

## ***‘In Christ’ in Paul***

**Michael Parsons**

[p.25]

Any thoughtful reader of the Pauline epistles will be struck by a dominant idea which runs through the apostle’s teaching: the recurrent theme of the believer’s close and indissoluble union with the Lord Jesus Christ. For Paul, union with Christ is summed up in the short phrase ‘in Christ’ and its various equivalents. It is supposed by many to be original with Paul, and the idea appears in different ways about two hundred and sixteen times in his writing. Indeed, Schattermann shows something of the complication that arises by linking the expression with others to be found in Paul’s correspondence: ‘These include *syzēn*, to live with (Rom 6:8; 2 Cor 7:3); *sympaschein*, to suffer with (Rom 8:17); *systaurousthai*, to be crucified with (Rom 6:6); *synergeiresthai*, to be raised with (Col 2:12; 3:1; Eph 2:6); *syzoōpoiein*, to make alive with (Col 2:13; Eph 2:5); *syndoxazein*, to glorify with (Rom 8:17); *synkléronomein*, to inherit with (Rom 8:17); *sybasileuein*, to reign with (2 Tim 2:12).’<sup>1</sup>

In this brief essay I want to clarify what is meant and intended by the formula ‘in Christ’,<sup>2</sup> by examining and seeking to define the expression as far as we are able, and by suggesting that its primary implication is an objective one-related as it is to the historical person of Christ and the believer’s present relationship to him. As the reality of being in Christ is closely associated with Paul’s ethical teaching I intend to take a sideways glance at this on the way through our examination of the idea.

### **IN CHRIST**

It has to be admitted at the outset that the ‘in Christ’ formula is a very difficult one to pin down to anything like a clear definition. Others would lend weight to this initial hesitancy. Markus Barth, for instance, points out the impossibility of elaborating a final definition of the meaning of ‘in Christ’ simply because Paul uses the phrase in more than one sense. Barth suggests that it variously indicates that believers are ‘inseparable from the Messiah Jesus’, that they are included ‘in the Messiah’, and also that the phrase denotes the ‘relationship formed by Jesus Christ between God and God’s people’.<sup>3</sup> C K Barrett, to take another example, realises the same problem. For him the reason that we cannot define ‘in Christ’ exactly lies in the fact that Paul himself does not elucidate or explain the ‘how’, the ‘mechanism’ of such a union evidently suggested by the phrase.<sup>4</sup>

Many, however, have outlined their own ideas in explanation. Some may be touched upon to show something of the variety and apparent

[p.26]

---

<sup>1</sup> J Schattermann, *κοινωνία*, *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 1 (Exeter, 1979) 639-644.

<sup>2</sup> I use the phrase ‘“in Christ” formula’ as a kind of ‘shorthand’ and merely for convenience. However, I do not like the phrase as it stands—it seems to take away something of the personal reality necessarily involved and the idea of commitment which is an element in Paul’s thinking.

<sup>3</sup> M Barth, *Ephesians*, 1 (New York, 1960) 70 (see 69-71).

<sup>4</sup> C K Barrett, ‘New Testament Eschatology’, *SJT* (1953) 149.

contradictoriness of the definitions given.<sup>5</sup> It is well known, of course, that Schweitzer, for example, held that the concept of believers being in Christ dominated the apostle’s writing and that, as he put it, ‘once grasped it gives the clue to the whole’.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, he suggested that the phrases ‘in Christ’, ‘fellowship with Christ’ and ‘belonging to Christ’ were the original ideas which became, over time, ‘in Christ’. This, he argued, was a mystical participation in Christ and his body.<sup>7</sup> This Christ-mysticism could be expressed in the following words: ‘I am in Christ; in him I know myself as a being who is raised above the sensuous, sinful and transient world and I already belong to the transcendent; in him I am assured of resurrection; in him I am a child of God.’<sup>8</sup> By this term ‘mysticism’ it seems that Schweitzer meant that believers were so involved in the death and resurrection of Christ that they can be said to be in Christ and with Christ. Believers thus share already in the present life the mode of existence of the resurrection. They have already risen with Christ. This, for Schweitzer, comes into existence by baptism and is mediated by the Holy Spirit. However, it should be stressed that being in Christ was not conceived by Schweitzer as a ‘static partaking in the spiritual being of Christ’ in an objective sense, but as ‘a real coexperiencing of his dying and rising again’. It is not a metaphor, it is simple reality, a fact for the believer. It is one that is constantly repeating itself in his life.<sup>9</sup> Cerfaux, similarly, holds a mystical explanation. He maintains that the *év* has been exaggerated in modern studies and that the ‘formula’, so called, should be taken on its own merit each time. The words ‘in Christ’, if expanded, would read, ‘Christ is risen and has communicated his own life to me’. He argues that it is this life which now constitutes the believer’s life.<sup>10</sup> White, likewise, interprets it as ‘a mystical experience’, whilst Bedale surely overstates the position when he claims that Paul’s language at this point ‘is the language of union, at times, one might say of absorption’.<sup>11</sup>

