

WHO YOU BELIEVE DEFINES YOUR FAITH

Today's Text: Romans 1: 1-32

Extracts:

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that *your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world...For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ; for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jews first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith"* [Rom. 1: 8, 16-17]

On Tuesday, 17 January 2012, the charismatic American "father of faith," R. W. Schambach died at the age of 85.¹ Best known for conducting his crusades in a gospel tent, he travelled to over 200 countries around the world, followed by signs and wonders. In one of his classic video tapes, he told the story of a crusade in India. According to that country's 2001 census, Hindus constitute 80.5% of the population of 1.03 billion while Christians are a mere 2.3% (24.1 million).² After preaching about Jesus for a long while to no avail, the Holy Spirit ministered another approach to him. There was in his audience an old woman with a prominent hunch back. He brought her to the stage and called for her healing in the name of each of the prominent gods worshipped by the Hindus. Nothing happened. Then he invoked the names of Allah (venerated by Muslims) and Buddha (by Buddhists). Nothing happened. Then, he called on the name of Jesus of Nazareth and the woman stood up straight- completely healed! Thousands climbed up the stage to receive Jesus that day.

There is hardly anybody who does not have faith. Even the atheist who does not believe in God believes in something. The suicide bomber believes in somebody or something; otherwise s(he) will not blow up himself/herself for nothing. Yet, all "faiths" cannot be valid. The lesson of Schambach's experience is that who you believe defines your faith. He believed in Jesus and it worked wonders for him. In this week's Bible story, Paul quotes what God told the prophet Habakkuk that the just shall live by his faith [Hab. 2: 4; Rom. 1: 17]. Who is just in God's eyes? On whom is your faith anchored? Those and more are the questions that we shall attempt to answer in this week's study.

¹ "Evangelist R.W. Schambach Passes at 85," <http://www.charismanews.com/us/32679-evangelist-rw-schambach-passes-at-85> ; Jan. 18, 2012

² http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/India_at_glance/religion.aspx

1. Background: Faith as a source and a sauce!

When we fall ill, the first people we want to reach are our physicians. Sick people tend to believe in their doctors' advice and prescriptions. What they may not know is whether those who pose before them as medical doctors are indeed physicians! For example, if a motor mechanic in a workshop outfit were to give them the same medication that the white-clad doctor in the hospital gave, it would not work because they would not believe in or trust the mechanic's ability to heal. Even if the person behind the mechanic's outfit were a true medical doctor, the prescription would not work. But if the mechanic were in a doctor's outfit, the prescription would work! The lesson we learn from that illustration is that our faith is based not only on what we believe (sauce or recipe) but who we believe (source or fountain).

During His earthly ministry, Jesus healed so many people because "the power of the Lord was present to heal them" [Lk 5: 17]. Yet, in His hometown (Nazareth), "He could do no mighty work there... and He marvelled because of their unbelief" [Mk 6: 1-6]. That suggests a two-way relationship between what you believe and WHO you believe. That explains why Jesus was fond of saying to people coming to Him for healing, "Your faith has made you well" [Lk 8: 48]. Therefore, faith has as its major component *your willingness and ability to trust what and who you believe in*. For example, the motto of the Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH), Nigeria, states, "We care GOD heals."³ That suggests that the owners of that top specialist hospital, where doctors, pharmacists and other medical professionals are trained, believe that their healing power does not come from medications but from a higher source, God. Therefore, faith has a prime place in our day-to-day living.

In this week's Bible verses, based on Paul's epistle to the Romans, we are told, "The just shall live by faith" [Rom. 1: 17]. To appreciate the significance of that statement, take your mind back several centuries before the coming of Christ in human form. During the prophetic ministry of Habakkuk in Judah, the invasion of the Chaldeans was imminent. The prophet was perplexed because, as he looked around, God did not seem to judge sin among His own chosen people. At one stage, he challenged God, saying, "Why do You look on those who deal treacherously, and hold Your tongue when the wicked devours a person more righteous than he?" [Hab. 1: 1-13]. Habakkuk was determined to keep watch until the LORD answered him. Then one day, God answered him, saying [Hab. 2: 2-4]:

Write the vision and make it plain on tablets, that he may run who reads it. For the vision is yet for an appointed time; but at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry. Behold the proud, his soul is not upright in him; but

³ <http://luthnigeria.org/>

the just shall live by his faith... for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as water covers the sea.

