Arguments for an Understanding of ΠΙΣΤΕΩΣ in Romans 3:22, 25, and 26 as a Subjective Genitive

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1. **Introduction**

The exegetical issue which is commonly referred to as the “πιστεύς χριστου debate” has been well tread, widely dealt with, and deeply assessed. Although I draw from exegetical, theological, and syntactical wells which exist beyond the spectrum of Romans 3:22, 25, and 26, the goal of this project is to demonstrate that when Paul inscribed these verses under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he intended to communicate a subjective genitive in his utilization of the verbal noun πίστεως.

2. **Exegetical Precursors**

It is important to look at Rom. 1:17 as an exegetical prolegomenon to Rom. 3:21-26 because v. 17 (along with its cotext) uses much of the same language. The gospel that Paul mentions in v. 17 in which he says the righteousness of God is revealed, from the beginning of the letter, is emphatically Christocentric [the gospel of God…concerning his son (1b, 3a); “who was declared the Son of God” (4a); “the gospel of his son” (9a)].

16b-17a which introduce the revelation of God’s righteousness are grammatically and syntactically dependant on 16a where Paul says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel.” This implies that το ευαγγελιον proper is intimately tied to δικαίωση…θεου εν αυτω apokaluptetai (1:17). To properly understand the prepositional phrase εκ πίστεως, it is necessary to understand that δικαίωση θεου (translated “righteousness of God”),

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1 To address the theological weight this debate has the potential of carrying, I feel obligated to say that I do not believe that the categorization of πίστεως as a subjective genitive in Romans 3:22, 25, or 26 affects the truth of the Reformed doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement, and therefore imputation in any negative way. Furthermore, I affirm that these doctrines are biblical, necessary, and true, and I affirm the primary role of faith in one’s ability to stand before God as righteous. Thanks is due to G. K. Beale and G. W. Peterman for encouraging me to consider these theological implications in reference to this exegetical project. However, I believe (with Paul and Calvin) that faith is not the central effective doctrine in a biblical *ordo salutis*, but rather, it is union with Christ. For further study on this issue, see Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 1997), 320; Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved By Grace*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdman, 1989); John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdman, 1955); Robert L. Reymond, *Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998). Further, see John 14:20; 17:1; Rom. 5:1, 17; 6:6, 8-10; 2 Cor. 5:14-15, 17; Gal. 1:22; 2:20; 1 Thes. 1:1; 2:14; 2 Thes. 1:1; 1 John 2:6, 24; 5:20.


4 Ibid., 274.
for Paul (especially in the context of Romans), is God’s covenant faithfulness. Therefore, in the context of Paul’s description of the Christocentric gospel, there is only one who could appropriately reveal “δικαιοσύνη θεου. . . εκ πιστεως” (3:26).

3. Grammatical Syntactical Arguments

3:22 borrows the verb πεθανερωσαν from 3:21 for its verb. πεθανερωσαν, being perfect in tense and singular in number, denotes a specific historical referent which had continuing effect up until the point of Paul’s authorship, ruling out the possibility of the manifestation being the act of belief carried out by all believers. This referent, being described by πιστεως in v. 22, is most naturally the faithfulness of Jesus to the Father’s προεθετο of him as an ἑλαστριον as described in v. 25.

Until 3:22, Paul has not used the word πιστεως since 3:3, which ironically contains a much less debated subjective genitive: πιστεων του θεου, or “faithfulness of God.” In this verse, Paul portrays the weak link between the faithlessness (πιστευω) of man and the faithfulness of God, and indeed makes a statement contrary to an objective interpretation of 3:22 in 3:5, saying, “our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God,” demonstrating the lack of dependence of the manifestation of the righteousness of God on the faith of man.

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5 For a brief summary of this point (refreshingly argued from inter-textuality beyond Hab. 2:4) with specific reference to Rom. 1:16-17, see Philip C. Smith, “God’s New Covenant Faithfulness in Romans” Restoration Quarterly 50.4, 239. I have two thoughts concerning δικαιοσύνη θεου in Romans 1:16-17 and 3:22 and 25. First, one’s syntactical categorization of Paul’s use of δικαιοσύνη θεου is not determinative for the categorization of πιστεως as a subjective genitive in Rom. 3:22, 25, or 26, but the two subjective categorizations do synchronize theologically. Second, even if δικαιοσύνη θεου were not to be categorized as a subjective genitive or the specificity of the definition “covenant faithfulness” were too extreme, it would not have any degenerative bearing upon a subjective categorization of πιστεως in any place it may be found.

