

# **Biblical Interpretation and Christian Faith: A Case Study of Romans 1:17b**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Without question, the Bible is the most widely disseminated writing in all of human history, translated into the largest number of languages, studied by laymen and scholars alike. It is prized by people of every conceivable background and is studied with a vast array of approaches and methods. From the perspective of the reader, the Bible may be considered a book of history, literature, drama, apocalyptic prophecy, poetry, wisdom, legend, saga, or even myth. Its prose and its teachings have shaped the perceptions, language, and understanding of mankind in every field of human endeavor.

With such variety, the Scriptures have been described as being like a piano upon which can be played any composition of the pianist's choosing. Unlike any other book, the Bible was written over a span of sixteen hundred years by over forty writers of various cultural, historical, and educational backgrounds. Even today, its unity and historical accuracy remain irrefutable, demonstrating the divine origin and inspiration of this mysterious book. For Christian believers, the Bible is considered one of God's greatest gifts, delivering His message to humanity concerning His will and desire. Its chapters and verses convey not just doctrine or instruction, but God's own heart for man and His desire in creation. While God has certainly spoken in the Bible, it remains to be seen just how much mankind has grasped its message.

In this paper, we will consider one of the most important verses found in the Bible, Romans 1:17, and in particular the key phrase, *The just shall live by faith* (Romans 1:17b). In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther's consideration of this same phrase motivated his reassessment of the Catholic Church and of Christian theology; it was this reassessment that set off the Protestant Reformation. In light of the importance of this verse, we will consider the various ways it has been translated in five different Chinese-language versions of the Bible. Then, we will consider the underlying translative and interpretive philosophies of these translations, their linguistic basis, as well as the resultant theological implications. In so doing, we will use Romans 1:17b as a case study to demonstrate the extent to which biblical interpretation can impact Christian faith.

## I. PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION<sup>1</sup>

### A. Various Schools of Bible Interpretation

In order to receive the revelation contained in the Bible, its words must be interpreted according to right principles. Over the last centuries, several schools have emerged of biblical interpretation, each with its own approach and methodology. Bertrand Ramm, in his seminal work on this subject *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, has identified seven major schools, four of which are presented in this paper as a background to the translative and interpretive methodology we consider valuable.

In a *devotional* interpretation, emphasis is given to the “edifying aspects of Scripture, and interpreting with the intention of developing the spiritual life.”<sup>2</sup> The history of this approach is traced through the line of medieval mystics and contemporary inner life teachers all the way up to the present. In this perspective, the words of the Bible are seen as a source of spiritual food and of spiritual blessing, and the Scriptures are understood to hold practical application to readers’ everyday life and spiritual experience.

In an *allegorical* interpretation, the “real meaning” (or deeper meaning) is believed to lie beneath the “letter” or the “obvious.”<sup>3</sup> When writing the passage, the author is understood to have set out to construct an “extended metaphor” in which the written elements are not actual, but are intended to point to an underlying meaning deeper than the word-for-word sense. John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* is a classic example of writing in this genre. Certain portions of the Old Testament are generally accepted as intentionally allegorical. Allegorizations of other passages are subject to interpretation and are often disputed.

In a *literal* interpretation, the reader is expected to be “satisfied with the literal meaning” of the text. Any understanding beyond the words themselves (in context) is precluded without “very substantial reasons...given for advancing beyond” it.<sup>4</sup> During the fourth century, Syrian scholars in Antioch solidified the literal interpretive principle when they taught that the relationship between the Old and New Testaments is not allegorical but typological. In other words, the events of the Old

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<sup>1</sup> The information in this section is adapted from Bertrand Ramm. *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House (1970).

<sup>2</sup> Ramm, Bernard. *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids (1970), p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> Ramm, Bernard. *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids (1970), pp. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Ramm, Bernard. *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids (1970), p. 45.

Testament are actual but are interpreted Christologically (as divinely designed types foreshadowing the New Testament Messiah).

