

PAUL'S USE OF THE "IN CHRIST" FORMULA

By Brenda B. Colijn*

Paul's use of the expression "in Christ" or "in the Lord" has received a great deal of attention in this century. He uses the formula quite frequently.¹ His use of it has implications for his Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, eschatology, and ethics.

The development of scholarship on this formula seems to have proceeded from a personal "mystical" conception (communion with Christ) to a more "objective" emphasis (judicial or ecclesiological or eschatological) to an interest in corporate personality.² The "mystical" approach was initiated by Deissmann and followed by Schweitzer, who gave it an eschatological twist.³ Others, such as Bultmann and Conzelmann, reacted against an interpretation of personal "mysticism" and sought to make the formula more "objective" in different ways: by removing the transcendent element, by reading it as purely metaphorical, by interpreting it as eschatological, or by connecting it to the objective events of salvation history.⁴ These scholars rightly observed that the "mystical" interpretation detached the formula from Christ's saving work. But in their reaction against an overly mystical approach, some have located the formula too firmly in the past. The "objective" approach fails to recognize Paul's statements about the present identification of Christ with his church and of believers with him.

It is now generally recognized that Paul uses the phrase in several different senses, some "mystical" and some "objective." The mystical and nonmystical camps seem to be converging toward the concept of corporate personality.⁵ Those who want to make the "in Christ" formula "objective" can emphasize federal headship without actual participation. Christ was our representative, and his merits are applied to us to change our judicial standing before God. Those who want to retain the "mystical" communion with Christ can opt for a more realistic headship. We participate in his death and resurrection (past tense) and in his life (present and future tenses).

It is not enough to say, as Bultmann does, that "in Christ" is a metaphor for "Christian."⁶ Of course it is. But the question remains, what does this expression tell us about what Paul felt it meant to be a Christian? To Bultmann, this phrase refers to the Christian's self-understanding and to the conduct based on that self-understanding.⁷ But "in" has locative force. Paul chose this metaphor over others, presumably because it expressed something he felt was true about Christ.

E. P. Sanders is closer to Paul's emphasis when he focuses on participatory language.⁸ Even if Paul does not always use the "in Christ" formula to imply

* Dr. Colijn (Ph.D. in English from Cornell University) is an M.A. student at ATS.

a corporate Christ, he does often use it in a participatory sense. This phrase is one of a complex of Pauline participatory language. In what follows, I will briefly examine some of the nonparticipatory uses of the formula and then concentrate on the participatory ones. I will explore the implications of this phrase for Christology and for believers.

Scholars have listed numerous senses in which Paul uses the phrase "in Christ" or "in the Lord."⁹ Sometimes the expression is synonymous for "Christian" or "in a Christian manner." In 2 Corinthians 12:2, Paul says, "I know a man in Christ," meaning a Christian.¹⁰ Similarly, in Romans 16:2, Paul says to "receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints." Paul also uses the phrase to denote the sphere or context in which something takes place. In Romans 16:3, 9, 12, he describes people as his fellow workers in Christ. He is confident in the Lord (Gal. 5:10); he urges others to stand firm in the Lord, rejoice in the Lord, and agree with each other in the Lord (Philippians 4:1-4).

In addition, Paul uses "in Christ" in an instrumental or causal sense (i.e., through Christ, because of what he has done). In Philippians 4:13, for example, he states, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." (The Greek has *en*, not *dia*.) Other uses describe God's actions in (through) Christ: God shows "the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ" (Eph. 2:7); Christians should forgive one another, "just as God in Christ has forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32); the atonement occurred "in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles" (Gal. 3:14).

Related to this instrumental usage are passages that describe Christ as the source or locus of the benefits believers have. Believers receive certain things in him because of what he has done. For example, Paul declares in Ephesians 1 that believers have adoption, grace, redemption, forgiveness, inheritance, hope, and sealing in Christ. He tells the Corinthians that they have been "enriched in Him" (1 Cor. 1:5); he tells the Romans that the locus of God's love is in Christ (Rom. 8:39).

But Paul also uses the "in Christ" formula in a more participatory sense. I will discuss several contexts for this formula: Christ as a location, lordship and ownership language, parallels between Adam and Christ, mutual indwelling of Christ and believers, spiritual union between Christ and believers (including images of head and body), identification between Christ and believers, election in Christ, and Christ's cosmic inclusiveness.