There are those, then, who wish to apply the ‘in Christ’ idea purely to the subjective nature of the believer’s life. As we might expect, not everyone agrees. At the other extreme, perhaps, there are those who wish to see this as *merely* the objective foundation of the believer’s faith. Conzelmann, for instance, in arguing against the mystical interpretation, observes that the ‘in Christ’ formula is sometimes used in juridical, objective contexts—he cites 2 Corinthians 5:17f. This shows that the idea is an objective one in the apostle’s mind. Ridderbos, as well, sees the ‘in Christ’ idea as of fundamental importance and defines it as having to do with ‘the church’s objective state of salvation’. For him, then, it is not an experience, nor a series of experiences, but rather an abiding reality which is determinative for the whole of the Christian life.<sup>12</sup> There are also those who interpret the idea as locative or instrumental,<sup>13</sup> or, in an

---

<sup>5</sup> For more comprehensive summaries of this particular point refer to E Best, *One Body in Christ* (London, 1955) 8-19; M Bouttier, *En Christ: Étude D’Exégèse et de Théologie Pauliniennes* (Paris, 1962) 5-22; C F D Moule, *The Origin of Christology*, (Cambridge, 1978) 60-63; M Barth, *op cit*, 67-71. A fuller treatment is beyond the scope and purpose of this present study.

<sup>6</sup> A Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of the Apostle Paul* (ET London, 1953) 16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 122-123.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 13. See also 15-17, 118. V P Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville, 1968) 258ff, gives a useful outline of Schweitzer’s thought at this point.

<sup>10</sup> See L Cerfaux, *Christ in the Theology of St. Paul* (ET London, 1959) 324-325, 331; *idem*, *The Church in the Theology of St. Paul* (ET London, 1959) 213. F Büchsel, ‘“In Christus” bei Paulus’ (*ZNW* (1949) 141-158, whilst not holding to a mystical interpretation, certainly argues that each occurrence of the formula should be exegeted in its own right.

<sup>11</sup> R E O White, *The Changing Continuity of Christian Ethics* 1 (Exeter, 1979) 151; S F B Bedale, ‘The Theology of the Church’ in (ed F L Cross) *Studies in Ephesians* (London, 1956) 75.

<sup>12</sup> H Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament* (ET London, 1969) 209-211; H Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of his Theology* (ET London, 1977) 59. See also, G Bornkamm, *Paul* (ET London, 1971) 155.

apocalyptic context, as participatory-instrumental: that is, as implying a continued participation in Christ’s Lordship.<sup>14</sup>

[p.27]

Dunn, interestingly, seems to conclude that it is ‘a consciousness of Christ’.<sup>15</sup>

However uncertain exact definition may prove to be I would suggest that the following three things seem reasonably clear.

First, it is clear that to be in Christ is absolutely necessary for a believer: or, to put it more strikingly, if a man is not in Christ he does not belong to him. Paul reminds the Galatians that they are sons of God through faith ‘for all of you who were baptised into Christ have been clothed with Christ’ (3:26-27). Similarly, in his second letter to the Corinthian church the apostle asserts that ‘if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation’ (2 Cor 5:17). This might give an impression that to be in Christ is an individual matter alone but this, as it stands, would be a wrong conclusion. Paul does speak of individuals as being in Christ (eg Rom 8:1; Phil 1:1, 14; Eph 3:12; Col 1:2) but also of whole churches and fellowships (eg Gal 1:22; 1 Thess 1:1; 2:14; 2 Thess 1:1). It is best, then, that we maintain both the individual aspect which clearly should not be neglected, together with the corporate nature of being in Christ. Best, for example, recognises the personal emphasis in this way: ‘The formula describes the relationship of the believer to Christ. But’, he insists, ‘it does more: it implies a relationship of Christians one to another in personal fellowship and all together to Christ. It is not individual but social in its implication.’<sup>16</sup>

The second thing that seems agreed upon is that Paul uses the formula in various contexts and with differing shades of meaning. Best, again, is most helpful on this point.<sup>17</sup> He usefully classifies Paul’s employment of the term in the following way:

