (15:20–24). The **harvest** he has mentioned at the beginning of the letter must not, he urges, be misunderstood as re-evangelizing those who are already believers (15:20). Nevertheless, Paul believes that, in the present situation in Rome, he needs to clarify the basic content of the gospel he preaches and to make sure that the teaching the Romans have already received from others is essentially the same; he is shortly to announce its main theme (vv. 16–17).

Telling his own story as he introduces himself to his readers, Paul thus stresses his sense of responsibility to the two main ethnic groups he knows—Jew and Gentile. On the one hand he has been called to be a particular kind of apostle—a messenger of the gospel to the Gentile world. [15] This is the reason, he explains, for his **eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome**, as he has already done in other Gentile territories. This is why he regrets having been prevented from traveling to Rome so far. On the other hand, the gospel he proclaims is rooted deeply in a Jewish heritage, and he is aware that he has Jewish-Christians in his audience, albeit in a minority. “His” gospel has been promised beforehand by [Hebrew] prophets (v. 2), and it is about a Son of God who is descended from the Israelite king, David (v. 3). In a moment he is to produce a lapidary summary: the gospel is salvation **for all who have faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek** [16].

II. The Theological Reception

Commenting on “called to be an apostle ... called to belong to Jesus Christ ... called to be saints” (vv. 1, 6, 7) Chrysostom among the Church Fathers calls attention to the frequency with which Paul uses the word “called” (*Hom.* 1, 341), as does Peter Martyr Vermigli among Reformation writers (Vermigli 5). Some commentators simply equate “called” with “elect” or “predestined”; Origen, for example, states that God foreknew Paul’s missionary activity and therefore predestined him to be an apostle (1. 63–4), Calvin understands all those called to be sanctified to be “chosen by the same election of the Lord” as Paul (18) and the English Puritan Thomas Wilson writes of “an eternal decree of God” (9). Both Patristic and Reformation writers thus lose something of the playfulness with which Paul moves in his mind from “called” to “elected,” or from being “summoned” to being “chosen,” which in Paul blurs any kind of dogmatic predestination. Some Reformation writers do, however, employ the

notion of “effectual calling” to try and retain the sense of human response to a summons, while affirming that God’s call of the elect is bound to issue in such response. Vermigli, for example, in commenting on the phrase “called to belong” affirms that conversion “is undoubtedly voluntary and not compelled or violent. We are persuaded, when we are with efficacy called by the inward word of God” (5). Wilson depicts this “internal and effectual calling” as irresistible: “both mind and heart are mightily persuaded by the Spirit” (27). Modern commentators stress that what matters for Paul is the initiative God takes in summoning him and all followers of Christ to a vocation in life (Barrett 22); others note that Paul wishes to include the Gentiles in a calling that might otherwise be assumed to be a privilege of the Jewish people (Dunn 25; Witherington 37), and that there may be an echo here of the “holy ones called together,” or “the holy congregation” in the Septuagint (Exod 12:16, Lev 23, Num 28:25) (Cranfield 70–1; Käsemann 15).

Further on the idea of being “called,” the magisterial Reformation writers, in the church struggle of their time, stress that appointment of Paul to be an Apostle trumps the appointment of a mere bishop: the first has universal scope and his teaching cannot err, while the second has only local authority and his teaching can be only too erroneous (Melancton 59–60; cf. Calvin 15). Behind this comment there lies the claim that Paul’s direct teaching is to be preferred to any bishop, including the Bishop of Rome. Luther stresses that there are “an unusual number” in the church of his time who hold office but are not called to it at all (142). Confessions of faith from the more radical wing of the Reformation, such as Independents and Baptists, cite Romans 1:7, “called to be saints” (together with 1 Cor 1:1 and Eph 1:1), in regarding all members of the local church as “visible saints” (e.g. Confession 1644: art. 33; in Lumpkin 1959: 165), as “a holy and sanctified people” (Confession 1644: art. 29; in Lumpkin 1959: 164) making the invisible church manifest.

Commenting on God’s promise of the gospel (vv. 1–2), the Church Fathers stress the continuity of the gospel of Christ with the words of the Israelite prophets, in order to underline the fulfillment of God’s work in Christ (Chrysostom 339; Ambrosiaster 3). Melancton in the Reformation draws a parallel between the fact that the message of the gospel as preached by the early church was “not new,” and the claim that the gospel as preached by the Reformers is not a novelty either, comparing the opposition of the Papal church in his time to that of the Pharisees earlier (Melancton 61–2). It is “one and the same Gospel” which was shown to the prophets, preached by the apostles and is now being proclaimed by the Reformers. Calvin, however, enters a caution: the gospel was not actually “preached” by the prophets but only “promised,” since the gospel is properly the preaching of Christ made manifest in the flesh (Calvin 15): “those who confuse the Gospel with the promises, therefore, are

mistaken.” Here Calvin opens up a space between the letter of the ancient text and the gospel in the person of Christ. Origen earlier also opens up a hermeneutical gap, but in his own way between the letter and the spiritual meaning: what is promised is the “eternal gospel” (citing Rev 14:6) “written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God” (Origen 1.66–7). Later, commenting on v. 16, he tends to identify the “eternal gospel” with Christ himself (86). Startlingly, Luther even opens up a gap between the fulfillment of the promise in the incarnate Christ and the effect of the preaching of the gospel, affirming that: “Christ did not come to everyone through public preaching until after the resurrection from the dead,” so that “the incarnation of Christ would have been useful to no one if the gospel had not come from it,” and that Paul’s intention is to say that “God paid more attention to the gospel and [its] public coming through the Word than to the bodily birth or his coming in human form” (Luther 2013: 17). A number of modern commentaries suggest that the phrase “gospel of God” challenges the authority of public announcements by the Roman imperial power (Witherington 32, also Porter 44, Cranfield 55), so claiming that the ultimate source for Paul’s oral delivery of the gospel is God himself. Though in different ways, the insights of Origen, Calvin, Luther and these modern commentators are consistent with Paul’s concern for primary obedience not to a text but to the Spirit of the risen Christ.

When Paul writes that Christ was “descended (*genomenou*) from David according to the flesh ... declared (*horisthentos*) to be Son of God in power” (vv. 3–4), the Church Fathers are concerned to show that the word *horisthentos*, which can mean “appointed” (Theodoret 45–6), is totally consistent with Christ’s being the Son of God eternally. A number accept the alternative Old Latin reading “predestined” (*praedestinatus*), which assumes an addition of *pro-* to *horisthentos* in the Greek (Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints* 15 [31]; Cyril of Alexandria 773), but Origen has *horisthentos* in his text and translates it as “destined,” i.e. “sent” to implement the purpose of God, claiming that this is more appropriate than “predestined” for someone who is already in existence before his earthly life (Origen 1.69). Other commentators also read *horisthentos* but understand it as “shown,” “manifested” or “proved” (Chrysostom, *Hom.* 1, 340; cf. Ambrosiaster 4). Another problem the text presents for believers in a virgin birth is how Jesus can be said to be “descended” from David if Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus. Origen suggests that either Mary was herself of Davidic descent, or Joseph can be understood as the father of Jesus in a spiritual sense (1.71–73). Chrysostom finds significance in the order “descended from David” and “shown to be Son of God”: this is not about a progressive identity of Christ but a changing human understanding of Christ (*Hom.* 1, 340).

Among medieval commentators, Abelard (101) explains that Christ was “predestined ... according to the flesh”; that is, his human nature was predestined or

“prepared according to grace” to be the Son of God, just as Christ with regard to his human nature was “made” (*genomenou*, “having come into being,” Vulgate *factus*) for the Word from the seed of David. Abelard also asserts a Davidic lineage for Mary. William of St Thierry (21) offers the same understanding of the word “predestined,” but notes that the Greek text has “destined,” and he adopts in this case the same interpretation as Origen. Aquinas approves of Origen’s understanding of Christ’s being “destined,” but also wants an interpretation of the Latin “predestined.” Here he discards both the view of the *Glossa* that “predestined” can simply mean “foreknown,” and the idea that the human nature is predestined to be united with the eternal Son. His answer is that the whole person of Christ is predestined to be the Son of God in power at the resurrection, but because the one person of Christ is in two natures the predestination is to be attributed properly to his human nature, just as crucifixion and dying is to be referred to the human nature and not the divine (38). “According to the Spirit of holiness” can, thinks Aquinas, refer to the virgin birth of Christ. Later, Denys the Carthusian reads “predestined” and, expanding the kind of explanation Abelard gives, finds this to mean that God foreordained not the Word himself but the subsisting of the hypostasis of the eternal word in the human nature (cit. Elliott 2007: 189).