Paul describes Christ as the locus of the Christian life, the "place" where not only believers' benefits, but believers themselves, are found.¹¹ For example, in his discussion of salvation in Ephesians 2:8-10, Paul identifies the new life as located in Christ: "For we are [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works" (10). He describes the new creation similarly in 2 Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come." According to Paul, Jesus is not merely a re-creator. He is the locus of the new self of believers; they experience this new creation only as they participate in him.¹²

Paul even says that believers themselves are found in Christ. For instance, he says that Andronicus and Junias (or Junia) were "in Christ before me" (Rom. 16:7). Philippians 3:8-9 is the most significant example of this: "More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in him . . ." ¹³ Paul desires Christ himself, not his benefits, and views gaining Christ as equivalent to being in him. He tells the Colossians, "Christ . . . is your life" (Col. 3:4). This participation extends beyond death; even believers who have died are still located in Christ (1 Cor. 15:18, 1 Thess. 4:16).

Similarly, Romans 8:1 declares, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Even at the climax of a generally juridical argument, Paul chooses to use participatory language to describe the state of believers. In other passages, Paul states that God "establishes us with you in Christ" (2 Cor. 1:21); declares his intention to present everyone "complete in Christ" (Col. 1:28); tells the Colossians, "in him you have been made complete" (Col. 2:10); and even adds, "in Him you were also circumcised" (Col. 2:11).

Even the apparently instrumental usages that describe the benefits of believers may have a more participatory sense than at first appears. Paul uses "in Christ" to describe these benefits not only because they are available because of what Christ has done, but also because it is as believers are united with Christ that they receive those benefits. For example, believers are justified in Christ (Gal. 2:17). This usage may be instrumental; believers are certainly justified through Christ. But Paul implies here that Christ is the justified one, and believers are in him.¹⁴ In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul describes the state of believers as a change of identities: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Because believers participate in Christ, they share his nature as the righteous one. Believers are also sanctified in Christ (1 Cor. 1:2). Similarly, Paul states in 1 Corinthians 1:30: "But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption." This suggests that believers receive redemption and sanctification by virtue of their participation in Christ, who himself embodies these benefits.¹⁵ The "eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" that believers receive (Rom. 6:23) is a life in union with Christ as well as a life achieved by his actions. For Paul, all God's promises are in Christ: "For as many as may be the promises of God, in Him they are yes" (2 Cor. 1:20; see also Eph. 3:6).

For Paul, the opposite of being in Christ is being "in the flesh" or "in one's sins." He describes two dominions or kingdoms in which human beings may participate. People are either under the lordship of Christ or under the lordship of sin (Rom. 6:16-23, Eph. 2:1,3). Being under the lordship of sin is not life, but death; being under the lordship of Christ is life (Col. 2:13). Salvation means the transfer of a person from one kingdom or lordship to another. Those who have been transferred to his kingdom belong to Christ (Rom. 1:6,

14:8-9; Gal. 5:24). One direct statement of transfer is Colossians 1:13-14: "For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Paul connects this transfer statement with the "in Christ" formula: "In him" believers have redemption. This use could be instrumental, but he may also be implying that being in Christ's kingdom is equivalent to being in Christ. Christ is the locus of the believer's redemption. Thus the transfer itself seems to be based on participation. As Sanders comments, the transfer from one lordship to another "takes place by *participation* in Christ's death."¹⁶

Victor Furnish wants to read all participatory uses of "in Christ" in terms of ownership. In his view, Christ has invaded the enemy kingdom of sin and death, and by his resurrection has shown that those rulers are subject to God. He frees believers from sin so that they can belong to a new realm, under a new sovereign.¹⁷ Paul certainly uses ownership language. But this explanation is not sufficient. As we saw earlier, believers do not simply belong to Christ; they live in him. The transfer to a new lordship itself seems to take place through participation in Christ. Paul seems to use the concepts of belonging to Christ and being in him interchangeably.¹⁸ Furnish would interpret the latter as a version of the former. The reverse is just as reasonable.

Believers still must choose which lordship to follow, which dominion to be "in": "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? . . . Even so consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:1-2, 11). Paul states in Colossians 2:6: "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him." The ethical responsibility of believers is to live out the consequences of their new citizenship. They do so by living out their union with Christ.

The parallels Paul draws between Adam and Christ make perhaps the strongest case for Christ as a corporate personality. In Romans 5, Paul draws a parallel between Adam and Christ. Adam is a "type" of Christ (14) because both are men whose actions determined the fate of many people: "For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous" (19). But Christ, the antitype, is greater than Adam because his obedience covered many transgressions and granted an "abundance of grace" to human beings (16-17).