Indeed, the vision tarried for over 700 years when the Messiah came in the form of a man, was crucified; He died and was buried; He rose again from the dead and has ascended into heaven where He is sitting at the right hand of the Father. Indeed, the earth has been filled with the knowledge of His glory but do we all accept that? So, ***when the word of God says that the just shall live by faith and that we should walk by faith and not by sight [2 Cor. 5: 7], what does it mean to you? Who is just and what is his/her faith? These are the issues that we shall address in this week's study.***

The ***just*** shall live by ***faith***. The just shall live by ***his/her faith***. Writing to the saints (believers) in Rome, Paul said, "I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that ***your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world***" [Rom. 1: 8]. Let us dig more deeply into those truths by attempting to answer the following questions:

a) *Who is just?*

According to any English dictionary that you can lay your hands on, a just person can be defined as one who is righteous or honest or truthful or morally upright. That begs a bigger question because the word of God is quite emphatic that "there is none righteous, no, not one" [Ps. 14: 1-3] and we all have sinned and fall short of God's glory [Rom. 3: 23]. Yet, Jesus told His listeners during the Sermon on the Mount, "You shall be perfect [holy], just as your Father in heaven is perfect" [Matt. 5: 48]. Therefore, ***NOBODY can be just by own effort except by the special grace of God.*** According to an African proverb, the dog that is trying to hunt down an elephant can only but severely bruise itself! Before God, our righteousness is as filthy rags [Is. 64:6]. Therefore, to define justness by human standards, such as upbringing, conduct, etc., amounts to trying to reach the heavens by building a tower of Babel [Gen. 11: 1-4]!

Righteousness, by God's standards, comes from faith and we can only be justified by faith [Rom. 3: 28]. Abraham was not justified by circumcision but by faith. We are told that long before he was circumcised, God showed him the stars in the heavens and assured him that his descendants would be as uncountable as the stars. Abraham "believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness" [Gen. 15: 1-6]. That is what has made Abraham the father of all nations, Jews and Gentiles- through the righteousness of faith [Rom. 4: 13-16]. That begs the question! If the just is defined by faith, what then is faith that the just is expected to live by?

b) *What is the faith of the just person?*

Paul thanked God through Jesus Christ for the faith of believers in Rome; a faith that was spoken of throughout the then known world [**Rom. 1: 8**]. But what does the faith of the just person consist of? As we had seen earlier, faith has as its major component *your willingness and ability to trust what and who you believe in*. The world has over six billion people and they do not all share the same faith. So, how do we know that the faith we are living by is the one referred to by Paul? We need to dig more deeply into the matter.

2. The Just is known by his/her faith anchor

We may not need to look outside of the walls of our places of worship to know that we all do not have the same faith even when we profess to be believers or church-goers! After all, is it not by our fruits that we are known? In his first epistle to the Corinthians, Paul reminded us that the world is full of immoral people and to not keep company with them is to go out of the world. His concern was about fellow believers who are sexually immoral or covetous or idolaters or drunkards or extortionists. Therefore, to correct such people is not judging them [**1 Cor. 5: 9-13**]. In like manner, we need to audit the kind of faith that we believers exhibit in the house of God and satisfy ourselves that we are just by living by our faith. Here is a profile of worshippers that I have experienced:

a) *Idol worshippers*

We tend to assume that idol worshippers are those who bow before graven images. But the critical line in the Ten Commandments states, “You shall have no other gods before Me” [**Ex. 20: 3**]. Therefore, *an idol is anything that we place over and above God. It can be money or material possessions, our work, family or culture, our indulgence or a carved image or accessory*. Jesus told His disciples, “He who loves father or mother ...son or daughter than Me is not worthy of Me” [**Matt. 10: 37**]. So, when we take traditional titles or join cults which we know for sure are anchored on idols or ancestral worship, we are idol worshippers, no matter the ranks we wear in our churches. When we treat our church leaders as inerrable and take whatever they tell us as the gospel truth, even when it offends the word of God, we are idol- worshipping. When we teach one thing and practise the exact opposite, we are worshipping the god of hypocrisy.