Reformation commentators generally understand Paul to be saying that Christ was “declared,” “shown” or “manifested” as the Son of God in the resurrection (Luther 147, Melanchton 63, Calvin 16), though Luther accepts the Latin word “predestined,” while Melanchton explicitly follows the Greek *horis-thentos*. Melanchton finds a two-nature Christology exhibited here, the human nature relating to “born from the seed of David” and the divine nature relating to “powerful ... by resurrection,” but the phrase “declared to be Son of God” refers to the whole person without reservation (63–4). Luther gives the passage his own stamp by finding a contrast here between humiliation and glory. In the thorough unity of the two natures in one person it is not, however, the Son of David who is humiliated but the Son of God who “became the Son of David in humbling and emptying himself ... to the point of the nothingness of the flesh,” while the Son of David is glorified in being demonstrated to be the Son of God in resurrection (146–7). In modern times Barth has celebrated this great exchange between Christ and humanity in general, with the Son of God humiliated and all human beings exalted in the resurrection (CD IV/1, 305, citing Rom 1:4; IV/1, 350–1). Calvin takes up what is to be a motif of the influence of the Spirit in the letter to come when he remarks that the power of the Spirit in resurrection, which declares the divine Sonship of Christ “is laid hold of when it is sealed by the same Spirit in our hearts,” and the exaltation of Christ “is not made known to us until the same Spirit imprints it on our hearts” (16).

Modern commentaries on this passage have taken a different direction from Patristic, Medieval or Reformation interpretations, more boldly asserting the

meaning of *horisthentos* as “appointed” rather than “declared” (Cranfield 61; Barrett 19; Fitzmyer 235) and not resorting to a distinction between natures. Witherington sees Paul as recognizing, with the term “appointed,” the “phase in [Christ’s] career where he becomes Son of God in power,” where previously “he was Son of God in weakness” (Witherington 33). More drastically, Käsemann asserts that the antithesis of the two lines of the liturgical formula and the use of the term “appoint” make it clear “that Jesus receives the dignity of divine sonship only with his exaltation and enthronement” (12), though he thinks that Paul himself did attribute divine sonship to Jesus in his earthly life. Dunn takes a mediating position, though still giving full force to the term “appoint.” He underlines that the title “Son of God” is quite widely used in Jewish culture for human beings who appear to have a special relationship with God (including, historically, the Davidic kingship), and he is interested in the way this formula expresses the growing Christian conviction that there is nevertheless something unique about the sonship of Christ. *This* Son of God, born from David’s line, has been appointed to an exceptional status by the “powerful” event of the resurrection: “Jesus’ divine sonship had been ‘upgraded’ or ‘enhanced’ by the resurrection so that he shared more fully in the very power of God ... in ‘executive authority’ able to act on and through people in the way Paul implies elsewhere” (Dunn 14; cf. Dunn 1980: 33–5). One aspect of this authority is in being not only a Messiah for Israel but a savior universally for all humankind (Dunn 23–4), so moving us into the momentum of Paul’s argument in the letter that the gospel is for both Jew and Gentile. Similarly, Porter comments that the second line of the formula “assumes divine sonship but enhances this by designating an additional type of divine sonship” (46).

The history of interpretation of the phrase, “the obedience of faith” (v. 5) demonstrates its ambiguity, and so Paul’s creativity with the idea of “obedience” (*hupakoē*), a word little known at the time, but which is to become prominent in the letter (Dunn 17). Pelagius understands the phrase as obedience *to* faith (60), as does Aquinas later (43). Ambrosiaster understands it as the obedience that comes *from* faith (4) and later William of St Thierry takes the same line, understanding obedience as undertaking “a new mode of life and a new pattern of religious behaviour” (23). Abelard understands it as an obedience to God that must *precede* faith (104), while Erasmus understands it to be the faith that *results* from simple obedience, rather than obtained by logical reasoning (*Annotations* 27). Like Ambrosiaster, Luther finds obedience to be the result of faith, but specifies obedience as faithful submission to Christ and not to any external, worldly power and dominion (2014: 42–3); Calvin somewhat similarly finds faith to be the means of obedience to the gospel (18). Thereby the Reformers come close to finding obedience to be *characterized* by faith rather than by the following of law (cf. Bucer 1536: 18–9). This is underlined by

modern commentators: Cranfield finds “the obedience that *consists* in faith” to be the interpretation that “suit[s] best the structure of Paul’s thought in Romans” (66). Similarly, Fitzmyer suggests “a commitment of faith” (237) and Dunn finds a mixture of “the obedience that *is* faith” with the “obedience that stems from faith” (17). We may say that with this teasing phrase Paul is *redefining* obedience, which is now a submission to the internal movement of the Spirit of Christ in whom we have justifying faith (see further on v. 9 below).

When Paul invokes “Grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 7; cf. 1 Cor 1:3), the Church Fathers realize that Paul is making some kind of distinction between God (as our Father) and Christ (as Lord), but they are anxious to defend the identity of Christ as also being God. Tertullian explains that by using two terms, “God” and “Lord,” Paul is avoiding the misunderstanding that there are either “many Gods” or “many lords” (Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 13, ANF 3: 608). Ambrosiaster differentiates Father and Lord by function, the former the origin of all things and the latter our redeemer (5). By understanding “grace” as the Holy Spirit, Abelard ingeniously finds Pauline testimony to the much later western doctrine of the double procession of the Spirit, since Paul invokes grace from both the Father and Christ (106). Melancton in the Reformation claims that the close linking of the terms “God” and “Lord” means that Christ is of the same nature as God (Melancton 65). Oecolampadius argues that if the Son gives the same things as the Father, grace and peace, then “he must likewise be God along with the Father” (*In Epistolam B. Pauli*, cit. Adams 2019: 31).

The Reformation approach is followed in modern times by Cranfield who finds the juxtaposition of “God” and “Christ” to be a strong pointer to the fact that “Paul believed Christ to be divine in the fullest sense” (72), but other modern commentators find here a trace of the developing sense of the exact relation of Christ to God in the early church, just as there is a progressive meaning given to the ascription “Son of God” (v. 4). Where Reformation writers find the juxtaposition of “God” and “Lord” to be a claim for identity of nature, Dunn finds that it hints at a new perception about God’s sharing of divine authority with Christ (25). For Porter, it expresses that Christ is the “source of grace and calling to spread the good news to all the nations” (49). Similarly, for Käsemann the linkage and the title “Lord” (*kurios*) does not mean that for Paul Christ is the “cult-god of Christians,” but that he is “the representative of the God who claims the world” (14). Thinking out loud, Paul is not only developing an argument about faith but experimenting with the best way to describe the very relation of Christ to “God our Father” and the Spirit of God.

When Paul writes of the “God whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel” (v. 9), the Church Fathers are sensitive to Paul’s rooting of his serving (*latreuō*) in a response to the demands of God that he experiences in his inner life as the

Holy Spirit, and that is to be his approach to Christian “obedience” throughout the Epistle (cf. v. 5). Origen, as to be expected, compares 2 Cor 3:6, “The letter kills but the spirit gives life,” and stresses that the law is weak as the basis of service to God (77–8). Ambrosiaster notes the association between “service” in work and in worship and finds such service to proceed from a “devout mind” (6). Gennadius of Constantinople identifies Paul’s “my spirit” with the grace of the Holy Spirit given to Paul for the work of mission (353). Similarly, Chrysostom comments that Paul ascribes all his service “not to his own zeal, but to the assistance of the Spirit” (*Hom.* 2, 344). But “assistance” is a key word here, because Chrysostom is anxious that the recognition of a divine “gift” (*charisma*) should not undermine the part played by what he calls *proairesis*, a “resolve” and human choice that in Chrysostom’s view is an indispensable agent for human transformation (see Trakatellis 2013: 46–8). This emerges in his following comment on the “spiritual gift” or “gift of grace” that Paul wants to share with the Roman Christians (v. 11), and that seems in Paul’s mind to have been prompted by his mention of “my spirit” (v. 9): Chrysostom writes, “when you hear of grace think not that the reward of resolve (*proairesis*) on our part is thereby cast aside” (345). Chrysostom thus finds a synergy in the inner life between the divine spirit and human will or resolve, and he is going to repeat his notion of *proairesis* in commenting later on “walking in the Spirit” in 8:7–10 as involving “freedom of choice” (*Hom.* 14, 434; Trakatellis 2013: 48). William of St Thierry likewise interprets “with my spirit” as “I act willingly, not under the impulse of fear nor with the hope of reward, but with an inner knowledge of justice and with love of truth” (27).

In the modern period Dunn notes that “my spirit” here alerts us to an “experiential ambiguity” about the way Paul envisages the Spirit of God acting upon and communicating with the human spirit (29). Barrett comments that “it is by using his spirit ... that Paul renders God service” (24), perhaps echoing Sanday and Headlam’s terse comment “the *pneuma* is the organ of service” (20). Käsemann helpfully comments that the *pneuma* here means “the inner core that governs the human being,” but unhelpfully discounts any connection with the Spirit of God (18). It is precisely the interaction between the divine and human spirit such as Chrysostom explores and other commentators note that is to be the key for Paul’s idea of non-legalistic ethics in the gospel.

Origen interprets Paul’s “debt to the Greeks and barbarians” (v. 14) as being the obligation to preach to all nations, based on his having received the gift of speaking all their languages through the work of the Holy Spirit (1.85, understanding Paul’s boast, in 1 Cor 14:18, of speaking in more “tongues” than any as actual languages rather than as ecstatic speech). Ambrosiaster understands the debt in the same way, though without Origen’s idea that it has been incurred through receiving the languages that belong to Greek and barbarian (8).