Paul is presenting Adam and Christ as corporate personalities. Herman Ridderbos identifies this as a Semitic rather than a Hellenistic concept, and he traces it to Old Testament figures of kings or progenitors who represented their people. The idea "is that of the representation by Christ of those who belong to him, the inclusion of 'the many' in the One and on this ground the application to these many of what has taken place, or will yet take place, in and with the One, Christ."¹⁹ Moule notes other instances in Paul of an awareness of Christ as "more than individual." For example, Paul applies collective Old Testament Israel-figures to Christ, "which seems to imply that Christian experience found in Christ not only an individual revelation of God

but also the very society or corporate entity to which they belonged.”²⁰

Paul understands Adam in terms of headship (federal or realistic).²¹ In the idea of federal headship, Adam and Christ serve as the representatives of human beings, such that their actions apply to those human beings:

The first Adam was the federal head of the race under the covenant of works; the second Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the federal head of all believers under the covenant of grace. Thus as the sin of Adam was legally and effectively *our* sin, so the obedience of Christ is legally and effectively the righteousness of all believers.²²

Federal headship is thus a juridical view. In natural or realistic headship, human beings are thought to have been somehow physically (seminally) present in Adam, so that they actually participated in his sin.²³ Natural or realistic headship posits a real union between the representative and those he represents.

Romans 5 uses “through” rather than “in Christ” and describes the connection between Christ and believers in juridical rather than relational terms. Nevertheless, it illuminates the similar passage in 1 Corinthians 15, which does use the “in Christ” formula and makes the case for headship more strongly:

But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ’s at His coming (1 Cor. 15:20-23).

The “in” of verse 22 could be regarded as instrumental or causal; verse 21 uses “by” or “through” in a similar construction. The two concepts are not exclusive: Human beings received death because of what Adam did and also by virtue of their incorporation in him as their representative. Paul seems to be talking at least about a federal headship.

Paul uses the concept of headship to support his argument in chapter 15 for the resurrection of believers. Because believers are incorporated in Christ, they will share in his resurrection. Oepke explains the Adam/Christ parallel as follows: “The first and the second Adam are progenitors initiating two races of men. Each implies a whole world, an order of life or death. Each includes his adherents in and under himself.”²⁴ The incorporation has an eschatological sense: “believers are removed from the sphere of the first Adam, which is that of sin and death, into the sphere of the second Adam, which is that of righteousness and life.”²⁵ The result seems to be equivalent to federal headship. The same is true for Ladd, who feels that the Adam/Christ parallel contains “a twofold idea: that of solidarity and of the eschatological contrast between the two ages As Adam is the head and representative of the old race, so Christ is the head and representative of the new humanity.”²⁶

As in Romans 5, the antitype is greater than the type: while Adam was a “living soul,” a human being, Christ is a “life-giving spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45).

Adam's descendants received death because of what he (and they after him) did; Christ, on the other hand, can **impart** life to those in him. Paul makes a contrast between natural and spiritual. Adam, like the body human beings receive from him, is natural; Christ, like the body believers will receive from him, is spiritual (47). But Paul believes that the spiritual is as real as the natural: "If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual" (44, 46). Paul implies that believers have as "realistic" a connection with Christ as they have with Adam. The Romans 5 passage can be explained in terms of federal headship. But more than a federal headship seems to be in view here. Believers come to be like Christ because they share in his nature: "As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. And just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly" (48-49). This seems to imply some kind of realistic headship, although one that is spiritual rather than natural.²⁷

Paul's statement that "all shall be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22) does not require universalism, any more than does Romans 5:18 ("justification of life to all men"). In the context of headship, 1 Corinthians 15:22 suggests that just as all who are in Adam must die, all who are in Christ will be made alive. The following verse specifically notes that "those who are Christ's" will be raised.

Paul also sometimes says that Christ dwells in believers (see, for example, Eph. 3:17). In 2 Corinthians 13:5, Paul tells the Corinthians that "Jesus Christ is in [them]" and equates this with being "in the faith." He thus considers that all Christians have Christ in them. The clearest instance of this formula is Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me." Two other instances often cited are less clear. Colossians 1:27 ("this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory") may be a corporate reference to the presence of Christ in the Gentile community. In Galatians 4:19 ("My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you"), the progressive connotations of "formed" suggests that Paul may be thinking of Christlike character rather than union with Christ.

This formula is not as common as the reverse. Paul usually says believers are in Christ and the Spirit is in believers. He does not emphasize reciprocity as strongly as the Gospel of John does.²⁸ However, Paul predicates similar things of Christ and the Spirit, and sometimes seems to identify them with one another. For example, in Romans 8:9-11, Paul uses the expression "if Christ is in you" and uses in parallel fashion "Christ," "the Spirit of God," "the Spirit of Christ," and "the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead." Consequently, the relative infrequency of the "Christ in you" formula, as such, does not weaken the idea of communion between Christ and believers. The fact that Paul can reverse the "in Christ" formula at all suggests a real union between Christ and believers. "In Christ" cannot just mean someone who

holds particular beliefs or loyalties. What then could "Christ in you" mean? This is a reciprocal relationship, a spiritual union, not just an allegiance.