6 Regarding G. W. Peterman, “Δικαιοθησάτω δια της εκ Χριστου πιστεως: Notes on a Neglected Greek Construction” NTS 56, pp. 163-168, he strongly demonstrates the determinative value of prepositions in grammatical and syntactical analyses of genitives in the Greek language, but only makes an argument for an objective categorization from silence. In fact, even in his demonstration of the value of identifying a role of prepositions as function markers for the syntactical categorization of verbal genitives, the “silence” is nearly awkward in the fact that δια is not discussed, despite its pressing relevance and controversy (especially in Rom. 3:25). Furthermore, δια is found more than any other preposition in the instances that πιστεως is in question almost every time: (Rom. 3:22, 25; Gal. 2:16; Phil. 3:9; 2 Tim. 3:15). Peterman concludes, “If, in Gal. 2:16 for instance, Paul had wanted to speak, not of faith in Christ, but rather of Christ’s faithfulness, why did he not say και της εκ Χριστου ιησου επιστευσαμεν εισ δικαιωθωμεν δια της εκ Χριστου πιστεως?” First, if it is the εκ preposition he requires to denote a subjective reading, Paul does use this preposition, and actually does use the exact phrase which Peterman himself admits would denote a subjective genitive, only he does not include a δια, which Peterman does not discuss. However, the absence of this δια is indeterminate, because according to Peterman, εκ almost always denotes subjectivity in its accompanying genitive. Second, Paul writes εκ πιστεως ιησου only one chapter later in 3:22, which is again the exact same phrase Paul uses in Rom. 3:26 of those whom God δικαιωντα. More than that, following v.22, Paul speaks of the first coming of Christ in reference to the law synonymously with faith in v.23-26 again utilizing the vocabulary Peterman himself admits could denote a subjective categorization of πιστεως in v.24 when he says εισ εκ πιστεως δικαιωθωμεν.


The phrase of διὰ τῆς πίστεως in 3:25, in order to maintain a consistent subject matter of the text, requires that πίστεως, just as ἰδεῖν τινιν and αἰματιν, to refer to Christ. If πίστεως were to refer to a member of the church, the text would lose its subjective coherence.

The prepositional phrase ἐκ πίστεως Ιησοῦ in 3:26 gains syntactical support as a subjective genitive from Paul’s similar construction in 4:16: ἐκ πίστεως Ἀβραὰμ, which is obviously subjective, and is, similarly to 3:22, juxtaposed with the law. To translate πίστεως χριστου as “faith in Christ,” one must understand, before translating the phrase under question, it is important to understand that when Paul explicitly uses εν χριστῳ as a dative of sphere in Romans, it is denotes fellowship (16:3), unity in the church (12:5), union with Christ (8:1) and most relevant to the topic at hand, the expression of God’s attributes (Rom. 8:39), but not usually as an object of faith (εἰς seems to have been the more popular way of expressing this concept in the early church; e.g. Acts 24:24).

4. Logical and Theological Arguments

I have three logical arguments for a subjective categorization of πίστεως. First, there is an issue regarding Paul’s rhetorical structure in passages that contain some form of πίστεως χριστου. A subjective reading of the phrase is the only reading that accounts for a logical flow of thought in the verse. In Rom. 3:22, Gal. 3:22 an elsewhere, there are, if one were to take the phrase objectively, redundancies in thought.

There are two main rhetorical issues which demonstrate the redundancy of an objective reading of πίστεως. The first is a primary logical analysis of the text in question, and the second is for syntactical and theological support. First, if one takes χριστου as an objective genitive in Romans 3:22, then in relation to εἰς παντὰς τοὺς πίστευομαι, Paul would be saying that the righteousness of God has been manifested through the faith of those who believe in him for all those who believe in him. It is not simply redundant, but also a chronological impossibility to say that it is through one’s faith that the righteousness of God is revealed to oneself for the sake of one’s belief. Second, the same chronological fiction is portrayed in an objective translation of Galatians 3:22, which would be translated, “But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe (in Jesus Christ).”

Second, in Romans 5:12-21 where Paul contrasts the acts of Adam and Christ in regards to condemnation and justification by emphatically stating that Adam brought sin into the world and that Jesus is the one who fixes it by bringing justification through righteousness. Furthermore, the “act/obedience” language here connotes a strong sense

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11 “ὑπὸ τοῦ νομοῦ” (3:21b); “οὐ τῷ ἐκ τοῦ νομοῦ” (4:16b).
13 Paul emphatically makes this point by making the direct connection between Adam and the presence of sin in the world/man in every verse in 12-21.
14 “…righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.” (17b), “…through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men.” (18b), “…through the obedience the One the many will be made righteous.” (19b), “…grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.” (21b).
of “faithfulness,” providing not only a thematic parallel between 3:21-26 and 5:12-21, but a syntactical one as well.\(^\text{15}\)

Finally, in Romans 3:26 the action which is εἰς εὐνοεῖται δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ in 3:25 is agreed to be God’s sending of his Son and not a belief upon the Son even by those who take πίστεως as an objective genitive in vv. 22, 25, and 26.\(^\text{16}\) This seems incongruous with an objective categorization of the almost identical prepositional phrase in 3:22.\(^\text{17}\) Also, the fact that the two phrases are only three verses apart (neither are transitional in nature, being that they are both in the middle of Paul’s argument) seems to push the burden of proof on those who would categorize πίστεως objectively to prove that Paul had two completely different theological events in mind which both had a primary role in the demonstration of δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ.