Ambrosiaster further explains that Paul might as well have written “Gentiles” as Greeks, and that this category includes Romans, while “barbarians” refers to “hostile tribes.” Origen understands Paul’s debt “to the wise” to be the obligation to unfold to them the wisdom of the gospel that is hidden in mystery (1.85, referencing 1 Cor 2:6–7); this seems to assume that some among the Greeks and barbarians have wisdom of a sort, and it echoes the earlier view of Justin Martyr that there was a *logos* from God scattered among the nations (Justin, *Apology* 1.46:1–4; *Apology* 2.10:1–4) The debt to the foolish, thinks Origen, is for the gift of the patience and longsuffering that they require him to exercise. For Ambrosiaster Paul is implying that all the so-called “wise” are in fact “foolish.”

Abelard also regards the debt as “the duty of preaching.” The Greeks are indeed different from barbarians in having law but, he thinks, this was learned from the Hebrew Bible through the Septuagint translation. The “wise” are those who now believe in Christ, and the foolish are the unbelievers. However, he adds that the Greeks learned faith in one God through their philosophers (111). Other medieval commentators show an increasing sense of the debt of the western Christian church to the classical world. William of St Thierry offers the same hint as Origen about the Gentile wise: charity “does not shun Greek wisdom or barbarian folly” (31). Aquinas differentiates barbarians from Greeks as those who are not ruled by reason, implying that Greeks are so ruled (53). Erasmus understands the “wise” and the uneducated (foolish) as being equivalent to Greeks and barbarians, and Calvin (25) follows him in this, approving Paul’s sense of assurance that he could teach even the Romans, “however much they excelled in learning, prudence and skill” (25); with a touch of Ambrosiaster, he adds however that “the wise are reduced to the same level as the ignorant” by the gospel. Melancton, like Calvin, identifies the wise with the Romans, but adds a contemporary commentary by also identifying them with the “writers and monks” of his own time; these need to receive a “doctrine unknown to reason” and to be raised up again by true, spiritual comforts’ (67–8).

Modern commentators generally agree with Origen and Ambrosiaster that Paul understands his debt as the obligation of his calling (Dunn 33, Cranfield 85, Barrett 26), not a cultural debt. However, Fitzmyer makes explicit what is implicit in some earlier commentaries, such as those of Origen and William of St Thierry, that *part* of Paul’s debt is that “he has learned and profited from his Hellenistic education” (250). Cranfield disputes that “wise” and “foolish” are simply parallel with “Greek and barbarian” (84, also Porter 54–5) and so allows that Paul is envisaging an element of the wise in every nation, regardless of sophistication of education. This apparently rhetorical flourish by Paul is thus, we may say, a hint of the openness of Paul to the good Gentile conscience, whether among “Greeks” or “barbarians” that is to surface in chapter 2.

III. The Wider Impact

Caravaggio's painting, "The Conversion of St Paul," housed in the Cerasi Chapel of Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome, well illustrates Paul's claim, "called to be an apostle, set apart ..." (v. 1; Illustration 1). Though probably based on the narrative of Acts 9:1–9 rather than this text, this particular version of the subject by Caravaggio communicates the intensity and personal directedness of the call that Paul expresses in Rom 1:1. Caravaggio's other known example of the story, housed in the Odescalchi Balbi Collection of Rome includes a portrayal of the risen Christ, a supporting angel, a rearing horse, and a soldier looking in the direction of the heavenly scene. But the Santa Maria picture shows only Paul, sprawling on the ground on his back, his horse carefully lifting a hoof over him, his hands lifted to heaven, lit from above by a brilliant light. The single other figure is an aged hostler who appears more concerned for the horse than either Paul or the source of the light. Vividly depicted is the particular nature of the call that Paul asserts in 1:1, as well as a hint of the inner transformation that is to be one of Paul's major themes in this letter.

In her poem entitled "Called to be Saints," the nineteenth-century poet Christina Rossetti envisages the saints as being a wider group than the named saints in the church calendar, echoing both Paul and the tradition of the non-conformist churches in calling every member a saint. Bringing the Pauline phrase "called to be saints" into conjunction with the "lowest place" of Luke 14:9–10, she reflects:

The lowest place. Ah, Lord, how steep and high
That lowest place whereon a saint shall sit!
Which of us halting, trembling, pressing nigh,
Shall quite attain to it? (1979: 307–8)

Yet there is still a place, she reflects, for those who are not fit for "Right Hand" or "Left Hand" of Christ (Mark 10:14). In her poem "Paradise," she hopes "To have my part with all the saints/And with my God." Somewhat ironically, then, in her book entitled *Called to be Saints* (1881), she only meditates on the "saints" commemorated in the festivals of the church.

In the film *The Apostle* (1977), Sonny Dewer is a flawed figure of an evangelist in an American black holiness church. Despite savagely injuring another minister out of jealousy and revenge, he helps many people through his preaching and pastoral ministry. As the police finally catch up with him, he assures his friend Sam: "Saint Paul says any man who accepts Christ as his savior is a saint. You're a saint here tonight, Sammy. You're going to heaven and I'm going to

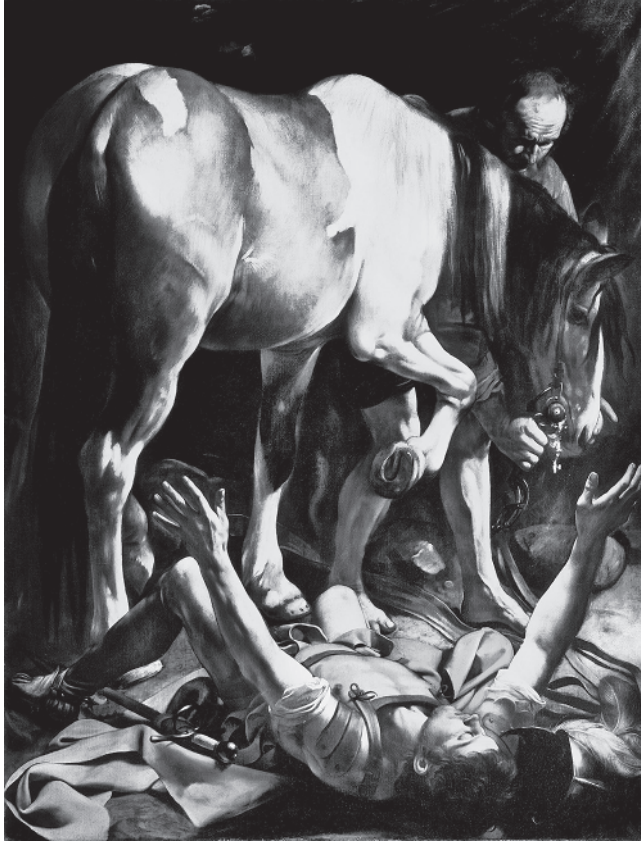


ILLUSTRATION 1 Caravaggio, *The Conversion of Saint Paul*. Caravaggio / Cerasi Chapel / Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain.

jail.” Richard Walsh comments (2005: 188, 192) that the director, Robert Duvall, is “juxtaposing secular reality and otherworldly religion,” achieving the picture of a “fully human apostle”—and we may add, a fully human saint.

Paul’s phrase “a debtor to the Greeks” (v. 15) has sunk into social consciousness beyond its original meaning, though not totally unconnected to it. In his poem, “Europe’s Shame” (2012) that excoriates the response of the European Community to the national debt of Greece, Günter Grass echoes Luther’s translation, “*Ich bin ein Schuldner der Griechen*” in his line: “As a debtor (*Als Schuldner*) put naked on the pillory, a country suffers, to which *it was your custom of speech* to say that you owed a debt of thanks” (my emphasis). The “custom of speech” must be the phrase “debt to the Greeks” deriving from Paul and Luther.

1:16–17. *Living by Faith*

I. Hearing the Voice of Paul

From the beginning of his letter Paul is aiming to highlight a text he has used before, about living by faith (which for him means without the law): Habakkuk 2:4 “**the one who is righteous will live by faith**” (v. 17). He had employed it some years before in his letter to the Galatians (Gal. 3:11) and it seems to him to be the suitable keynote now for his letter to the Romans, in which he wants to urge that both Jews and Gentiles live truly when they live by faith. But how is he going to get to this text? In his introduction to his letter, he has been celebrating the **gospel** he has been given to proclaim [1–3, 9, 15], and now he declares that he is **not ashamed of the gospel** because it is [16] **the power of God for salvation for all who have faith**. The word **righteous** in the Habakkuk text that he intends to quote sparks off the thought that righteousness is actually the power of *God’s own self* that is contained in the gospel, God’s dynamic activity of putting people in a right relation with God: [17] **for in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith**. Now all is ready for the text. It is because of God’s act of righteousness, known in faith, that the righteous can live by faith.