Paul spoke of people who claim to know God but do not glorify Him as God. Instead, they are futile in their thoughts and their foolish hearts are darkened. They change the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man- birds, four-footed animals and creeping things [**Rom. 1: 21-23**]. Where your treasure is, there your heart will also be [**Matt. 6: 21**]. Therefore, *idol worshippers place their trust in their gods*.

But, since idols are the works of men's hands, they have mouths but cannot speak; eyes but they cannot see; ears but they cannot hear. So, "those who make them are like them; so is everyone who trusts in them" [Ps. 135: 15-18]. For example, when Elijah challenged four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal to call on their god to make fire come down from heaven, they cut themselves up and made incantations from morning to evening but nothing happened [1 Kgs 18: 17-29]. Can you afford to anchor your faith on vanities?

b) *Demonic forces*

Some people raise the bar by going to idols or cults that rely on demonic forces for their operations. ***Demonic forces are not flesh and blood but principalities, powers, rulers of the darkness of this age and spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places [Eph. 6: 12].*** Like their master, the devil, they are "false prophets [and] deceitful workers" posing as "ministers of righteousness" [2 Cor. 11: 13-15] and they can seduce innocent people to believe a lie. For example, Simon was a sorcerer in Samaria who astonished the people with his sorceries for a long time and they came to believe that he was "the great power of God." It was only when Philip came there that his sorcery was exposed [Acts 8: 4-12].

So, be careful about those pastors and priests in your places of worship who profess to be performing miracles and wonders "in the name of Jesus." Which Jesus? Check their pockets. Look under their altars. Check under their garments! Their faith is not based on God but on Satan and his demonic spirits. So, put on the whole armour of God so that your faith cannot be shaken in due course. Those who know their God shall be strong and shall do great exploits [Dan. 11: 32].

c) *Worshippers of the unknowable God*

Some of us have moved beyond that to believe in God. ***The only problem here is that God is invisible! That is why you cannot find the image or picture of God in any church. So, how can you place your faith in an unknowable God?*** That is the major problem facing Muslims that claim to worship Allah. Who is he? Can they call him "Father"?

That is where "inventors of evil things" [Rom. 1: 30] have crept into our churches. To fill the void of insufficient knowledge, they then build towers of Babel- unscriptural rules and practices handed down as church doctrine or tradition. When you challenge them to show you the scriptural foundations of the faith they want you to hold on to, they brand you a rebel or an apostate! That is why James has teased believers, "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe- and tremble!" [Jam. 2: 19]. So, ***when you base your faith on a nebulous***

unknowable God, you are anchored on a shifting peg. You are standing on a slippery slope! That was why Jesus told the Samaritan woman by the well, “God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” [Jn 4: 24].

d) *True followers of Jesus*

The word of God says that *no one has seen God at any time but Jesus who is in the bosom of the Father has declared Him* [Jn 1: 18]. He is the visible image of the invisible God [Col. 1: 15]. He is the one who came down from heaven [Jn 3: 13], and “*there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*” [Acts 4: 12]. On his faith in Jesus, Paul wrote to his beloved disciple, Timothy, “I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day” [2 Tim. 1: 12].

Clearly, *the believers in Rome anchored their faith on Jesus. Only those who believe in God by Christ Jesus shall be regarded as just. Only the just who live by such faith until the Day of Judgment can be regarded as having lived by faith.*

3. Conclusion: Look up to Jesus-the author and finisher of your faith!

The just shall live by his/her faith. Faith in Christ Jesus must not only be professed (through water baptism); it must also be practised and lived. Jesus has said that you cannot call Him Lord and yet refuse to do what He has commanded you to do [Lk 6: 46]. *You need to fear and obey Him because He is the fountain of your faith and without Him, you can do NOTHING* [Jn 15: 1- 5].

Ignorance, hardship or exigencies may tempt you to have faith in man or in the world or in religion. Political correctness may lure you to give up your true knowledge of God by Christ Jesus “for vile passions.” Remember that the righteous judgment of God will fall not only on those who practise sins but also on those who approve of those who practise them [Rom. 1: 26, 32]. So, keep looking up to and relying on Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith.

The just shall live by faith.