- 1 ‘A is in Christ’: for example, Paul speaks of the saints ‘in Christ Jesus’ (Phil 1:1), of ‘those who are in Christ Jesus’ (Rom 8:1) and of himself as ‘a man in Christ’ (2 Cor 12:2).
- 2 ‘A does something to B in Christ’: the apostle urges the Thessalonians ‘in the Lord Jesus’ (1 Thess 4:1; cf Eph 4:17). 3 ‘A does something in the Lord’: in this way Paul exhorts the Philippians to ‘rejoice in the Lord’ (Phil 3:1; 4:4-10; cf 2 Cor 10:17).
- 4 ‘A is X in Christ’: Appelles is said to be tested and approved ‘in Christ’ (Rom 16:10) and Paul’s ultimate aim for his ministry is ‘to present everyone perfect in Christ’ (Col 1:28; cf 1 Cor 3:1).
- 5 ‘God gives us (does to us) something in Christ’: eg he forgave us in Christ (Eph 4:32; cf 1:6).

---

<sup>13</sup> Eg E Schweizer, *The Holy Spirit* (ET London, 1980) 87; J A Allan, ‘The “in Christ” Formula in Ephesians’ *NTS* (1958) 54-62; idem, *The Epistle to the Ephesians: Introduction and Commentary* (London, 1959).

<sup>14</sup> Eg J C Becker, *Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh, 1980) 272, 275.

<sup>15</sup> J D G Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (London, 1975) 324.

<sup>16</sup> Best, *One Body*. See also 20, 58, 186.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 1-7.

- 6 ‘...the gift of God ... in Christ’ (eg Rom 3:24).
- 7 ‘A, B, C ... are in Christ’ (eg Gal 1:22). It is interesting at this point that the Thessalonian church is said to be ‘in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1).
- 8 The formula sometimes has cosmic significance, as it does in

[p.28]

Colossians 1:16-17: ‘in him all things hold together’ (cf Eph 1:9-10; 3:10-11).

- 9 The use of the phrase in Colossians 2:9 deserves singular mention: ‘For in Christ all the fulness of the deity lives’.

These examples and the tabulation help form our impression that Paul does use the words with different connotations. Other scholars are agreed—they see a variety in the apostle’s usage without, necessarily, expressing it in the same way. Bornkamm, for example,<sup>18</sup> classifies the term under four more general ideas: he says (1) that it is equivalent to the word ‘Christian’, or ‘as a Christian’ and that it describes a way of speaking, thinking, acting, suffering and also the conduct befitting a Christian; (2) that it is equivalent to membership of the church; (3) that it sums up what has come about for believers through Christ and constitutes salvation (Rom 8:38f; 15:17; 1 Cor 1:2; 6:11; 15:31; 15:58; 2 Cor 5:2; Gal 2:4; Phil 3:14); (4) that it signifies what Bornkamm calls ‘the new basic and all comprehending reality into which believers are transferred’. He concludes, ‘That it is found in very different contexts indicates that it has a variety of meanings.’

The third thing that is clear about the ‘in Christ’ formula is that the term—where it is used in any significant manner—is distinctly and essentially eschatological. A good indication of this is Paul’s usage in 2 Corinthians 5:17, ‘If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation’. Here the apostle refers to the creation of the believer within the creation of the whole new world—‘a reborn microcosm belonging to the eschatological macrocosm of the new heaven and the new earth’.<sup>19</sup> I refer to this because the concept of creation here naturally implies man in the midst of his environment, a new one in Christ. The radical nature of the transformation is emphasized by the Greek ὡςτε εἶ τις ἐν χριστῷ. The person in Christ is, by definition, also in the eschatological reality brought about by Christ’s resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. He is the one translated from the present age and world into the kingdom of the son whom God loves (Col 1:13); he has been ‘raised up with Christ’ and placed with him ‘in the heavenlies’ (Eph 2:6).

### THE IMPLICATIONS OF BEING IN CHRIST

Having briefly surveyed the ‘in Christ’ formula both in Paul and theology I want to suggest that the primary connotation of ‘in Christ’ is an objective one, which I do with no disregard for the subjective aspect that is certainly an element in the idea. The reality of being in Christ

---

<sup>18</sup> Bornkamm, Paul, 154ff.

<sup>19</sup> P E Hughes, *2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, 1971) 201-202.

involves fellowship with him at all points. We may see this both historically and in the believer’s present relationship with the Lord.

