

A Faithful Response to the Pulse Shooting (When Faith is Hard to Come By)ⁱ

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The biggest shooting in U.S. history.² One hundred forty-five mass shootings in the first 170 days of 2016.³ 6,321 people killed by guns so far this year.⁴ Gun sales are on the rise.⁵ Guns and death seem to inundate media headlines these days in the United States. Every person lost leaves behind gaping holes in the lives of their loved ones, whose worlds will never be the same.

In the wake of last week's Pulse nightclub shooting, we're overwhelmed by new waves of personal and national devastation. In moments of crisis, ordinary saints never fail to emerge to care for the wounded and the families. And so we live in this nonsensical world of good and bad, extreme violence and tireless kindness, all framed by inconsolable grief.

There's too much to process and too much to do and not enough faith to do it with. It's too overwhelming and the grief too weighty. But I'm a good Christian and so I should just have faith. Right? The Bible says "the one who is righteous will live by faith."⁶ But my faith is drowned out by my fear and my doubt. Will my family and friends be safe at Pride events this weekend? And beyond just this week, will we ever fix whatever Godforsaken thing is wrong in our country that this *keeps* happening?

The Christians in Galatia, the recipients of Paul's words above, knew what it was like to try to eke out a functional existence in a living hell. In an empire built to serve the top three percent of the population at the cost of the other 97 percent, theirs was a world of poverty, sickness, and oppression.⁷ If their economic reality wasn't a clear enough message of their status in society, the streets of their city were decorated with statues of women

intended to represent various conquered nations—Galatia, Britannia, Gaul, and dozens more—being raped by imperial soldiers.⁸ Evil was alive and well in their midst and took the forms of physical, sexual, economic, and political violence with the goal of convincing the populace that this was normal—and that it would never change.⁹

Even though the Galatians knew despair firsthand, they had also heard the message of Christ and had declared themselves to be his followers. But real life didn't—and doesn't—reflect the hope of Christ when we live in that—and this—kind of perpetual trauma. Hope and despair were at odds in their hearts and in their community and the Galatian Christians didn't know what to believe in anymore. Floundering, they grasped at whatever was offered to them. Should they turn to the empire that had branded itself their benefactor? The emperor who declared himself savior?¹⁰ Should they focus on fulfilling God's law?¹¹ At least then they would be *doing* something. Maybe it would take their minds off the pain.

In the midst of this confusion and hurt, their pastor wrote them a letter. He begins with a blessing:¹² “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.”¹³ The present¹⁴ evil age.¹⁵ This morally bankrupt era. The current time of immorality. This world we live in that is rife with the violence humans inexplicably perpetrate against one another. According to Paul, these things are of primary concern to God. They're the reason not only for Christ's life but for his sacrifice.¹⁶

Paul denounces the imperial lies his people have been told: *God* is our father—the emperor is not.¹⁷ The empire has not ushered in an age of peace (the *pax romana*, their

claim to fame) but an age of evil (the reality of how that “peace” was achieved through the silencing and erasure of tribal identity).¹⁸ Paul turns empire on its head as he paints a picture for them of a new, different way of life—one characterized by peace and harmony rather than subordination and oppression.¹⁹ While Paul’s indication that the present age is transient and that a more perfect age is to come, the reality is that it has not yet arrived. And he still expects that “the one who is righteous will live by faith.”²⁰ A tall order. Or is it?

What if the faith we live by is not our own? Paul is quoting—or rather, misquoting—Habakkuk 2:4 here, which reads, “the righteous live by *their* faith” (emphasis mine). Why does Paul omit the pronoun? Scholar Richard B. Hays follows a breadcrumb trail around Galatians and through other letters by Paul where the Greek is ambiguous in referring to what many translations render “faith in Christ,” for example in 2:20b, “And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God.”²¹ Hays argues this and other verses can just as accurately be translated the faith *of* the Son of God.²²

In Galatians 4:9, Paul even corrects himself midsentence,²³ writing, “Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God....” It would seem Paul is intent on moving the onus of faith from the person (or community) onto *God*.²⁴ While this is an unfamiliar and oddly unsettling idea, it’s not unappealing. Frankly if God is so all-powerful, maybe God *should* be the one to shoulder this unbearable load. Perhaps this is what Paul is encouraging the Galatians to do: to try to find rest in God’s faithfulness toward *us* instead of rallying faith in ourselves when there is little or none to be had.