It is no huge leap for Paul’s mind to jump from the righteous human person in the Habakkuk text to a righteous God. Paul would have been well aware that two readings of Hab 2:4 were available: the Hebrew version reads “by his faithfulness”—the faith of the righteous person—but the Greek version² reads “by my faithfulness”—referring to the faithfulness of God. The text as circulated in the early church probably omitted the pronoun,³ and Paul follows this practice, saying simply that “the righteous will live by faith”; but he must know that he is leaving open an ambiguity, which he regards as a double affirmation. The righteous person lives by his or her faith, *and* by the faithfulness of God. Like the mention of a **power**, this surely prompts the appearance here of the **righteousness** of God, which is a faithfulness to God’s covenant promises, already in mind in the mention of salvation **to the Jew first**. This whole movement of thought is confirmed when Paul describes the righteousness of God as being revealed **from faith to faith** (against NRSV “through faith for faith”), best understood as “from God’s faithfulness to human faith”—so that God’s righteousness is the source of human faith. Paul has been prompted to speak of the righteousness of God at least partly because of the faithfulness of God implied in the Habakkuk text, and from **faith to faith** expresses this truth in the reverse direction. Moreover, the ambiguity of “faith” in the text from Habakkuk leads naturally to an ambiguity in the word “righteousness” itself: in the first place God’s righteousness, it is also the righteousness with which God endows the person who has faith, a righteousness “from” God (cf. Phil 3:9).

By an almost casual association of ideas, Paul has given emphasis to an expression, **the righteousness of God**, which he has certainly not invented. It was already well-established in the Hebrew Bible and appears outside Paul's writings in the New Testament (see Mt 6:33 and Jas 1:20). Paul himself elsewhere quotes a text from the Psalms in which it appears: "his righteousness endures for ever" (1 Cor 9:9). However, apart from this quotation, Paul had only used the exact phrase **the righteousness of God** once before (2 Cor 5:21). Of course, the idea, if not the expression, had been there already, and much more widely. In Paul's version of the gospel God "justifies" human beings—that is, puts them in a right relationship with God's self (and we should add, with others)—through grace received in putting faith in Christ. Thereby they are "righteous" or have received the gift of "righteousness," of being rightly related. God then both declares and makes righteous human persons, so that he is both "righteous" (adjective) and the subject of the verb "to give righteousness." The *noun*, "righteousness," thus lies immediately to hand to be applied to God in Paul's sense. By actually voicing it here and then using it a number of times in the letter, Paul summons up a kind of **power** [16], a dynamic personification, which works in and through faith. It is, as we shall see, closely allied to the "spirit" at work in the human personality, and which has already been invoked in the opening to the letter as a **power** and as **the spirit of holiness** [4]. Through a play on words, in the very act of speaking, Paul has created a new idea that will help to shape his letter. There is no such word-play going on in the citation of the Habakkuk verse in Galatians.

II. The Theological Reception

Patristic and medieval commentators tend to find support in the phrase "The righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith" (v. 17) for what I have called *fulfillment A* (see Introduction, section 5). They see an essential continuity between the Old Testament law and its completion in Christ and understand there to be a continuity in revelation from putting faith in God through the law to putting faith in Christ through the gospel (so "from faith to faith"). As Origen puts it, "either it means that he who is under the law must believe in the Gospels as well, or that he who is under the Gospels must also believe in the law and the prophets" (1. 87; cf. Tertullian *Against Marcion* 5.13). An anonymous commentator, in a text called *The Holy Letter of St Paul to the Romans* (see Glossary, under "Anonymous") writes of "the first faith in the law" (23). These early writers do not therefore have any sharp contrast between the law and faith in mind, though law of course is to be read in the light of Christ. Alternatively, Ambrosiaster understands the first faith Paul mentions as God's own faithfulness (9), and Augustine finds a movement from the faith of the proclaimers of the gospel to the faith of its hearers (*On the Spirit and the Letter*, 18).

In the medieval period, Abelard follows here the direction of thought in *fulfillment A*; the movement is from a “faith in punishments to faith in rewards” (111). Aquinas reflects this in interpreting the phrase as “from the faith of the Old Testament to the faith of the New, because in both cases men are made just and are saved by faith in Christ” (56, so also William of St Thierry 32), but he also offers the explanations given by Augustine and Ambrosiaster (without naming them), and adds, “from present faith to future faith, i.e. into the full vision of God.” Nicholas of Lyra finds a movement from “unformed” faith characterized by a natural knowledge of God to a faith “formed” by love and exercising charitable works to others (I: a2).

Luther in his early lectures, referring to Nicholas, denies that an “unformed” faith can be called faith at all, and prefers the idea that the righteousness of God “develops” in a person so that faith becomes progressively “clearer,” quoting Revelation 22:11, “he that is righteous, let him be made righteous still” (perhaps then hinting at *fulfillment C*). In a remarkable echo of Aquinas he comments that “the fathers of the old law ... believed as we do. There is only one faith, though it may have been less clear then” (152–3). All this seems quite far from the sharp dialectic between law and gospel in Luther’s mature work, and Melancthon’s insistence on the righteousness mentioned in this passage as being “imputed,” and received by a faith that is “by knowledge of and confidence in Christ” (70); for Melancthon, “from faith to faith” means “from an imperfect faith to one more perfect” in the one who has already been declared righteous (so following *fulfillment D*). Likewise, Calvin finds here an advance in faith, and so an “increase” in righteousness, but this is not a development from Old Testament to New Testament faith, but “the daily progress of every believer” (28). For Calvin, this progress in faith includes observing the written law and doing good works, not as a means of justification but as “a rule of righteous living that God requires of us” (*fulfillment E*); citing v. 16 about the gospel, “the power of God unto salvation” he notes that Paul “presently adds: ‘The Law and the Prophets bear witness to it’” (*Institutes* 2.9.4). In another place he reflects that “however eagerly [the saints] may in accordance with the Spirit strive toward the righteousness of God,” in “pressing on” they need the law like a whip to arouse them to good work (*Institutes* 2.7.12).

There is a marked disinclination in modern commentaries to take “from faith to faith” as designating any progression in human faith; they either understand it as “from God’s faithfulness to human faith” as in Ambrosiaster (so Barth 41, Dunn 44, 48), or as a rhetorical emphasis—“faith from start to finish” (Barrett 31, Fitzmyer 263, cf. Cranfield 102, Porter 58). But in their different ways, the Patristic, medieval and Reformation interpretations about an increase in faith seem to catch better Paul’s sense of righteousness as an effective power working within the person. In this case, understanding the first faith as “God’s

faithfulness” need not cancel out the idea of development of faith in the human person, but can stress that this process is motivated by God.

Modern reception is concerned to clarify the exact meaning of “the righteousness of God” that is revealed (v. 17), analysing it more assiduously than earlier writers. One key issue is whether the phrase is to be understood as either a subjective or objective genitive: according to the first it denotes an attribute and activity of God, i.e. God’s own being and doing right, while according to the second it denotes a gift bestowed by God, a righteous status that comes “from” God (as in the phrase “righteousness from God” in Phil 3:9). Luther tells us that at first, before his realization of “justification by faith,” he had taken the phrase (Latin *iustitia dei*) in the first meaning and had been terrified by a “justice of God” which he understood as merely wrathful and threatening to the sinner. Later he understood “the righteousness of God” as the gift of God to the one who has faith, which was also the interpretation of Augustine (Luther 1960: 336–7; Augustine *On the Spirit and the Letter*, 1.9.15). The majority of modern commentators understand the phrase in the first sense, while seeing it, not as threatening, but as parallel to “the power of God for salvation” in v. 16 (e.g. Barth 40–1; Barrett 29; Fitzmyer 262; Porter 59; Withington 51; Williams 1980: 261–2), and this appears to fit with Paul’s general sense of an inner dynamic shaping life. A minority do interpret the phrase in the second sense that comforted Luther (e.g. Cranfield 99–100). However, yet others point out that it is possible to affirm both meanings, subjective and objective, if we understand “righteousness” (*dikaïosunē*) in a relational sense. This approach stresses that “righteousness” in the Hebrew Bible, and so in the New Testament, should not be understood in its Graeco-Roman sense of an absolute ethical norm for the individual, but in the Hebraic sense of being “rightly related” as a social being in covenant with God and neighbors (Ziesler 1972: 38–43, 60–1, 93–4; Sanders 1977/2017: 305–10). God, then, is righteous when God is faithful to the requirements of a covenantal relation with God’s people, Israel, and acts to fulfill this obligation. Because righteousness is relational, it implies both the subjective and objective dimensions of the relationship (Dunn 41–2; Moo 1991: 70; cf. Käsemann 27–9). God’s activity to put human beings in the right with God’s self will result in their *being* in this right relation, or having a righteousness from God.

Moreover, this relational character of righteousness unifies the two sides of another historic question: when God “justifies” (*dikaïoun*), does this mean that God *declares* sinners to be righteous, or *makes* them to be righteous? In terms of the Reformation discussion, is righteousness “infused” as Catholic tradition has it (*fulfillment C*), or “imputed” as most of the Reformers insist (*fulfillment D*)? If the “righteousness of God” is God’s salvific activity to put sinners into a right relationship, then this is *both* a new status and a transformation of life. The “New Perspective on Paul” (*fulfillment F*) adopts this relational, covenantal understanding of righteousness, but such an understanding is not exclusive to this

school of thinking, and in the present commentary it is shown to have a significant place in Paul's stream of thought.