5. Issues in Romans 4

A common response to a subjective categorization of πίστεως in Romans 3:22, 25, and 26 is to refer to Romans 4 as Paul’s utilization of the story of Abraham as an example of someone who was justified on the basis of their belief.\(^\text{18}\) There are several exegetical problems with this appeal. First, the “belief” which Abraham has in Romans 4, according to vv. 18-21, is in a promise which God has already made. This particular faith is responsive in nature. Therefore, it is not a product of Abraham’s initiative or a logical or chronological starting point for any justificatory action. In the same way, in v. 24 Paul seems to assume a chronological subsequence within the one’s ability to believe which is required by the very nature of the object of belief.\(^\text{19}\) Furthermore, the two present tense verbs in the construction μελέλει λογίζεσθαι (“will be reckoned” or “are about to be reckoned”) seems to remove any possibility that the believer’s “reckoning”\(^\text{20}\) could precede the event described by the two aorist words παρεδοθε and εγερθε, which Paul sees as the logical, chronological, and theological precedent for his own justification.\(^\text{21}\)

Second, the genitive construct δικαιοσύνης πίστεως should be understood as a genitive of simple apposition, where πίστεως epexegetically qualifies δικαιοσύνης based on Paul’s forensically equalitative connection of the two words in reference to

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\(^{16}\) See Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (ed. E. Stonehouse, F.F. Bruce, and Gordon Fee; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 237. “The third prepositional phrase in the series indicates the purpose for which God ‘set forth Christ as a sacrifice of atonement’: ‘for a demonstration of his righteousness…’ And at the end of footnote 91, “God’s public display of Christ as ἡσαστήριον has, as at least one of its purposes, the demonstration that he is ‘righteous.’” Also see Robert Mounce, *Romans* (ed. E. Clandenen; Broadman & Holman Publishers; 1995), 119.

\(^{17}\) “διά πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ” (3:22) and “διὰ πίστεως εν τῷ αὐτῷ” (3:25). The elephant in the text here is that in v. 25 Paul finally uses an εν, which would have made an objective genitive so much clearer in v.22, which Paul does use this way elsewhere (2 Tim. 3:15). Unfortunately for the one who would categorize πίστεως as an objective genitive, it is obviously not used to denote an indirect object, but rather is an instrumental εν.


\(^{19}\) It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

\(^{20}\) λογίζομαι is the usually the Greek word which theologians refer to as the New Testament word which has the closest semantic range to “imputation.”

\(^{21}\) ος παρεδοθε δια τα παραπτώματα ημών και εγερθε δια δικαιοσύνη ημών.
justification in 4:5 where he says, λογιζεται η πιστεις αυτων εις δικαιοσυνην. This being the case, and in light of the object of Abraham’s faith being God in reference to his faithfulness to his promise, Paul seems to be communicating that the faith which was credited to Abraham as righteousness is the fulfillment of the promise which God made to Abraham. This is why Paul says that the promise of God came to Abraham “Ου γαρ δια νομου η επαγγελια τω Αβρααμ η τω σπερματι αυτου...δια δικαιοσυνης πιστεως.” In the same way, as mentioned above, [δικαιοσυνη] μελλει λογιζεθαι τοις πιστεουσιν. But as is clear from the example of Abraham, this reckoning of righteousness occurs only because the object of belief is the promise and the constituent fulfillment implicit therein that Abraham will believe in the first place. Therefore it should not be assumed that Abraham’s faith logically or even chronologically preceded his righteousness.

6. Conclusion and Translation

In conclusion, the word πιστεως functions as a subjective genitive in Romans 3:22, 25, and 26, and should be translated in this way:

3:22-“And the righteousness of God (has been revealed) through the faithfulness of Christ for all those who believe.”
3:25-“Whom God put forward as a propitiation, through faith[fullness], by [the shedding of] his blood. This was to show God’s righteousness.”
3:26-“So that he would be just and the justifier of the one who has the faith of Jesus.”

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22 Επιστευσεν δε Αβρααμ τω θεω (4:3), ου διεκριθε τη απιστια αλλ’ ενεδυναμωθε τη πιστει (4:20).