We cannot know for sure what Paul intended,²⁵ but the gift of our limited understanding is the space it leaves for creative interpretation: space in which we might find freedom to experience God’s faithful grace even today, even just days after so much

senseless loss of life in Orlando. If Hays is right, either interpretation (the faith *of* Christ versus faith *in* Christ) is equally correct.²⁶ While we grieve and strive for a new way of being beyond the present evil age and toward an age of life, liberty, and basic safety, we know from experience that there will inevitably be times when we're stretched beyond what our hearts can bear. In those times—in these times—we pray that God's faithfulness will be enough.

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<http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/13/health/mass-shootings-in-america-in-charts-and-graphs-trnd/>.

¹ This essay is a reflection on and response to last week’s Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida, particularly with the families, friends, and loved ones of the victims in mind. What are we to do when evil is so present and pervasive in our world? What are we to believe when there is nothing left to believe in? How are we to sustain the work for justice that lies ahead when we face this magnitude of despair?

² “US Home to Nearly a Third of World’s Mass Shootings,” CNN, accessed June 20, 2016,
<http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/13/health/mass-shootings-in-america-in-charts-and-graphs-trnd/>.

³ “Gun Violence Archive,” Gun Violence Archive, accessed June 20, 2016,
<http://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>.

⁴ “US Home to Nearly a Third of World’s Mass Shootings.”

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Gal. 3:11. All quoted scripture is from the New Revised Standard Version.

⁷ Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 3; “Many [nonelites] knew regular periods of food shortages. Poor health was

pervasive. Infant mortality was high, with perhaps up to 50 percent not reaching age ten. Most nonelite adults died by age thirty or forty. Elite life spans were longer,” Carter, 10.

⁸ Davina C. Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul’s Mission* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press: 2008), 2. Lopez argues that these images of the rape of conquered nations are an empire-wide campaign to naturalize “the Romans as the master race or the people most naturally fit to rule over others,” Lopez, 34.

⁹ Those in power “claimed social hierarchy and exploitation were simply the way things were,” Carter, 3, 11.

¹⁰ Gal. 1:6-9.

¹¹ Gal. 3:1-14.

¹² Richard B. Hays wants to pay particular attention to Paul’s salutation in his letter to the Galatians, writing, “It is generally recognized that the openings of Paul’s Epistles are not inconsequential; they are artfully composed to signal the chief themes and concerns of the letters they introduce.” This is the treatment that Paul’s *other* letters have received, Hays continues, “Yet until rather recently, the apocalyptic opening lines of the Letter to the Galatians have rarely been given their full weight as a thematic key to the letter’s message.” This interpretation is critical to the purpose of this essay to those who lost loved ones in the Pulse shooting because it allows the emphasis of Paul’s message to fall on acknowledging the active presence of evil in this world and God’s attunement to our very real experience of that evil, Richard B. Hays, “Apocalyptic Poiesis in Galatians: Paternity, Passion, and Participation,” in *Galatians and Christian Theology: Justification, the Gospel, and Ethics in Paul’s Letter*, ed. Mark W. Elliott, Scott J. Hafemann, N.T. Wright, and John Frederick (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 200.

¹³ Gal. 1:3-5.

¹⁴ The use of ἐνεστώτος signifies that there is an alternate, future age—one that is separate from today and will look, feel, and be totally different from the darkness in which we presently exist. This is the basis for Hays’ understanding of Galatians as an apocalyptic narrative and which he links to Paul’s pointing to καὶνὴ κτίσις in 6:15. “Apocalyptic Poiesis in Galatians,” 203.