[p.29]

### **The historical aspect of being in Christ**

Solidarity with Christ is seen foremost in the apostle’s use of the Adam/Christ parallelism and antithesis. This is a peculiarly Pauline notion which takes further the concept of racial solidarity which was common to Paul and to his contemporaries. In summary, for the apostle, ‘The eschatological prospect to which the first man failed to attain is realised and receives its character through the resurrection of the Second Man who has become heavenly.’<sup>20</sup> The idea of solidarity is that of the incorporation of many in one representative head together with ‘èv’—we have this, for example, in the Greek of the LXX at Genesis 12:3 and 21:12. Thus a ‘corporate personality’ is a figure who represents a whole people or a societal relationship in which they stand to him. And so it is with Christ and those who are in him. He represents believers in his life, death and resurrection, as Paul’s most systematic discussions of the subject show.

In 1 Corinthians 15, for instance, Christ and Adam stand antithetically over against each other: one a heavenly, pneumatic man; the other an earthy, psychical one<sup>21</sup>—the former in whom the Spirit is the vitalizing principle; the latter where the natural self fulfils that role. Orr and Walther indicate an antithesis between the old and the new creation (v45). It is certainly clear that the actions of the representatives have significance for others: ‘As the first Adam had successors, earthy people, so Christ has successors, heavenly people, and that contrast of the successors is based upon the contrast of the two Adams.’ Ridderbos sums it up well: ‘Adam and Christ stand over against each other as the two great figures at the entrance of two worlds, two aeons, two creations, the old and the new; and in their actions and fate lies the decision for all who belong to them, therefore these are comprehended in them...’<sup>22</sup>

Of course, the subject of chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians is the resurrection—both of Christ and of believers, and here Paul links this theme to that subject. The unity of believers with Christ in this instance, however, is that of the relationship of the remainder of the harvest to the first-fruits. At verse 23 Paul demonstrates an order in the resurrection: ‘But each in his own turn: Christ, the first-fruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.’ The first-fruit was quite literally the first swing of the sickle<sup>23</sup>—the rest of the harvest is already there to take in. In this sense we may say that the resurrection of Christ is the first act of the final resurrection; it has already begun. This aspect of the unity is seen in vital terms by the apostle. It is so important that, ‘If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins’ (v 17; cf vv 13-14). This has ethical relevance for the apostle (see v 32f) and leads to the conclusion: ‘Therefore stand firm. Let nothing

[p.30]

move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.’(v 58). Believing behaviour (cf vv 32-33) would be useless

---

<sup>20</sup> A T Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet* (Cambridge, 1981) 190.

<sup>21</sup> H Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (ET Philadelphia, 1975) 284.

<sup>22</sup> W Orr and J A Walther, *1 Corinthians* (New York, 1976) 348; H Ridderbos, *Paul*, 60-61. See also, A Oepke, èv, *TDNT* 2. 541-542; R P Shedd, *Man in Community* (London, 1958) chs 3, 4, particularly 151-157.

<sup>23</sup> See Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 159.

(κενός—literally ‘empty’) if there was no reality in Christ’s resurrection and no truth in the believer’s vital union with him. Calvin remarks, ‘...he intimates that if the hope of the resurrection is taken away, the foundation (as it were) being rooted up, the whole structure of piety falls to the ground’.<sup>24</sup>

The idea of the believer’s solidarity with Christ is discussed again in Romans, but here at greater length. Romans 5:12-6:14 is a very relevant passage to our consideration of what it means to be in Christ. Again we have the contrast between the two corporate personalities, Adam and Christ; again, Paul shows something of what it means to be in the latter.

First, we notice that there is a clear solidarity held to exist between Adam and his race, and between Christ and his people—a solidarity which naturally envisages Adam and Christ as two inclusive heads of humanity (vv 14-15). It is because of this that the fate of Adam’s descendants rested on his decision of disobedience (vv 12,19: spoken of as the breaking of the command—v 14) and the fate of Christ’s people on his act of righteousness (v 18: termed ‘obedience’—v 19). Leenhardt<sup>25</sup> distinguishes between ‘solidarity in guilt and solidarity in the consequences of the original transgression’ when identifying where the solidarity lies. However, this seems to me to make a false distinction. Paul seems rather to say that Adam’s descendants were involved in his sin and that Christ’s were involved, by imputation, in the ‘one act of righteousness’.

We might notice, in passing, that the results of Adam’s transgression are said to be sin in the world (v 12a), together with death (v 12b), judgement and condemnation (vv 16, 18). The consequences of Christ’s obedience, on the other hand and in stark contrast, are God’s grace (vv 15, 17), justification (vv 16, 18), righteousness and life (vv 17, 21). In these results those represented by each of the corporate personalities share and live daily—such is the relationship envisaged between the head and those united to him.