Some of Paul's participatory language directly suggests a spiritual union in which believers can have conscious fellowship with Christ. In 1 Corinthians 1:9, Paul notes that believers are "called into fellowship with . . . Jesus Christ our Lord." In his discussion of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 10, Paul implies that believers participate in Christ through the Supper just as worshipers of idols participate in demons when they take part in meals at idol temples:

Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread [The] things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord, and the table of demons (1 Cor. 10:16, 20-21).

Believers participate in Christ, and a unity is created among believers because of their union with him.

Paul uses the analogy of marriage in Ephesians 5:23-32 to describe Christ's union with believers: He quotes Genesis 2:24 about husband and wife becoming one flesh and adds, "This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church." Christians are "members of [Christ's] body" (30), and he is "the head of the church" (23). Paul reinforces this intimate union with another use of the body metaphor in 1 Corinthians 6:15-17:

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? May it never be! Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a harlot is one body with her? For He says, "The two will become one flesh." But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him.

As Sanders has stated, Paul feels that the spiritual union between Christ and believers is as "real" as the bodily union with a prostitute. One union excludes the other:

The argument is that one participatory union can destroy another, even though the two are not on precisely the same level. A *person* cannot participate in two mutually exclusive unions The participatory union is not a figure of speech for something else; it is, as many scholars have insisted, real.²⁹

This sense of real spiritual union (of Christ with believers and of believers with one another) carries over into Paul's uses of the "in Christ" formula, as well. In Ephesians 2:19-22, Paul uses a building image to suggest this union: "[You have] been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fit-

ted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.” Believers are being built together into a temple in Christ. Paul could simply mean that Christ is the agent of, or basis of, their unity. But the description of Christ as cornerstone still makes him an integral part of the whole structure.

Similarly, Paul describes Christ as the ground of union between formerly divided groups: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). This could be interpreted to mean that they are one because of what Christ has done. But a similar “in Christ” passage in Ephesians 2:13-16 emphasizes that Christ himself is the bridge:

But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.

Jew and Gentile are “one new man” in Christ. In him, they have become one body, just as in his one body they were both reconciled to God.

Paul makes extensive use of head and body language to describe the union and growth of believers in Christ. For example, in Romans 12:4-5, he declares: “For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.” Paul affirms the individuality of believers while still asserting their interdependence and their unity in Christ. They are members of one another because they are members of Christ.

Many of Paul’s other uses of body language do not include the “in Christ” formula. Some passages call believers members of Christ’s body, emphasizing their union in him, even without the formula.³⁰ Other passages, such as Ephesians 5:23-32, Colossians 1:18, and Ephesians 4:4-16, call Christ the head of his body, the church. These passages also do not use the formula, although Ephesians 4:15-16 comes closest:

[Speaking] the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

Whether the church is joined to the already existing corporate body of Christ, or whether the church forms the body of Christ of which Christ is the head, these images indicate a real union between Christ and the community of believers. He is the source of the church’s life and the ground of its unity. It is only by virtue of their union with Christ that believers become a body.³¹

Moule remarks that Paul's use of the body metaphor suggests that the "aliveness of Christ, existing transcendently beyond death" is the "source and origin" of the community.³² This would be a reasonable function of the head of the body, although Moule does not make the connection with headship here. The word *kephale* was often used in the sense of source of life: "Paul employs the concept of Christ's headship over the church to indicate that Christ is the source of the church's life, indeed that its life is in actuality a participation in his own."³³

The imagery of head and body fleshes out the idea of headship Paul describes in the Adam/Christ parallel. It defines more clearly the nature of the union Christ has with believers. A statement by Philo makes a connection between the idea of one person as the progenitor of a race and the head/body image: "And of all the members of the clan here described Esau is the progenitor, the head of the whole creature."³⁴ Christ is the head of the church in the same way that he is the head of a new race of human beings: He is the source of life for those who are united with him, who exist **in him**.

The real union between Christ and believers explains why they can be said to share in one another's suffering. Paul's experience on the Damascus road taught him that Christ identifies with the sufferings of his church: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (Acts 9:4). Paul also teaches that believers identify with Christ's sufferings (2 Cor. 1:5, Col. 1:24, 1 Cor. 4:10). The sufferings of Christians are an extension — a completion — of the sufferings of Christ. This identification is more than being conformed to Christ's likeness (Rom. 8:29). Christ and the church suffer in union with one another.