Paul's quotation from Habakkuk, "The one who is righteous (*dikaïos*) will live by faith" (17b) became the basis of the Protestant Reformers' cry of *sola fide*, "by faith alone," supported by appeal to 3:24, "justified (*dikaïoumenoi*) by grace ... through faith" and 3:28 "justified by faith." But the earlier tradition shows a variety of interpretation of this text from Habakkuk 2:4, reflecting the difference between different approaches to the fulfillment of the law by Christ (see Introduction, section 5).

Following the momentum of *fulfillment A* (maximum continuity between law and gospel), the phrase is read as: "the person who is *already* righteous must *also* live by faith, or go on living in faith." So Origen gives as one option for interpretation, "the one who lives in the law will also believe the gospel" (87). Ambrose similarly speaks of its being right "to have begun with the law and to have been confirmed in the gospel, from faith to faith, as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith'" (*Letter 47*, FC 26.251). Accordingly, Gennadius of Constantinople interprets the phrase as meaning that "all are saved through Christ, both those enlightened by the natural law and those who follow the written law that was added to it" (355), and Theodoret similarly understands "the righteous" as the one living either by the natural law or according to the prophets (50–1).

At the same time, where the influence is that of *fulfillment B* (a greater dialectic between law and gospel), the phrase is understood to mean: "it is the person who lives by faith who will be counted righteous." So Chrysostom interprets succinctly, "Whoever has become righteous through faith shall live" (*Hom. 2*, 349), although he shows a typical blurring of boundaries between *A* and *B* among the Fathers by his further comment that "both the righteous and the sinners were justified by faith" (349), implying that some were already "righteous." Ambrosiaster makes explicit that the text means "a man is not justified before God by the law but by faith" (9; cf. Theodoret 50, "not to cling to the way of life of the Law").

Augustine, however, hints at an inner bestowal of righteousness (*fulfillment C*) when he understands the phrase to mean: "by this faith of Jesus Christ we believe it is from God that we now have, and will have more and more, the ability of living righteously" (*On the Spirit and the Letter* 18.11, trans. NPNF NS 2.5, 90). The Augustinian idea of the infusion of righteousness becomes stronger in medieval commentators as they consider this text. Denys the Carthusian, for example, is more interested in the way that God's justice (*iustitia*) or righteousness works in the believer than he is in faith. In fact, he seems confused about where to place faith, and he himself admits that he is not sure about "what comes first with what follows." Commenting on "the righteous

shall live by faith,” he finds a “created justice [righteousness] that God causes in us through which we are formally justified,” so that “through faith without works of the law, he confers justice [righteousness] by giving faith and grace, by which the soul is justified.” Paul’s quotation of Habakkuk 2:4 thus means that “in faith, as on a base or foundation ..., the righteous person lives.” His idea seems to be that faith in Christ results in God’s infusion of righteousness into the inner person, producing grace, an increase in faith and the will to do good works, so creating a “habit” of righteous activity with the consequence that the person is justified or counted as righteous. So “grace [issuing from ‘the passion and blood of Christ’] is the formal cause of our justification.” (translation in Elliott 2007: 191). His basic assumption for this process is that being righteous means orientating all our works to the “ultimate end” of supernatural happiness.

Calvin opposes this kind of theology, judging that its proponents “interpret the grace of God not as the imputation of free righteousness but as the Spirit helping in the pursuit of holiness”. That is, grace is not God’s freely offered declaration that we are righteous but an inner dynamic that *leads* to justification, a process that he complains includes the doing of good works. Directing his criticism directly against Peter Lombard (though showing suspicion even of Augustine) he accuses him of saying that Christ’s death justifies us because it arouses love in our hearts that makes us righteous (*Institutes* 3.11.15). Paul’s quotation of Habakkuk simply means “our righteousness depends on faith” and, while Paul does not mention “free righteousness,” it is implied (Calvin 28–9). Melancton does claim that Paul has the “righteousness imputed through mercy to the believer” in mind here, comparing his use of the same phrase in Gal 3:11; noting that the phrase in 17b comes from an Old Testament prophet, he claims that “the prophets fought about this article with the teachers of the law” (71) In Luther’s early lectures on Romans he does not put the same weight of significance on the phrase in 17b as Melancton and Calvin, or as he does himself later, but rather concentrates on the revelation of “the righteousness of God” mentioned just beforehand in v. 17a, stressing that it is a gift that comes “completely from faith” (153).

Modern commentators note the ambiguity of syntax of Paul’s phrase (literally, “the righteous one from faith will live”): it may mean “the one who is righteous will live from faith” or “the one who is righteous from [i.e. because of] faith will live”. The Church Fathers aligned these readings respectively with what I have called *fulfillments A and B*, but the status of the Old Testament law is no longer a live issue in the minds of modern commentators. Some insist on the first reading (Fitzmyer 265, Sanday and Headlam 28, Witherington 51) as being closer to Habakkuk’s own meaning, and others find that the second (Barrett 117, Cranfield 101–2, Käsemann 32, Porter 58) is closer to Paul’s overall argument in his letter. The Fathers, as we have seen, tend to blur the

boundary between the two readings, and allowing both would seem to be in accord with Paul's own openness of meaning.

A similar ambiguity attaches to Paul's omission of both "his" (the believer's) and "my" (God's) attached in various versions of the Habakkuk text to "faith." While many commentators simply take the faith to be that of the believer (Fitzmyer 265, Barrett 31, Cranfield 100), some commentators, notably Barth, urge that the faith by which the believer lives must primarily be God's faithfulness. This is of a piece with understanding "from faith" in v.17a as "from God's own faithfulness" and "the righteousness of God" as the salvific activity of God. Barth has been highly influential in arguing that the passage, and Paul's entire message, is not focused on the faith of the human individual at all but on the sovereign work of God in breaking into the human sphere to bring all human-kind into the crisis of judgment and deliverance (40–1). However, Barth himself allows that the "faithfulness" referred to here is *also* practiced by human believers: "Where the faithfulness of God encounters the fidelity of man, there is manifested His righteousness" (42; cf. *Shorter* 23, also suggesting that the faithfulness is that of Christ). Taking faith as *both* divine and human in 17b accords with understanding the "righteousness of God" as *both* an attribute of God and a gift bestowed. Moreover, while Paul probably intends the first "faith" in "from faith to faith" to be God's, the picture is of a dynamic interplay between God's faithfulness and human faith (cf. Dunn 45–6).

The multiple senses of v. 17 are entirely what we would expect from Paul's playing with words and his thinking out loud. The key is in Paul's understanding of the gospel as the "power of God for salvation," an energy at work within the human personality, individually and in its covenant relations with others. Paul makes no attempt to place "grace" and "faith" within any kind of schema or sequence, as in 3:24, "justification by grace through faith." In modern times, adopting this mood has enabled the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation to overcome their conflict over justification stemming from the Reformation. The counter-Reformation Council of Trent had affirmed that "in the process of justification" through Christ, together with the forgiveness of sins faith is *infused* into a person, along with hope and love (Session 6, Chapter 7; Denzinger 1911: 800). *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999) stresses that the inner transformation or renewal of life through the Spirit by the "imparted" (or infused) grace of God, and justification by the exercise of a believer's own faith in Christ, are simply inseparable and take place "at the same time" (paras. 15–6, 22–7).

III. The Wider Impact

The impact of Paul's statement that "the righteous one will live by faith," when filtered through its Reformation lens, has been widespread in western culture. Understood as a stress on the importance of individual experience and

decision-making, it has been identified as contributing to the “turn to the subject” in modernity (Maritain 1929: 14–26); against this subjectivity much late-modern thought has reacted in its concern to recognize the “other” over against the self. It has also been argued that the stress placed on Paul’s sentence by the Reformers led to the prioritizing of individual conscience over against the traditional sources of authority held by the church, and then to a quest for new, scientific authorities under the control of the subject (Josipovici 1979: 47–51). All this has a certain irony, since Paul himself does not view human faith as subject-centered but always related to the power of God’s faithfulness and a community of faith.