Protestant Reformers later followed the literal tradition as a guiding principle in their own understanding and interpretation of the Bible. Martin Luther wrote, "The literal sense of Scripture alone is the whole essence of faith and of Christian theology." Elsewhere, he wrote, "Every word should be allowed to stand in its natural meaning, and that should not be abandoned unless faith forces us to it."<sup>5</sup> For Luther, the literal principle of interpretation also implied sub-principles that should also govern the reader's understanding:

- 1) the rejection of excessive or biased allegorization,
- 2) the primacy of the original languages as the vehicles of God's message, and
- 3) the importance of grammar, history, and context to a proper understanding.

In holding to a literal interpretation, Luther always affirmed the perspicuity of Scripture and the believer's sufficiency to understand it ("the sufficiency principle"), a principle that Ramm has summarized as meaning that the believer himself is "sufficient" to interpret the Bible and that the Bible is "sufficiently clear" to be understandable to him.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Scripture always interprets Scripture. In addition, Luther maintained that the goal of all biblical interpretation must be Christ Himself and not merely better interpretation.<sup>7</sup> Ramm has called this "the Christological principle," that "all doctrines are unified in their radial relationship (like spokes on a wheel) to Christ and not in terms of a network of dogmas forming a system."<sup>8</sup>

## **B. Qualifications of a Bible Interpreter**

First Corinthians 2:14 says, "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." In other words, only a spiritual person, and not a soulish person, has the capacity to interpret properly the Word of God. By definition, a spiritual person is one whose human spirit has been activated and enlivened by the Spirit of God. In affirming this principle, we agree with the twentieth century Scottish theologian Marcus Dods:

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<sup>5</sup> Ramm, Bernard. *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids (1970), p. 54.

<sup>6</sup> Ramm, Bernard. *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids (1970), p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> Ramm, Bernard. *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids (1970), p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> Ramm, Bernard. *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids (1970), pp. 109-110.

...in order to appreciate and use the Bible the reader of it must himself have the same spirit which enabled its writers to understand the revelation of God and to record it. The Bible is a record, but it is not a dead record of dead persons and events, but a record inspired by the living Spirit who uses it to speak to men now. It is more than a phonograph which has mechanically stored up for ages the words and tones of the original speaker. It is the medium through which the living God now makes Himself heard and known. But to find in it the Spirit of God the reader must himself have that Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the first and most necessary qualification for any Bible interpretation is that the interpreter has been “born again” (John 3:3) to receive God’s Spirit. Without regeneration, the words of the Bible are “foolishness unto him: neither can he know them.” Any academic qualification or credential, while potentially useful, must play a secondary role and depend on the spiritual. We also echo Ramm’s three additional spiritual sub-qualifications. The interpreter must have:

- 1) a passion to know God’s word,
- 2) a deep reverence for God, and
- 3) utter dependence on the Holy Spirit to guide and direct.

### **C. The Complexity of the Greek Grammar**

As we have stated earlier, Luther maintained that as the vehicles of God’s message, the biblical source languages must be given primacy. As the Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, the interpreter must have a grasp of these languages and understand the ways in which they are structurally distinct from the language of translation. Without such an understanding, there is no way for meaning in translation to be conveyed accurately and adequately. It is not always sufficient simply to replace one word for an equivalent word of the same definition. In any language, each word has a “little pool of meaning.”<sup>10</sup> Translators must discern the correct sense from within both the “pool of meaning” of the word in the source language and the “pool of meaning” of the word in the language of translation.

The English language (like Chinese), has an analytic structure. This means that the meaning of the various words in combination is dependent on the ordering of those words. With a different word ordering, the meaning of words given in combination may be altogether different from the words provided in another ordering. The Greek language, on the other hand, has an agglutinative structure. This means that the meaning of the words may not change with a change in word ordering.

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<sup>9</sup> Dods, Marcus. *The Bible: Its Origins and Nature*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons (1904), p. 102.

<sup>10</sup> Ramm, Bernard. *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids (1970), p. 5.

Instead, meaning is assigned by changes in declension or conjugation within the words themselves. These changes are indicated by different word endings. Thus, Greek-English (and Greek-Chinese) translation is not always as simple as identifying correspondent dictionary definitions. The structural and grammatical nuances of the source language must also be taken into account.