Believers must in particular identify with Christ's death (Gal. 2:20, Col. 3:1-3).³⁵ In 2 Corinthians 5:14, Paul declares that "one died for all, therefore all died." He explains the significance of Christ's death in participatory categories: All have died, not all have had their sins paid for. This implies that the purpose of Christ's death was that believers might participate in it and receive the assurance of life with him.³⁶ In fact, the identification of believers with Christ's death and resurrection is the basis for Paul's assurance of his own resurrection (Rom. 8:17, 1 Cor. 15, Phil. 3:9-11, 2 Tim. 2:11-13).

In Romans 6, Paul discusses Christ's death in terms that combine the concepts of identification, belonging, union, and the "in Christ" formula. Believers have been baptized "into Christ" and "into his death" (3). They participate in his experience:

Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin (Rom. 6:4-6).

The passage climaxes with an imperative using the "in Christ" formula: "Even so consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (11).

Union with Christ in his death produces newness of life now, freedom from the power of sin, and promise of resurrection.

Several scholars have described this as an appropriation of the benefits of Christ's death through baptism.³⁷ But this language is more than juridical. It seems to be more than an appropriation; it is a union.³⁸ Whiteley describes it in participatory terms: "Through Christ's death and our baptism participation is effected; we are linked with Christ."³⁹ Best describes it as an "existential union with the death and resurrection of Christ."⁴⁰ Such a union does not require an *ex opere operato* view of baptism on Paul's part. The act of baptism serves as the outward sign of the inward union that has taken place. This idea of participating in Christ's life because of having been joined with him in his death is a logical extension of the incarnation. Christ shared in our humanity, to the point of suffering and death. His doing so forged a connection that enabled believers to participate in his death and the power of his resurrection.⁴¹

The "in Christ" formula also expresses the election of believers according to God's eternal purpose. In Ephesians 1:4, Paul states that God "chose us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him." He also describes God's eternal purpose as "carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord" (3:11). Some scholars regard these uses of the formula as instrumental.⁴² However, interpreting 1:4 as a reference to an inclusive personality makes good sense and is consistent with the Old Testament references to Messiah as the Elect One of God. Isaiah 42 describes the Elect One of God:

Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold;
My chosen one in whom My soul delights.
I have put My Spirit upon him;
He will bring forth justice to the nations . . .
I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you,
And I will appoint you as a covenant to the people,
As a light to the nations. (Isaiah 42:1,6)

This Chosen One will himself be God's covenant with the people. Matthew quotes these verses and states that this prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus (Mt. 12:18). In Luke's account of Jesus' transfiguration, the voice identifies Jesus as "My Son, My Chosen One" (9:35). Paul's statement that our benefits in Christ have been "freely bestowed on us in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:6) shows that he is thinking of Christ as the Elect One.⁴³

Since Jesus is the Christ, the Chosen One of God, the living covenant, it makes perfect sense to say that believers are chosen in him. In fact, it requires more stretching to make the Elect One the agent of election than to conclude that his election includes within it the election of believers. Lightfoot comments on 1:4 that "in Christ" means "by virtue of our incorporation in, our union with, Christ" and adds, "In God's eternal purpose the believers are

contemplated as existing in Christ, as the Head, the Summary, of the race. The *ekloge* has no separate existence independently of the *eklektos*.”⁴⁴ All of the benefits Paul lists in Ephesians 1 fall to believers only because of their union with Christ. Christologically, election in Christ suggests that Jesus is both preexistent and inclusive.⁴⁵ For believers, election in Christ affirms God’s love for them, underscores their complete dependence upon Christ, and involves a responsibility: to “be holy and blameless before Him.”

At times, Paul uses the “in Christ” formula to indicate that Jesus’ inclusiveness embraces not only believers, but all of creation. The Christ hymn in Colossians 1:15-20 describes his preexistence (“He is before all things,” 17), his creation of all things (16), his reconciliation of all things (20), and his supremacy in all things (18). Paul uses the formula in a locative sense to describe Jesus’ divine nature: “For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fulness to dwell in Him” (19). He uses it also to describe Christ’s creating and sustaining power: “in Him all things were created . . . and in Him all things hold together” (16-17). The “in” in 16 and 17 could be instrumental or causal: Creation is created and sustained through, or because of, Christ’s power. But the phrase “in him” suggests that Jesus is himself the medium of creation, or the ground of its unity, just as he is the ground of unity of Jew and Gentile in his body, the church. (Verse 18 ties in this other unity with the head and body metaphor.) In some sense, Jesus contains creation within himself and keeps it going. In Ephesians 1:10, Paul reveals God’s ultimate purpose “which he purposed in [Christ]”: the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth” (9-10). Thus, the consummation will also take place in Christ. Paul describes Jesus as one who creates, sustains, and consummates everything. He is not only the personal agent who accomplishes all this, but also the context in which it takes place. Such statements could only be predicated of God.⁴⁶