The way that the thought of the Reformers shaped an understanding of “faith” as strengthening the identity of the individual may be seen in the seventeenth-century poet George Herbert’s poem of that name. Here he exults that “Faith makes me any thing,” that “by Faith all arms are of a length” (i.e. the same length) and “A peasant may beleeve as much/As a great Clerk, and reach the highest stature.” Significantly, this faith is placed in an “imputed” righteousness, playing on the word sun/son:

When creatures had no reall light
Inherent in them, thou didst make the sunne
Impute a lustre, and allow them bright;
And in this shew, what Christ hath done.
(Herbert 2007: 173)

In his play *Luther*, John Osborne stresses the modern perception of Luther as a man preoccupied with his own subjective experiences and existential anxiety. He presents him as a man struggling with his inner guilt and uncertainty, just as he struggles to overcome his digestive problems. His Luther takes Romans 1:17 as the text for his sermon in the Castle Church of Wittenberg, on the occasion of pinning his ninety-five theses to the church door, and compares the relief that the phrase “the just shall live by faith” gives him to the opening of blocked bowels (Osborne 1961: 63). While still a monk he asks his vicar general, “You think I lavish too much attention on my own pain, don’t you?” and when he cries out “how can I be justified?” a brother-monk remarks that “God isn’t angry with you. It’s you who are angry with Him.” While he declares at Worms that “to act against one’s conscience is neither safe nor honest. Here I stand ...,” he confesses later that “I wasn’t certain” and that “I listened for God’s voice, but all I could hear was my own” (Osborne 1961: 20, 30, 54, 63, 85, 101).

The sociologist Max Weber argued in 1905 that modern capitalism had been shaped by Calvin’s variation on the theme of justification by faith, in which response to a call to do good works was the evidence of having been given the gift of faith, and so of being among the elect. Thus, according to Weber, an

other-worldly faith drove successful economic activity in the world, characterized by an ethic of hard work, thrift, and efficiency in one's worldly calling (Weber 2001: 39–43, 66–80; cf. Arendt 1958/1998: 251–2).

George Eliot, portraying a Methodist meeting of the nineteenth century in her novel, *Adam Bede*, offers a picture of a social faith, more in tune with Paul's own concept of "righteousness" as a relational rather than an individualistic ethic:

A crowd of rough men and weary-hearted women drank in a faith that was a rudimentary culture, which linked their thoughts with the past, lifted their imagination above the sordid details of their own narrow lives, and suffused their souls with the sense of a pitying, loving, infinite Presence, sweet as summer to the houseless needy. (Eliot 1992: 38)

1:18–28. *The Human Situation Outside a Life of Faith*

I. Hearing the Voice of Paul

Now Paul's argument turns toward the natural condition of human beings outside the life marked by faith. He makes the transition into this contrast by means of a riff on the term "revealed": just as the **righteousness of God is revealed** through faith, so [18] **the wrath of God is revealed from heaven** against those **who by their wickedness suppress the truth**. Paul now speaks about their condition by playing on the idea of what is "revealed." *Wrath* is revealed because people have failed to pay attention to *what* the invisible God has in fact revealed about God's self: [19] **For what can be known about God is plain to them.** [20] **Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse,** [21] **for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.** Paul now begins to move into the revelation or unveiling of divine wrath he has previously announced: [22] **claiming to be wise, they became fools,** [23] **and they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened.** Paul asserts that they have **exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.** That is, they have engaged in the idolatry of valuing what is created above the creator. Now Paul underlines the wrath that has been revealed: [24] **Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to their degrading of their bodies among themselves.** As the letter goes on, this heart-body relationship is going to be important for Paul as he thinks through the condition of both the unredeemed and redeemed person. But for the moment,

picking up the word “exchanged” he has just used (“exchanged the glory...”) he begins to play on the word to describe their life further: [25] **they have exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.**

Paul now looks around for an example of the *consequences* of idolatry, or self-assertion of the creature against God, and his use of the word “**exchange**” causes him to light upon a target. While his mentioning of people’s **degrading of their bodies among themselves** could apply widely to various sexual practices, he turns to same-sex relations as a situation in which—as he believes—[26] women “**exchanged**” **natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another.**

Same-sex relations were the object of conventional Jewish polemic at the time and condemnation may well have struck Paul as an uncontentious matter, on which he might expect agreement from his audience. It is quite clear that this issue is meant to be an example of human idolatry, launched from an improvisation on the word **exchange**, not a dogmatic statement about human sexuality, which has no place at this stage of his argument. As with several spontaneous thoughts of Paul, the reader may ask how well it actually fits into the argument. The catchword “exchanged” seems strained: it refers in the first place to the attempted exchange of the glory of God for the likeness of something created, which is not illustrated at all well by what Paul considers to be an exchange of gendered roles among men and women themselves. It also assumes that same-sex relations are always the result of a prior disposition of the mind toward “suppressing” the truth of God and setting up of idols against God. Paul writes that [26] **God gave them up to degrading passions** as an outworking of divine wrath, so that men [27] **received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.** But it is clear that Paul cannot be talking here about the kind of same-sex relations that do *not* in fact proceed from an attitude of idolatry and from a refusal to **honor God** or **give thanks to God**. At this point he is only talking about distorted sexual relations that result from a refusal to acknowledge the manifestation of God through creation. These are **against nature** (*para phusin*) (v. 26) in the sense that they are a symptom of rebellion against God’s ordering of nature as the gift of a creator (v. 20). We cannot know whether Paul was aware of faithful same-sex relations that proceed from a desire to be obedient to the creator and to honor God, or whether he would have placed them under the same condemnation. It is possible that Paul has in mind the particularly degrading same-sex relations that were to be found in cultic activity in pagan temples, or the abusive pederasty found more widely in Roman society. But even if he is aiming to make a more general observation about sexual practices his

perspective is limited to manifestations of human idolatry, or a giving of priority to created things over against the creator.

That this example is improvised in the course of Paul's dictation is shown by his following condemnation of a range of vices, introduced by words from the previous discussion: [28] because people **did not see fit to acknowledge** the manifestation of God in creation, **God gave them up to a debased mind** (cf. degrading, v. 24) and **to things that should not be done**. This section begins as if it were a continuation from v. 25 about serving the creature rather than the creator, leaving vv. 26–27 on same-sex relations as a kind of parenthesis or diversion. It makes no sense to identify the "they" who are [29] **filled with every kind of wickedness** and **evil** with the actors in the immediately preceding verses. The moral inventory here, which is similar to other lists in the New Testament, does not, we notice, even include sexual sins at all.⁴ Paul has moved his attention to evils that are to be found everywhere in daily life: **covetousness, malice ... envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, being gossips, [30] slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, [31] foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless**.

[32] Going back to his observation of what human beings know about God (v. 19), Paul affirms that those who behave this way **know** the truth; they know **God's decree**, or "righteous ordinance", either from the patterns of creation or (as we shall discover) from the written religious law. This ordinance (*dikaiōma*) declares that **those who practice such things deserve to die**, and so we return in full circle to the contrasting affirmation that the righteous (*dikaios*) will **live by faith**. The sentence to "death," like the promise of life, does not refer to the decision of a Roman law-court, but to the verdict of God.

In portraying the wrath of God, Paul three times uses the phrase **God gave them up**—variously to **impurity** (v. 24), **degrading passions** (v. 26), and **to a debased mind and to things that should not be done** (v. 28). Divine wrath is not worked out here in an imposed penalty—no mention is made of supposed punishments such as suffering famine, disease or death—but in terms of God's surrendering people to the natural consequences of their own refusal to acknowledge God. It is characteristic of Hebrew thought to depict Yahweh as "hiding his face" from his disobedient people, or "letting them go" the way that they themselves desire to tread.⁵ God in his justice "gives them up," although the prophets sometimes make clear that this is with deep pain of heart, as God himself sorrows for the tragedy of his people's self-inflicted wounds:⁶ "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How surrender you, Israel?" (Hos 11:8). This view of divine wrath naturally follows in Paul's mind from conceiving the righteousness of God as a "power" that works within the human personality, since wrath also appears as a power at work internally. Later Paul is to take a similar way with the powers of the law, sin and death.

Paul has been developing his thought by playing variations on a number of key words, among them **gospel, faith, righteousness, reveal, know, exchange**, cutting across conventional divisions between the opening of a letter, the statement of theme (*propositio*) and the body of the writing. Other vocabulary that will become increasingly important is **being called, flesh, spirit and grace**. Thinking out loud, moving from word to word in his performance, Paul has brought the reader by way of the promise of living by faith to the situation where people are being condemned for the way they actually live. Paul, we notice, does not say how many are thus condemned. It is significant that at this point he does not draw the conclusion that “there is no one who is righteous” (3:10, cf. 3:20)—that is, rightly related to God and the community. The list of vices (29–31) is indeed extraordinarily comprehensive, and everyone will be caught somewhere in its net: who at some time has not been guilty of—for example—envy, pride, gossip or foolishness? But, in accord with ancient virtue-ethics Paul is thinking of those who have allowed these vices to become a way of life and to form their characters through habitual **practice** (32)—in short, those who have been **given up** to them (28), and **who not only do the same** (NRSV “them”) **but even applaud others who practice them** (32). Simply to state that all are condemned by God would be to undermine what is to follow in the next section; it would short-circuit his thinking aloud and close up the open cracks he is leaving in his performed text.