#### **D. Proper Understanding of the Biblical Geography, History, and Culture**

Finally, the interpreter must be able to “bridge the gap between our minds and the minds of the Biblical writers.”<sup>11</sup> There is not only a divergence of language, but also a divergence of culture between the reader of antiquity and the reader of the present day. While we fully believe that the life and truth found in the Bible are timeless and transcendent over all geographical, historical, and cultural distinctions, in order to unlock their meaning, Scripture must be understood in light of the geography, history, and culture of the time and place in which it was written.

### **II. Justification by Faith**

Theological understanding or perception always has some influence on a person’s interpretation and translation of the Bible. Before examining the translation of Romans 1:17b in five different Chinese-language versions, we will first cover this verse’s significance in light of the historical development of understanding concerning justification by faith. The simple phrase, “The just shall live by faith” may be considered the wellspring of the Protestant Reformation, and the revelation that Luther received in this verse changed his perception of God:

At first I clearly saw that the free grace of God is absolutely necessary to attain to light and eternal life; and I anxiously and busily worked to understand the word of Paul in Rom. 1:17: the righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel. I questioned this passage for a long time and labored over it, for the expression “righteousness of God” barred my way. This phrase was customarily explained to mean that the righteousness of God is a virtue by which He is Himself righteous and condemns sinners. In this way all the teachers of the church except Augustine had interpreted the passage. They had said: The righteousness of God, that is, the wrath of God. But as often as I read this passage, I wished that God had never revealed the Gospel; for who could love a God who was angry, who judged and condemned people? This misunderstanding continued until, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, I finally examined more carefully the word of Habakkuk: “The just shall live by His faith” (2:4). From this passage I concluded that life must be derived from faith...Then the entire Holy Scriptures became clear

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<sup>11</sup> Ramm, Bernard. *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids (1970), p. 4.

to me, and heaven itself was opened to me. Now we see this brilliant light very clearly, and we are privileged to enjoy it abundantly.<sup>12</sup>

In an excellent article on this subject (entitled “Justification of Life”) for the Christian journal *Affirmation & Critique*, Greek scholar Kerry S. Robichaux has compared various schools concerning justification, particularly those considered Lutheran and Catholic. Robichaux points out that for Protestant Reformers, human beings “possess no justifiable quality and can look to nothing in themselves to be justified.” Therefore, believers require an “external righteousness.” Faith in Christ’s work on the cross is the basis, but righteousness itself is an attribute of Christ alone and is found wholly outside of the believer. The “imputation” of Christ’s righteousness to the believer’s account means that the value of this righteousness is assigned to him, but he never possesses it intrinsically:

Righteousness is said to be imputed by God to the believer, not distributed to him or her by any means. This type of righteousness is strictly external to the believer and is termed an alien righteousness. Because the justification that depends on it is not one based on the actual righteousness of the believer nor even on a righteousness imparted to the believer through some dispensation of God, it is termed a forensic justification.<sup>13</sup>

In the Catholic view, the believer’s righteousness is based not just on faith in Christ, but on union with Christ. Justification is considered more than forgiveness of sins, but also “sanctification, and the renewal of the inner man.”<sup>14</sup> Robichaux explains:

Catholic justification is based on a real degree of righteousness in the believer, not on an external righteousness that the Reformers defined. Further, and more importantly, justifying righteousness in Catholic thought is not merely resident in the believer, but effects a real change in him or her...Thus, justification is not a mere declaration of righteousness over the believer but an actual making righteous of the believer by grace. Justification effectively severs human beings from their sinful heritage and permits them to live righteously before God.<sup>15</sup>

In Catholic theology, it is “sanctifying grace” that “makes us ‘pleasing to God.’”<sup>16</sup> In other words, the grace deposited *within* the believer is the basis for his justification. This view, while apparently inward, is still, however, based in part on the believers’ works and not based entirely on

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<sup>12</sup> Plass, Ewald. *What Luther Says*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House (1959), p. 835.

<sup>13</sup> Robichaux, Kerry S. “Justification of Life.” *Affirmation & Critique* (April 2001), 30-31.

<sup>14</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. New York: Doubleday (1995), 544.

<sup>15</sup> Robichaux, Kerry S. “Justification of Life.” *Affirmation & Critique* (April 2001), 35.

<sup>16</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. New York: Doubleday (1995), 544.