Paul’s use of the “in Christ” formula has implications for Christology and for believers. It describes a real union that has juridical, mystical, and ethical effects. For Paul, participation in Christ seems to be primary. All the benefits believers receive flow from that participation. Christologically, the formula affirms both Christ’s full divinity and his full humanity. It affirms his divinity by the implications that he existed before creation; he is alive beyond death; believers can have a real union with him; he is accessible to all Christians everywhere at once (in other words, he is omnipresent); he can be in believers as well as they in him; he enables believers to participate in his death and resurrection; he is the “location” of believers; he is their Lord; and he even contains creation within himself. It affirms his humanity by the parallel with Adam; by his identification with human beings in his incarnation, suffering, and death; by his identification with the sufferings of his church; and by the glorified (but still human) body that is the model for the future resurrection bodies of believers.

Whether Christ is corporate or not, Paul’s participatory language implies something about Christ’s nature. Someone who can have a real union with

believers beyond his death, who can be available to all believers everywhere, and who can enable believers to participate in his own nature and accomplishments is no mere dead rabbi.⁴⁷

For believers, the “in Christ” formula encompasses the past, present, and future of their Christian lives. It looks backward in its references to the objective events of salvation, the means of salvation, federal headship, election, and even perhaps the preexistence of believers (or at least God’s concern for them before creation). It is concerned with present life in its expressions of fellowship or communion with Christ, realistic headship, union with other believers, identification with Christ’s death and resurrection in the present, freedom from the power of sin, an understanding of suffering, the importance of Christ’s lordship, and a foretaste of the full kingdom to come. Finally, it looks toward the future in its assurance of personal resurrection and eternal life in Christ.

Being in Christ should govern all the behavior of believers.⁴⁸ In particular, the corporate emphasis of the formula is a corrective for the individualistic orientation of Western culture. The common exhortation to believers to become what they are takes on added force in this context. Believers are not just living out the consequences of their judicial standing before God; they are living out their new nature, as they participate in the nature of Christ, and they are doing so in the community that is his body.

NOTES

¹Deissmann found 164 instances, not counting the Pastorals, Colossians, and Ephesians, which he regarded as spurious. Cited in J.A. Allan, “The ‘In Christ’ Formula in Ephesians,” *New Testament Studies* 5 (October 1958): 54.

²For a history of the scholarship, see, for example, G.E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 480-83.

³Deissmann pictures the Christian “dwelling in a *pneuma* element comparable to the air.” Cited by A. Oepke in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:542. Schweitzer says that Paul’s “eschatological mysticism” enables believers to know themselves as “raised above this . . . transient world and already [belonging] to the transcendent.” Cited in W.W. Gasque, “Christ Mysticism,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 221. Richard N. Longenecker still seems to reflect the mystical view: “Paul’s emphasis . . . was on the nearness of the Lord in the experience of the Christian.” *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), p. 135.

⁴Hans Conzelmann, for example, contends that the phrase is not mystical, but refers to the “objective saving work” of Christ. He has pointed out that

the phrase occurs in contexts where reconciliation is spoken about in “juridical, objective terms.” *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament*, translated by John Bowden (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 209-10. He views even the passages that describe Christ in believers in nonmystical terms: Christ is “there for” believers in the sense that he intercedes for them (p. 211).

⁵Corporate personality is the expression used by Ernest Best: Believers “as a corporate whole dwell ‘in Christ.’ ” Cited in the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 4 vols., edited by Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 3:1192. A. Oepke calls the phenomenon “universal personality.” Kittel, 2:542. C.F.D. Moule calls it “inclusive personality.” *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 95. Despite their apparent differences, these terms are roughly equivalent, as I will discuss below.

⁶Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, translated by Kendrick Grobel (New York: Scribner’s, 1951), 1:311.

⁷Bultmann, 1:311, 328-29.

⁸E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

⁹For example, see Brown, 3:1191-93, Kittel, 2:541-42, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed., translated by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 259-60. I will simplify their categories for my examples.

¹⁰All citations from the Bible will be from the New American Standard version.

¹¹See Moule, p. 56. He describes the Christological implications of Paul’s idea that Christians are located in Christ: “it indicates a more than individualistic conception of the person of Christ” (p. 62).

¹²Ephesians 2:5 may express a parallel idea, if the alternate MS. reading “alive together in Christ” (rather than alive together with Christ), is correct. The parallel passage in Col. 2:13 has “with.”