II. The Theological Reception

The Church Fathers are nearly unanimous about the identity of the “truth-suppressors” and the polytheistic idolators against whom Paul thinks the wrath of God is directed, when he writes of those (*anthrōpoi*, “people”) who by their wickedness suppress the truth (v. 18). Paul evidently envisages them as a group of “people” who had once had a knowledge of God revealed to them through God’s works in the cosmos and have now become apostate, or rebels against the truth, returning to the polytheism and idolatry that has always characterized others, and deserving the wrath of God for their deviation. There is nothing to indicate that those arraigned by Paul consist of all humankind without exception, or even all Greeks or all Gentiles, although it is likely that they are numbered *among* the Greeks and other Gentiles. So Origen states that God’s wrath is revealed “not in all people but only in those who, to be sure, hold fast to the truth but suppress it” (88). The Fathers understand generally that the truth-suppressors are not the whole of humanity, but from the end of the second century they adopt a distinctly anti-Greek polemic. Paul’s accusation that “claiming to be wise they became fools” (v. 20) is applied specifically to the Greeks, identifying them as the “people” who suppress the truth about God

because they have gleaned it better from “visible things” than others have: Tatian, Athanasius and Chrysostom, in commenting on this passage, accuse Greek culture in its totality, including the philosophers (Tatian, *Oration to the Greeks*, 5.5–6; Athanasius, *Against the Heathen (Gentes)* 35.18–21; Chrysostom, *Hom.* 2, 347). Although Chrysostom asserts that all Gentiles know God through the natural order to some degree, he finds the accusation of “backsliding” from the truth in vv. 18–27 to be directed against the Greeks alone: “serving the creature is Grecian” (*Hom.* 3, 352–3). It is only with the vice-list of vv. 28–32 that Gentiles in general come into view (*Hom.* 5, 359). While Origen concedes that Paul’s accusation of suppressing the truth does not lie against all Greek philosophers, he singles out for blame precisely those who had been earlier allowed to be genuine witnesses to the God of the Bible by Athenagoras and Justin Martyr among Christian thinkers. and by Philo and Josephus among Jewish—namely Plato and Socrates (*Against Celsus*, 6.3–4). This is because they interested themselves in “unseen” realities and yet succumbed to polytheism, where Stoic philosophers were concerned only with the material world.

Augustine had expanded the identification of those in this passage who “suppress the truth” to include Greeks, Romans and Egyptians (*The City of God*, 8.10), and later commentaries continue the expansion, losing the recognition that this is a particular group who have actually committed apostasy from the truth they know. Abelard and William of St Thierry include both Jews and Gentiles in different parts of the indictment (Abelard 112–4, William 33), and Abelard explicitly mentions Plato. Aquinas, while regarding the accusation as leveled against the Gentiles generally (63), refrains from naming any particular philosophers, perhaps mindful of his own debt to Aristotle and Plato. Luther and Calvin identify those targeted as all humankind, Calvin noting that all sorts of people consider themselves “wise,” not just Greek philosophers (33); Luther argues that even if not literally every person suppresses the truth, everyone bears a corporate responsibility in the one body of the world (155). For Melancthon, the accusation is against the whole of humanity up to v. 21, and then it moves to the Gentiles only (76, 80).

Modern commentaries tend to favor an indictment of all humanity (Barth 44; Dunn 56; Porter 70), or alternatively all Gentiles followed by a condemnation of Jews in chapter 2, leading to the conclusion of 3:24 that every human being falls short of the glory of God (Fitzmyer 270). But reading backwards from chapter 3 misses the progression of Paul’s thought, which is by no means a tight argument, and which leaves some loose ends about human response to God. In this passage there is no theory of universal human sinfulness, but the identifying of a particular kind of refusal to acknowledge God that is widespread but not necessarily total.

Barth is one modern interpreter who finds all humanity to be in the crisis of standing under the wrath of God’s “no-saying” for failing to honor God, but he

denies for most of his theological career that Paul is presenting any kind of natural theology in this passage. This is certainly at odds with virtually all earlier commentary, Ambrosiaster for example proposing that “what can be known about God” from the visible universe includes God’s existence, eternity, power, creativity and right to be loved (10). Barth proposes that “what can be known” about God is merely that God is *unknown*, as the “hidden abyss” and the “hidden home.” When Paul says that the visible things show forth the “eternal power” and “divinity” of God he means that they are simply telling us that God is totally *other* than our human life (45–7), not giving us information about God. While Calvin declares that God has put into human minds a “knowledge” of God’s self (32), Barth understands Calvin to be saying that human beings cannot “make anything of it,” or put it to any “positive use” (Brunner and Barth 1946: 108). Barth’s concern is to insist that human beings cannot, of their own faculties, find their way to God, even by reading the signs of the world by a God-given inner light of reason such as Aquinas describes in his commentary on this passage (Aquinas 60). Barth might have satisfied his concern for God to take the initiative in all knowledge of God’s self by observing that Paul himself does not speak of a human process of rational deduction, but a “revelation” from God in the world (v. 19). Later, Barth was to suggest that since Christ was the personal revelation of God, the “glory” of God shines from Christ in many places of the world outside the church (CD IV/3, 38–44, 116–7). In an interview in 1961 he thus claimed that “Later I brought *theologia naturalis* back in via Christology” (Barth 1961: 8).

The Fathers stress that God’s “giving up” or abandoning people to their own unhealthy desires and the misuse of their own bodies (v. 26) is sheerly permissive. God does not “force” them into this behavior (Ambrosiaster 10), but stands back and allows the consequence of their own rejection of the truth to unfold. So Origen concludes that their behavior is still blameworthy, despite being the result of God’s abandonment; it comes from the free choice of the soul (95). Pelagius, though condemned for his advocacy of free-will, puts pithily what other Fathers accepted: they have been “abandoned by God because they have abandoned him” (68). The anonymous commentator of the *Holy Letter* maintains that this passivity of God is merciful, intended to provoke sinners to repentance (25–6), and in modern times Cranfield (121) takes the same approach. None of the Fathers suggest that this divine abandonment is the *only* punishment to be imposed on the “truth-suppressors,” and none link it explicitly to the “wrath” of God in v. 18. Indeed, Augustine distinguishes between a “hidden” punishment that consists in the state of sinful activity itself, and “manifest” punishments inflicted by God externally (*On the Spirit and the Letter*, 54). Chrysostom gives an indication of what these manifest punishments might be, at least in his view, when he lists plagues, wars, famine and hell as instances of the “wrath” of God (*Hom 3*, 351).

Aquinas draws out the logic of Paul's claim—that sin is a punishment for sin—and questions then how a willing sin can be a punishment, when the nature of a punishment is to be received by the victim unwillingly. His answer is to identify the punishment more strictly with what accompanies the sin, namely withdrawal of grace and a disarranged mind (68). Unlike the Fathers, Luther and Calvin both equate God's "giving up" (v. 24) with the wrath of God (v. 18), but they insist that this must mean that God's action is not just permission but deliberate commission. They understand this in terms of the function of Satan as "minister of the wrath of God and his executioner" (Calvin 35); when God deserts people he hands them over to Satan, who "has the will and command of God on his side" in overwhelming them with sin (Luther 161). Thomas Wilson sums up that they are handed over "to be ruled by Satan and their own lusts" (79).

Among the Reformers, Vermigli however takes a different line. God's giving up of sinners can indeed be understood as an instance of the wrath of God, but this is not because of Satan: "the most horrible punishment," he writes, "is when a man is forsaken by God and delivered up to be governed by himself" (26, citing Augustine as above). Among modern commentators, C. H. Dodd takes the same line, but takes a further step in understanding the wrath of God *entirely* to consist of this divine abandonment of people to the inner consequences of their own actions. He asserts that for Paul, "The wrath of God" meant "not a certain feeling or attitude of God toward us, but some process or effect in the realm of objective facts", namely "the inevitable effect of human sin" (21–3). It is surely possible, however, to agree that the wrath of God means God's consent to the working out of a process of sinning into its consequences, and not an imposition of punishments, without therefore depriving God of such emotions as compassionate sorrow over the human condition. Such a concept is consistent with Paul's picture of human life as filled with internal energies, among which are both the "power of salvation," and "wrath" as a dynamic movement in which justice "is an act of love which surrenders that which resists love to self-destruction" (Tillich 1968: 314–5).

In commenting on Paul's observation that "Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men" (vv. 26–27), the Church Fathers understand Paul to be developing a general view of human sexual relations rather than limiting his reference to specific pagan practices such as temple prostitution or pederasty. While Paul is referring to those same-sex relations that are both a consequence of, and a penalty for, deliberate rebellion against God in idolatry, the Fathers generalize and simply place all same-sex relations in this category. Correspondingly they understand such relations to be instances of lust and not love (Chrysostom 356; Cyprian, *To Donatus* 9; FC 36:14–15). Several make the point that indirectly the passage validates heterosexual relations as legitimate and a proper source of pleasure (Tertullian, *The Chaplet* 6, ANF 3:96; Chrysostom 357), and some conclude that same-sex

relations cannot be pleasurable (Cyprian, *To Donatus* 9, FC 36:15; Chrysostom 357). Ambrosiaster alone appears to recognize that Paul is making a play on words between an idolatrous “exchange” of the creator for the created on the one hand, with an “exchange” of body-usages on the other (Ambrosiaster 13), but overall the Fathers certainly echo Paul in being more interested in the issue of idolatry than the consequence resulting from it (in their view) in homosexuality.