God's free grace as championed by the Reformers. For them, Catholic justification was entirely too subjective and insufficient basis for salvation from the "terrors of condemnation."<sup>17</sup> At the Council of Trent, the Church's formal response to the Reformers, teachers of the Church affirmed that those who have "fallen from the received grace of Justification" are justified again "through the sacrament of Penance."<sup>18</sup> Thus, as Robichaux points out, in the Catholic view, "There is no security in one's salvation...no certainty that one will persevere in the grace of God."<sup>19</sup>

Unlike other leaders of the Reformation, Luther was not limited in his view of righteousness to something merely "forensic" or "imputed." "For Luther, righteousness was both an imputed quality and a quality shared with Christ through union with Him."<sup>20</sup> Luther's balanced perspective benefited from the best elements, and dispensed with the extremes, of *each* of the two approaches, Catholic and Lutheran, that have been discussed in this paper.

It is unfortunate that Luther's understanding of justification in these complementary aspects has been generally unknown. Righteousness by imputation and righteousness by union were each emphasized by two Lutheran theologians, Philip Melanchthon and Andreas Osiander, who each took a "side of Luther's position to its furthest conclusions and to the absolute denial of the other side."<sup>21</sup> While Melanchthon emphasized imputed or forensic righteousness, Osiander emphasized righteousness by union. Because Melanchthon's view gained more prominence in the ensuing years, a complete picture of Luther's balanced, multi-dimensional view of justification by faith has been lost until more recent scholarship.

Since the late 1970s a new school of thought has arisen among Finnish theologians who have reexamined Luther's writings and reviewed his understanding of justification. Their findings have been studied by Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Professor of Systematic Theology at Fuller Seminary, in a recently published compendium called *Justification: Five Views*. While the traditional understanding of Luther has presented his view of justification as merely forensic, the Finnish school has reaffirmed that Luther's view *also* emphasized the impartation of Christ to the believer as his own righteousness. In Luther's understanding, Christ Himself is present in the believer through the Spirit and through *theosis*. True faith, for Luther, is that which "takes hold of Christ in such a way that Christ is...the One

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<sup>17</sup> Robichaux, Kerry S. "Justification of Life." *Affirmation & Critique* (April 2001), 31.

<sup>18</sup> Schaff, Philip. *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes: The Greek and Latin Creeds, with Translations*. New York: Harper & Brothers (1919), p. 104.

<sup>19</sup> Robichaux, Kerry S. "Justification of Life." *Affirmation & Critique* (April 2001), 37.

<sup>20</sup> Robichaux, Kerry S. "Justification of Life." *Affirmation & Critique* (April 2001), 31.

<sup>21</sup> Robichaux, Kerry S. "Justification of Life." *Affirmation & Critique* (April 2001), 31.

who is present in the faith itself...Therefore faith justifies because it takes hold of and possesses this treasure, the present Christ.”<sup>22</sup>

Kärkkäinen understands Luther’s statement to mean that “Christ in both his person and his work is present in faith and is through this presence identical with the righteousness of faith.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, the believer’s righteousness is Christ Himself received into him, applied to him, and made real to him. His basis for righteousness is Christ, not merely in a “forensic” way, but Christ within him—as righteousness Himself infused into him to be the believer’s own righteousness before God.<sup>24</sup> Thus, Luther’s actual view of justification encompasses not just forensic righteousness, but righteousness by union, and even righteousness by the believer’s partaking in God’s very life and nature.

### **III. Case Study of Romans 1:17b**

The final section of this paper will focus on the translation of Romans 1:17b (“The just shall live by faith.”) in five Chinese-language versions of the Bible: the Chinese Union Version, Today’s Chinese Version, the Lu Chen-Chung Version, the Catholic Studium Biblicum Version, and the Recovery Version. In studying the translations of this text in these five versions, we will use Romans 1:17b as a case study to demonstrate the importance of understanding:

- 1) the cultural and historical context in which the text was written,
- 2) the original Greek grammar, and
- 3) the principle that Scripture always interprets Scripture.