Carter echoes Hays’ thinking, writing that the New Testament writers’ borrowed Jewish eschatological understanding, and that “this thinking understood this age, the present age, to be so contrary to God’s purposes, so dominated by oppressive landowners, rulers, and the power of the devil, that God will judge this world and age by ending it. God will then establish a new age and world in which God’s purposes are established,” Carter, 18.

¹⁵ τοῦ αἰῶνος τοῦ ἐνεστώτος πονηροῦ: a genitive phrase reflecting an era or significant period of time contemporary to the time of writing and characterized by evil, wickedness, immorality. Louw, Johannes P. and Eugene A. Nida, eds. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*. 2d, Accordance electronic ed., version 4.1. New York: United Bible Societies, 1989; Mounce, William D. *Mounce Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*. Accordance electronic ed., version 3.4. Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2011.

¹⁶ “Paul’s constant use of language closely associated with imperial power, and his redefinition of these terms with Christian content, indicates a direct challenge to the gospel of Caesar,” Carter, 87.

Additionally, Paul redefines what it means to be righteous, whereas in the Roman Empire, righteousness (also characterized as justice) was fundamentally “punitive, self-serving, benefiting only the elite,” Carter, 91.

¹⁷ One way Paul challenges Caesar is in his use of father language with regard to God, a name the emperor used for himself, defining his subjects as his children for whom he cared, “Apocalyptic Poiesis in Galatians,” 209-212; Carter, 4.

¹⁸ In terms of Paul’s use of the word and his understanding of faith and faithfulness, he reminded the Galatians that God’s faithfulness is in opposition to Rome, which embodied a non-mutual reciprocity that was based on a compulsory, dehumanizing submission to Rome and Rome’s self-serving interests, Carter, 91.

¹⁹ Lopez, 154; Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 208.

²⁰ Paul is paraphrasing Habakkuk 2:4 when he writes, ὁ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται. This phrase can be broken down into three parts: subject, noun, and verb. First, the subject: ὁ δίκαιος, a masculine, singular, nominative noun that can be translated righteous one, one who is in right relationship (with God), “being in accordance with what God requires.” Second, the noun: πίστεως, feminine, singular, genitive, can be rendered “completely believable,” proof, confidence, trustworthiness, loyalty. Third, the verb: ζήσεται, is future, middle,

indicative, third-person, singular. It means to live, to have life, to be alive. The conjunction ἐκ becomes a critical detail on which this phrase hangs. Meaning *by* or *through*, but also *from* and *of*.

The crux of Hays' work is to ask, by *whose* faith does the righteous one live? Their own? God's? Christ's? Any of these interpretations may be true. In fact, Hays argues, perhaps Paul edited the Habakkuk passage in the way he did in order to inject his message with ambiguity. In that case, Hays writes, "Paul's thought is rendered wholly intelligible only if all three of these interpretations are held together and affirmed as correct, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, 140.

²¹ For example, the NRSV (quoted here) concurs with the NIV, ESV, and NASB.

²² *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, 172.

²³ *Ibid.*, 211.

²⁴ Paul insists on "*divine initiative and action* as the ground of salvation and hope, as opposed to any human religious practice or subjective disposition [...] *God* is the primary agent, and human beings are the receivers of God's gracious action," "Apocalyptic Poiesis in Galatians," 203.

²⁵ "Perhaps the truth of the matter is that Paul's compressed language will not answer all the questions that we would like to put to it and that he did not intend a clear distinction: [...] and the attempt to distinguish [between the two...] is our problem rather than Paul's," *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, 131.

²⁶ Πιστις "is a term that may with equal aptness be used to describe either God's steadfast faithfulness to his people or the trusting and faithful response of people to God," *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, 140.