¹³Sanders notes the centrality of this verse, in that it expresses Paul’s view of the goal of religion (p. 506).

¹⁴Sanders observes the close connection between juridical and participatory terminology in Paul’s soteriology (p. 520). He sees the participatory categories as primary. Ralph P. Martin states that justification, salvation, and being in Christ “are all relational terms and take on meaning only in the context of personal relationships.” *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul’s Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), p. 46.

¹⁵D.E.H. Whiteley sees participation as central to Paul's soteriology: "If St. Paul can be said to hold a theory of the *modus operandi* [of the Atonement], it is best described as one of salvation through participation: Christ shared all our experience, sin alone excepted, including death, in order that we, by virtue of our solidarity with him, might share his life." *The Theology of St. Paul* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), p. 130.

¹⁶Sanders, p. 468; see also p. 497.

¹⁷*Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), p. 180, 176, 225.

¹⁸Sanders, p. 462.

¹⁹*Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, translated by John Richard DeWitt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 62, 38.

²⁰Moule, p. 95, 94; see also p. 50.

²¹Ridderbos notes the difficulty of determining whether the headship of Adam and Christ is federal or realistic (p. 61).

²²G.N.M. Collins, "Federal Theology," in Elwell, p. 413.

²³Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), p. 637. Erickson sees Paul's parallel between Adam and Christ in terms of federal headship. This position holds with his juridical view of salvation. He even calls our union with Christ "judicial in nature," which it clearly is not (p. 952). Erickson himself admits that it is also a "union of spirits" (p. 952). The union does, however, have judicial effects.

²⁴Kittel, 2:542. Oepke calls this "a view of Christ as a universal personality." This seems to imply that Christ contains within himself all human beings, but Oepke restricts the incorporation to Christ's "adherents," that is, believers.

²⁵Kittel, 2:542.

²⁶Ladd, p. 482.

²⁷Sanders remarks on the need for a new perceptual category to express the reality of being in Christ, one that lies between a magical transference on the one hand and a revised self-understanding on the other hand (p. 522).

²⁸Brown, 3:1192. See also Kittel, 2:542-43 and Moule, p. 58.

²⁹Sanders, p. 454-55.

³⁰In examining 1 Cor. 12:12-31 and 1 Cor. 6:15, Moule suggests that Paul conceives of Jesus as "an inclusive person, a Body, to be joined to which was to become part of him" (p. 71, 81). Robert H. Gundry disagrees, contending that there is no "supramundane body" and that "without the Church there is no Body of Christ." *Soma in Biblical Theology, With Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 224.

³¹Moule, p. 81-82, 86. Gundry argues against a physical understanding of the union between Christ and the church (p. 223-44). But he seems to equate "real" with "physical": "The terms 'mystical' and 'spiritual' tend to take back what the term 'real' offers; but they fail to cover up the difficulty in carrying through the 'real' with consistent literalness to the end. We might just as well have the courage to say 'metaphorical' " (p. 228). I agree with Sanders that we need a perceptual category that recognizes the reality of spiritual union.

³²Moule, p. 70.

³³R.S. Rayburn, "Head, Headship," in Elwell, p. 496. For the idea of "head" meaning source of life, see also Berkeley Mickelsen and Alvera Mickelsen, "What Does *kephale* Mean in the New Testament?" and responses, *Women, Authority, and the Bible*, edited by Alvera Mickelsen (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1986), p. 97-110.

³⁴Philip Barton Payne, response to Mickelsen and Mickelsen, in Mickelsen, p. 124.

³⁵According to Sanders, dying with Christ is how believers begin their participation in Christ (p. 463).

³⁶Sanders, p. 464-65, 511; see also 1 Thess. 5:10.

³⁷See, for example, Ridderbos, p. 209. He believes that Paul refers here to the identification of the church with Christ's death "in the one-time, redemptive-historical sense of the word." It is not mystical (p. 206).

³⁸J. F. Walvoord notes that this is "more than merely a position created by divine reckoning." "Identification with Christ," in Elwell, p. 542.

³⁹Whiteley, p. 154. Whiteley holds that the effects of Christ's work are "communicated to us in baptism," although this is not a mechanical process but depends upon faith (p. 170).