#### **A. Cultural and Historical Background: A Hebrew Law Court Setting**

In Romans 1:17b, the phrase, “The just shall live by faith” is actually Paul’s quotation from Habakkuk 2:4. This original text was written shortly before the Babylonian siege and capture of Jerusalem in the early seventh century BC. Paul employs the same quotation from Habakkuk in two other places, Galatians 3:11 and Hebrews 10:38. Of course, the same phrase written by Habakkuk would have a different application and implication than it would have to Romans, Galatians, or Hebrews centuries later. Therefore, in order to understand this phrase’s nuanced meaning in each

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<sup>22</sup> Luther, Martin. *Luther’s Works* (vol. 26). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House (1955), p. 130

<sup>23</sup> Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti, “Deification View” in Beilby, James K. & Eddy, Paul Rhodes (eds.). *Justification: Five Views*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic (2011), p. 224.

<sup>24</sup> Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti, “Deification View” in Beilby, James K. & Eddy, Paul Rhodes (eds.). *Justification: Five Views*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic (2011), p. 228.



particular context, we must have some understanding of its contextualized meaning to Roman, Galatian, and Hebrew believers.

Here, our discussion will be limited to the way in which Paul presented the phrase, “The just shall live by faith” (Romans 1:17b) in the context of the book of Romans. New Testament scholar N. T. Wright points out that it is especially important to understand the historical and cultural background behind this verse in order to have a deeper understanding. In Paul’s day, the word translated “righteousness” would be understood in a legal sense with particular significance in the Jewish court system:

When the judge finds in favor of either the plaintiff or the defendant, that party is declared “righteous”—not morally good and deserving of a favorable outcome, but one who is given the status by the court of “being in the right” as a result of the judge’s decision.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the word “righteousness,” to a Hebrew reader, would evoke the setting of a law court in which two parties present their respective sides of a dispute to a judge. Without this understanding of the historical and cultural background, we would miss that Romans 1:17 points to the accused (the believers) being justified in Christ by proclamation of God’s verdict.

## **B. Consideration of Greek Grammar**

Chinese theologian Denny Y.C. Ma has also noted the legal implication of the word “righteousness.” However, Ma takes a linguistic approach to find this meaning in the grammar itself, pointing out that in Romans 1:16-17 Paul uses the argumentative Greek particle *gar* (“for” or “because”) three times, as though he were presenting his case in a court of law (“*for* I am not ashamed of the gospel,” “*for* it is the power of God,” and “*For* therein is the righteousness of God revealed.”). Paul continues to use *gar* in his argument three more times in 1:18-21, and four more times in 2:11-14. In fact, the particle *gar* appears more than one hundred times throughout the book of Romans to emphasize the law of God and His verdict toward the Gentiles.<sup>26</sup>

It should be noted that the two instances of *gar* in 1:16 are not reflected in any of the five Chinese-language versions, perhaps because of the difficulty of the resultant Chinese-language reading were it included. However, because of this omission, the feeling of a law court with a judge hearing a case before pronouncing a verdict is somewhat obscured.

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<sup>25</sup> Wright, N.T. *Romans: 18 Studies for Individuals and Groups*. Wheaton: InterVarsity Press (2009), pp. 13.

<sup>26</sup> Ma, Denny Y.C. (馬有藻) 從稱義到成聖—保羅書信詮釋 *From Justification to Sanctification—An Exposition of Paul’s Epistles* (2005), pp. 35-36.

Ma points out that in addition to the Greek particle *gar*, Paul also uses another particle *oun* (“what then”) to highlight a conclusion in his argument. This is in evidence in Romans chapters 3, 4 and 6, which all begin with this word. For example, in Romans 3:9-10, Paul’s powerful conclusion begins with *oun*: “*What then?* Are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin. As it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one.” With an understanding of the legal sense inherent to these grammatical particles *gar* and *oun*, the reader will certainly have some feeling that Paul is like a lawyer arguing his case in the court of God.