The early Christian writers understand Paul’s contrast between that which is “natural” and what is “against nature” as either simply what is “proper and improper” use of the body, or a sign of human rebellion against God as creator of the natural world; “those who forsook the author of nature also could not keep to the order of nature” (Pelagius 67). While Paul seems to have been influenced by Stoic vocabulary in his use of the phrase “against nature” (see Köster 1974: 262–7), the Fathers do not develop a Stoic theory of natural law, in which the will of God is somehow identified with the will of nature. It was the medieval commentators who constructed a clear category of an “unnatural” sexual act that transgressed a “law of nature” (Abelard 120). According to Aquinas this could be defined in two ways: as an irrational passion and as “every act of intercourse from which generation cannot follow” (Aquinas 72); the latter would of course exclude many heterosexual acts. William of St Thierry refuses to comment on the verses at all, remarking that “This whole passage ... seems better passed over than read” (41).

Among Reformed commentators, Bucer continues Aquinas’ condemnation of “sexual behavior that does not serve the production of offspring, to say nothing of being contrary to nature” (Bucer 70). Calvin says little about the passage but is also interested in the transgression of “nature,” finding that with “the fearful crime of unnatural lust” human beings have “reversed the whole order of nature” (36). In the English Reformation, William Sclater finds corrupt worship of God leads to corruption of behavior, “changing the very course of nature in their uncleanness” (Sclater 117). Luther likewise clearly sees the link between idolatry and sexual behavior: “thinking thoughts about God that are less worthy than He is” leads to thinking and acting “less worthily concerning themselves than is proper.” However, the focus of Luther’s interest consequently lies not in the behavior itself, but in the modern form of idolatry that presumes to “claim in bold and impudent treatises that God is this or that way” (Luther, Romans 167). Peter Martyr Vermigli comments that disgraceful sexual behavior is “compared” by Paul with idolatry (33) and so loses Paul’s emphasis that it is the *consequence* of idolatry. Here we find an increasing tendency to reverse the direction of Paul’s argument: commentaries assume that if certain behavior is the result of idolatry then, wherever it appears and in whatever form, it must always *be* idolatrous.

Standard modern commentaries almost entirely understand Paul as regarding homosexual activity generally, unlimited to specific contexts, as being a result and manifestation of idolatry; in this he is seen as being in line with Jewish critique of sexual practices in the Graeco-Roman world of the period (e.g. Dunn 65–6; Barrett 39; Cranfield 125–7; Käsemann 48–9; Fitzmyer 286–8). This does not mean that all modern commentators (as distinct from earlier ones) think that the church today in its pastoral practice is bound by Paul’s own conviction (so Loader 2017: 120, 149). Discussion of the passage that dissents from the general view tends to take one or more of four approaches. First, it may be claimed that Paul only has in mind abusive relations of pederasty or promiscuous cultic rituals (Boswell 1980: 108; Scroggs 1983). Second, it may be said that Paul only has in mind arbitrary and willful sexual practices that are “against nature”—in the sense of contradicting a heterosexual nature—and not those that proceed from what we now know to be a natural disposition (Boswell 1980: 109; Wink 1999: 36). Third, it is proposed that Paul voices a typical Jewish condemnation of homosexuality only to undermine this in his critique of Jewish hypocrisy in the next chapter (Countryman 2007: 109–22). Fourth, it may be asserted that Paul has no awareness of faithful, covenanted same-sex relations that are part of a life-style of obedience to God and so he cannot be referring to these. I have taken the view that since we cannot in fact *know* whether Paul had any experience of this kind of loving same-sex relation, all we can say is that he is condemning the kind of uncontrolled sexual desire that results from idolatry, whatever the scope of this in his own mind (cf. Runcorn 2013: 187). A modern reader will note that loving and faithful same-sex relations are neither the result of idolatry nor the behavior actually being described by Paul.

III. The Wider Impact

Shakespeare alludes twice to this passage, and each time the context of the reference illuminates his intention. In *All’s Well That Ends Well*, Count Bertram deserts his new wife Helen and refuses to consummate the marriage, despising her as below him in social status. His mother, the Countess, who values Helen’s worth highly, exclaims,

He cannot thrive
Unless her prayers, whom heaven delights to hear,
And loves to grant, relieve him from the wrath
Of greatest justice. (3.4.26–29)

While there are many scriptural references to the wrath of God, these lines weave together wrath, heaven and righteousness (justice) in a similar way to vv.

17–18 (“the righteousness of God is revealed ... the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ... unrighteousness of men”). Bertram is behaving unjustly, yet Helen’s “bed-trick” to recapture him raises uncomfortable questions about whether she too can be regarded as entirely “righteous,” describing it herself as “wicked meaning in a lawful deed /... both not sin and yet a sinful fact” (3.7.45–7). In *Measure for Measure* Isabella, another heroine who is to employ the bed-trick (though on behalf of another), recoils with horror from Angelo’s proposition that surrendering to him sexually would win a reprieve from execution for her brother. He bids her: “give up your body to such sweet uncleanness” (2.4.53), echoing v. 24 “God gave them up ... unto uncleanness, to defile their own bodies.” The context here of God’s wrath on suppressors of truth helps to explain why she thinks that her yielding to Angelo would be a mortal sin. Both plays are often known as “problem comedies” because of the ambiguous attitudes of their heroines, and Paul’s passage raises open-ended questions about the condition of humanity in general, as the theological reception history demonstrates.

The film, *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972), written and directed by Werner Herzog, may have taken its sub-title from many passages of scripture as well as v. 18 (“the wrath of God is revealed from heaven”), but the context of this passage is especially appropriate. While the Conquistador Aguirre thinks he is inflicting the wrath of God on idolatrous tribal peoples of the Amazon, his increasingly oppressive and terrifying leadership of the expedition to find gold recoils on him, and he reaps the consequences of his own tyrannical behavior, which includes the intention to found a kingdom on incest. So he finally suffers in himself the wrath of God in a way that reflects the sentence of Romans 1:24.

The seventeenth-century poet John Dryden begins his poem “Religio Laici” (“The Lay-Person’s Religion”) by alluding to Romans 1:16–22. He perceives the association Paul has made between the revelation of God “through faith” (v. 17) and God’s self-revelation through the natural world (v. 19) and uses this to criticize “natural religion” of his time that exalts the human mind against God in an idolatrous way (v. 22). What is “seen” of God’s nature through what God has made (v. 20) comes through faith and revelation

Thus man by his own strength to Heaven would soar;
And would not be obliged to God for more...
These truths are not the products of thy mind,
But dropped from heaven, and of a nobler kind.
Revealed religion first informed thy sight,
And reason saw not till Faith sprung the Light.

(Dryden 1882: 40)

Paul's verses on same-sex relations (1:26–27) have had an impact on cultural life beyond internal legislation of the Christian church. Paul is not the first to use the phrase “against nature” (see above on Stoicism), but his use here (especially through the Vulgate *contra naturam*) has popularized it. The notion of a “crime against nature” or an “unnatural” sexual act entered civil and criminal law codes in many countries, including the UK and the USA, but such laws have been widely repealed in the modern world. *The Against Nature Journal*, first published in 2020, is an arts and human rights magazine that explores “crimes against nature” laws and their heritage. The damage that has been done to homosexuals by a crude and cruel application of Paul's language of the “unnatural” is illustrated in the play *Unnatural Acts* (2011, conceived by Tony Speciale, written collectively by members of the Plastic Theatre), a docudrama about the investigation and persecution of a group of gay students by the administration of Harvard University in 1920 after the suicide of a sophomore.

Against Nature or *Against the Grain* is the English translation of an 1884 novel by the French writer Joris-Karl Huysmans. The narrative centers on Jean des Esseintes, an eccentric, reclusive, and ailing aristocratic figure, who attempts to retreat into an ideal artistic world of his own creation. While the French title, *À Rebours*, does not explicitly feature “nature” (it can also be translated “against the grain”), the text portrays an attempt to replace the natural with an excessive aestheticism: “Artifice ... seemed to Des Esseintes the final distinctive mark of man's genius. Nature had had her day, as he put it. By the disgusting sameness of her landscapes and skies, she had once for all wearied the considerate patience of aesthetes” (from Huysmans 1926: chapter 3). Summing up the “decadence” movement of the late nineteenth century, the novel inspired Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890); both novels depict graphically, in an ambiguous mixture of celebration and satire, the human effort to make what Paul identifies as “idols,” brilliant human artifacts that nevertheless challenge the created order.

Notes

- 1 “Obedience of faith” is repeated by the writer of the concluding doxology (16:26), but this is very unlikely to be Paul himself.
- 2 LXX B text, preferred by most editors. LXX A and C group have “my righteous one shall live by faith.”
- 3 As in Gal 3:11 and Heb 10:38.
- 4 By a copyist's error, some MSS either replace *ponēria* (wickedness) with *porneia* (fornication) or add *porneia* to the list.
- 5 E.g. Ps 81:12: “I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels.” Cf. Ps 27:9, Isa 59:2, Jer 33:5, Ezek 39:23, Mic 5:3.
- 6 See Jer 12:7–11, 31:20.