⁴⁰Cited in Ladd, p. 482. R.C. Tannehill offers an eschatological explanation of Romans 6. Christ is an inclusive person because he "represents and embodies the new dominion in himself." *Dying and Rising with Christ: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Berlin: Alfred Topelmann, 1966), p. 24. The old man, the body of sin, and the old dominion are "corporate entities" (p. 29-30). "When believers were in slavery to sin, they were part of this inclusive 'old man'; their existence was bound up with his" (p. 30). Christ's death puts an end to the old man and to the old dominion, the dominion of sin. It is an inclusive event because the existence of human beings is "bound up with this old aeon, and what puts an end to it also puts an end to them as men of the old aeon" (p. 30). Christ's death is a "particular past event" in which believers participate by virtue of their inclusion in the old and new dominions (p. 30). Thus believers participate in the corporate old man, and in the old and new dominions, rather than in Christ. Tannehill uses participatory language for Christ but does not suggest any real union between Christ and believers. Par-

icipation becomes an elaborate metaphor.

⁴¹Whiteley states that it is "through this 'contact' with the created world, Christ had the power to 'build into himself' members of the human race" (p. 169). Ridderbos suggests that Christ could die for us because he "entered into our mode of existence, and in that mode of existence God not only delivered him up 'for us,' but also made us to be 'in him.'" He adds that these two ideas are "an indissoluble unity" (p. 169).

⁴²J.A. Allan interprets 1:4 to mean that "God's electing will operates through Christ" and 3:11 to mean that "his will comes to fruition through Christ" (p. 57). He holds that there are no uses of the "in Christ" formula in an inclusive sense in Ephesians, and he uses this as a basis for denying the Pauline authorship of the epistle. The reading of 1:4 in Brown is that election is "based on" Christ (2:302).

⁴³Roger T. Forster and V. Paul Marston point out the close connection between elect and beloved. Matthew's and Mark's accounts of Jesus' baptism have "beloved" where Luke has "chosen." Matthew also translates the "chosen" of Isaiah 42 as "beloved." Paul connects election with being beloved in Rom. 11:28, Col. 3:12, 1 Thess. 1:4, and 2 Thess. 2:13. *God's Strategy in Human History* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1973), p. 129-31.

⁴⁴Cited in Robert Shank, *Elect in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Election* (Springfield: Westcott, 1970), p. 43. Shank concludes that Christ "is Himself the Election" (p. 45). According to Forster and Marston, "The central idea in the election of the Church may be seen in Ephesians 1:4: it is that we are chosen in Christ. The church is elect because it is in Christ and he is elect" (p. 130).

⁴⁵To R.G. Hamerton-Kelly, the fact that election is in Christ and predates creation implies that "both Christ, and, in him, the Christians, must have enjoyed 'ideal pre-existence' before the world." *Pre-Existence, Wisdom, and the Son of Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 180.

⁴⁶Hamerton-Kelly sees in these passages a Hellenistic and Diaspora myth of the macroanthropos: Jesus preexisted in the mind of God and "contains in himself all the believers as well as all the (redeemed) universe" (p. 181-82). But Jesus is clearly more than an archetypal man here, however inclusive; Paul identifies him with God himself.

⁴⁷Moule concludes that Paul conceives of Christ "as any theist conceives of God" (p. 95).

⁴⁸As Martin observes, ethics stem from being in Christ (p. 45).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allan, J.A. "The 'In Christ' Formula in Ephesians." *New Testament Studies* 5 (October 1958): 54-62.
- Bauer, Walter. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 2nd ed. Translated by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- Brown, Colin, ed. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986.
- Bultmann, Rudolf. *Theology of the New Testament*. 2 vols. Translated by Kendrick Grobel. New York: Scribner's, 1951-55.
- Conzelmann, Hans. *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament*. Translated by John Bowden. New York: Harper and Row, 1969.
- Elwell, Water A., ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984.
- Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985.
- Forster, Roger T., and Marston, V. Paul. *God's Strategy in Human History*. Wheaton: Tyndale, 1973.
- Furnish, Victor. *Theology and Ethics in Paul*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1968.
- Gundry, Robert H. *Soma in Biblical Theology, with Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
- Hamerton-Kelly, R.G. *Pre-Existence, Wisdom, and the Son of Man*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.
- Kittel, Gerhard. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. 10 vols. Edited and translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964.
- Ladd, George Eldon. *A Theology of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974.
- Longenecker, Richard N. *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970.
- Martin, Ralph P. *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989.
- Mickelsen, Alvera, ed. *Women, Authority, and the Bible*. Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1986.
- Moule, C.F.D. *The Origin of Christology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- Ridderbos, Herman. *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*. Translated by John Richard DeWitt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975.

- Sanders, E.P. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977.
- Schweitzer, Albert. *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*. New York: Seabury, 1931.
- Shank, Robert. *Elect in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Election*. Springfield: Westcott, 1970.
- Tannehill, R.C. *Dying and Rising with Christ: A Study in Pauline Theology*. Berlin: Alfred Topelmann, 1966.
- Whiteley, D.E.H. *The Theology of St. Paul*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974.