Having seen the influence that grammar can have on biblical understanding, we can come to our consideration of the various Chinese-language translations. The following table shows the rendering of this verse in five Chinese versions:

羅馬書一章十七節下 Romans 1:17b (King James Version)	Romans 1:17b The just shall live by faith.
新標點和合本 (Chinese Union Version 2002)	義人必因信得生
現代譯本 (Today’s Chinese Version 1995)	因信的人將得生命
呂振中譯本 (Lu Chen-Chung Version 1970)	因信而成為義的人，必得活著
思高譯本 (Stadium Biblicum Version, Catholic, 1968)	義人因信德而生活
恢復本 (Recovery Version 2005)	義人本於信得生並活著

In the English language, most translations render Romans 1:17b as, “The just shall live by faith.” The Greek word *zao* (Strong’s G2198), rendered “live” in English, has at least two meanings:

- 1) to live, be among the living, be alive (not lifeless, not dead)
- 2) to enjoy real life, to have true life.<sup>27</sup>

Both the Chinese Union Version 新標點和合本 and Today’s Chinese Version 現代中文譯本 translate the Greek word *zao* as “receive life,” whereas the Lu Chen-Chung Version 呂振中譯本 and the Catholic version 思高譯本 render the same word as “live this life” or simply “live.” The translators would seem to understand two different aspects of meaning behind the same Greek word and therefore each

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<sup>27</sup> Thayer, Joseph H. *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers (2005), pp. 269-270.

presents a different emphasis. The Recovery Version, on the other hand, includes both aspects and renders this word as “have life and live.”

### **C. Using Scripture to Interpret Scripture**

As we have previously mentioned, using Scripture to interpret Scripture is a necessary principle in Bible interpretation. This means simply that the portion of the Bible being studied (the second “Scripture”) should be understood in the context of the entire Bible (the first “Scripture”). In rendering the best translation of any word, phrase, or verse, consideration should be given to the context in which it appears. Application of this principle is seen in the Recovery Version’s translation of Romans 1:17b as evidenced by the Recovery Version’s corresponding footnote:

This book covers mainly our being justified (1:1-5; 9:1-11:36), our having life (5:12-8:39), and our living properly by this life (12:1-16:27). Since this verse also stresses these three points, it may be considered an abstract of the entire book<sup>28</sup>.

Thus, in the Recovery Version, Romans 1:17 is understood to encapsulate the message of the entire book of Romans. As a result, the word *zao* is rendered “have life and live” to reflect Paul’s emphases of “having life” and “living properly by this life.”

The Recovery Version renders *zao* in the same way in Galatians 3:11, while in Hebrews 10:38, *zao* is rendered simply, “live.” An examination of the context of these verses lends credence to the usage of different shades of meaning for the same Greek word. The context of Hebrews is Jewish believers returning to Judaism. They already have life, but they need to live this life by faith.<sup>29</sup> The context of Romans and Galatians, on the other hand, is the gospel, written to those alienated from the life of God, needing the infusion of faith to be justified unto receiving, or having, life. Then, having received this life, they must continue to live by it. The inclusion of both “have life” and “live” in the Recovery Version covers both aspects of justification discussed in section II.

In addition to accounting for the context in which a particular word appears, the author’s usage of similar words should also be considered to confirm the meaning of the first word. In Romans 1:17b, the Recovery Version includes references to Romans 5:2 and 5:10 for its distinctive translation of “have life and live.” The leading translator of the Recovery Version, Witness Lee, has written on the two aspects of God’s complete salvation, giving further clarification to the Recovery Version’s understanding:

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<sup>28</sup> Recovery Version of the Holy Bible, Romans 1:17 note 3.

<sup>29</sup> Many thanks to Roger Good, one of the translators on the Recovery Version team, for his helpful comment.

The complete salvation of God has two aspects: the judicial aspect and the organic aspect. It is not that easy to understand what organic is and what judicial is. However, by the word judicial we know it has something to do with the law, and by the word organic we know it has something to do with life. Therefore, God's complete salvation has both the judicial aspect, an aspect related to the law, and the organic aspect, an aspect related to life<sup>30</sup>.

In Witness Lee's view, mankind has no capacity to comply with God's righteous requirement and can only be sanctified by the death of Christ on the cross. Witness Lee used the phrases "objective justification" or "judicial redemption" to describe the stage of salvation in which a believer is declared righteous through his believing into Jesus Christ to receive God's life (i.e. have life). He used the phrases "subjective justification" or "organic salvation" to describe the process in which a believer learns to live the day-to-day Christian life, having received this life judicially (i.e. live). The two verses in Romans 5 (vv. 2, 10) are used to explain and support his proposition and to confirm the Recovery Version's expanded translation of Romans 1:17 to include both aspects:

Romans 5:2 says, "We have obtained access...into this grace in which we stand." How can a sinner obtain access into the grace of God? There must be the fulfillment of the judicial aspect so that the sinner may receive forgiveness of sins, washing away of sins, justification by God, reconciliation to God, and positional sanctification. All of these items are a matter of procedure, qualification, and position. The judicial aspect qualifies and positions us sinners to enter into the grace of God to enjoy the salvation which God has accomplished for us according to His life organically in the aspect of purpose (Rom. 5:10). Here we see that God has accomplished a salvation with two aspects: the redeeming aspect and the saving aspect. Redemption is accomplished judicially, and saving is carried out organically<sup>31</sup>.

Witness Lee points out that a believer *first* gains the position of justification (the "access" in Romans 5:2). This accounts for the rendering "have life" in Romans 1:17, which is the judicial aspect. Subsequently, as a believer he lives, experiences, and enjoys this life ("saved by his life" in Romans 5:10). This accounts for the additional rendering "live by faith," which is the organic aspect.

By differentiating between these two aspects of God's salvation in this way, Witness Lee effectively incorporates the two theological positions concerning righteousness and justification: Sinners are first *declared* righteous, and then they are *made* righteous by receiving God's life and living this life. Objective justification is the procedure, and subjective justification is the goal. Thus,

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<sup>30</sup> Lee, W. *The Organic Aspect of God's Salvation*, 1996, p. 9

<sup>31</sup> Lee, W. *The Organic Aspect of God's Salvation*, 1996, p. 13

the Recovery Version presents a compelling case, with footnotes and references from other chapters, for its particular expanded translation.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we hope to have demonstrated, using one of the most important verses in the book of Romans, the importance of theology, historical background, grammar, and context in Bible translation. In light of our study of the five Chinese translations of Romans 1:17b, we agree with Marcus Dods that a Bible interpreter should love God's word, revere God deeply, and depend on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In other words, this person should be regenerated and be well-versed in the Scriptures before embarking on any task of Bible interpretation or translation.

Second, the importance of adequate skill in the Greek and Hebrew languages cannot be overemphasized. The translator must be able to navigate accurately structurally distinct languages while taking into account relevant historical, geographical and cultural differences. In Hebrew, Greek, English, or Chinese, a single word can have multiple meanings. Much wisdom is necessary to discern the correct meaning, and the correct translation, in any given context.

Third, Romans 1:17 illustrates the need for accurate translation with the proper view of God's salvation. Having an adequate translation, we can better understand the complete meaning of Romans 1:17. Justification is only "forensic" or "objective." The child of God with the life of God experiences real union and oneness with Christ to experience subjective, organic salvation by growing together with the divine life (Romans 6:5). This growth in life enables him to live out the life of God, with a proper and justified living, and even to be constituted righteousness (Romans 5:19).

Lastly, in studying the five Chinese-language Bible translations, we are full of appreciation for the valuable contributions earlier versions have made toward biblical understanding. This is particularly true with regard to the Chinese Union Version, which has been the predominant translation among Chinese readers ever since its publication in 1911.

Every new translation of the Bible should inherit from its forebears and build upon the translation work that has gone before. This is described succinctly and clearly in the introduction to the Recovery Version of the New Testament:

Throughout the centuries, translations of the Bible have steadily improved. In general, each new translation inherits from previous ones and opens the way for later ones. While a new translation derives help from its predecessors, it should go further...

Translation of the Bible depends not only on an adequate comprehension of the original language but also on a proper understanding of the divine revelation in the holy Word. Throughout the centuries the understanding of the divine revelation possessed by the saints has always been based upon the light they received, and this understanding has progressed steadily.<sup>32</sup>

Aspiring toward an ever-improving understanding of God's word, we humbly present this paper in this spirit of progress, grateful for the work of the past Bible translators in the Chinese language, and invite further studies.

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<sup>32</sup> Recovery Version of the New Testament. "A Brief Explanation." Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry (1991).