Second, the clear implication of the passage is that in Christ there is a new organism or organisation that did not exist in the same way prior to his life, death and resurrection. Previous to this all can be said to have been ‘in Adam’, for all had sinned, showing their likeness to their head (see v 12; cf 3:19, 23). The passage, therefore, implies two groups within humanity—Christ being the head of the new humanity.<sup>26</sup> The use of the word ‘receive’ in Romans 5:17 might imply the necessity of the deliberate reception of God’s provision which would, then, be in contrast with the involuntary nature of man’s reception of the consequences of Adam’s sin.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, to be in Christ, for Paul, is to be part of the newly created humanity which has received the grace of

[p.32]

God and has been identified with the historical Christ; it is to have broken with that group which is identified with Adam, still in its sin and under the judgement of God.

---

<sup>24</sup> J Calvin, *Commentaries XX* (ET Grand Rapids, 1979) 66.

<sup>25</sup> F J Leenhardt, *The Epistle to the Romans* (ET London, 1961) 145.

<sup>26</sup> See D J A Clines, ‘The Image of God in Man’, *Tyndale Bulletin* (1968) 102 [[http://98.131.162.170//tynbul/library/TynBull\\_1968\\_19\\_03\\_Clines\\_ImageOfGodInMan.pdf](http://98.131.162.170//tynbul/library/TynBull_1968_19_03_Clines_ImageOfGodInMan.pdf)]. Ziesler’s claim that Paul is speaking of ‘two different ways of being human’ and of Adam and Christ as ‘representatives of two sorts of humanity’ needs to be qualified, I think. See J Ziesler, *Pauline Christianity* (Oxford, 1983) 50, 53-emphasis added.

<sup>27</sup> Best, *One Body*, 37.

Third, Paul continues the theme of solidarity with Christ as the head, but this time in its historical outworking in his death and resurrection (Rom 6:1-14). Having outlined the believer’s incorporation in Christ as a representative figure (Rom 5:12-21) Paul then turns his attention to the ethical consequences of such a vital union. The transition from the one to the other is through the question, ‘Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase?’ and his dogmatic retort, ‘By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?’ (vv 1b-2). Paul reminds the Christians that they were baptised into Christ (εἰς χριστόν—v 3). In this he reiterates the central contention of the previous section—that Christ has initiated a new humanity and established a new solidarity in which they now exist. From this he develops the idea to answer the initial question. The focal point is that believers have been united to Christ in his death (εἰς τὸν θάνατον αὐτοῦ). This he repeats time and again (vv 3, 4, 5, 6, 8) to emphasize its importance. John Murray intimates something of this in his comment: ‘Not only did Christ die, not only was he buried, not only did he rise from the dead, but also all those who sustain the relation to him that baptism signifies.’<sup>28</sup> Leenhardt expresses it as follows: ‘God willed that this death should be my own; when I look at the cross, I see there the victim who represents me objectively, his death includes my own, it is my death which he dies. In the intention of God with regard to myself, I have died.’<sup>29</sup>

The incorporation into Christ’s death happened historically; that is, both in Christ’s death as it occurred outside of Jerusalem in history and in the experience of the believer. That is, Paul teaches that it is not only within the facticity of Christ’s crucifixion that the individual died, but it is also the case that in his personal history it is the old sin-dominated self that has been crucified with Christ. The apostle’s affirmation of this is clear in verse 2, for example: ‘We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?’ In verse 6 he asserts that ‘our old self was crucified with him’ (cf v 7).

Participation in Christ’s death and burial, of which we have been speaking, also involves participation in his resurrection: ‘If we have been united with him in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection’ (v 5). Here the future tense of the verb probably denotes a logical future. In other words, we are able to lead a qualitatively new life now on the basis of being thus in Christ.<sup>30</sup> That is, for Paul, here as always, there are radical ethical implications to be spelled out and he does this in the imperatives from verse 12 following. The power that the believer has is anchored, first and foremost, in Christ’s experience because he is in Christ. The believers, therefore, are to live as those who have, in Christ, entered resurrection life.<sup>31</sup> They are

[p.32]

to yield themselves to godly obedience (v 13), rather than to sin’s evil desires (vv 12-13a). They have been set free from sin (vv 11, 18) and ‘have become slaves to righteousness’ which leads to holiness and eternal life (vv 22-23).

---

<sup>28</sup> J Murray, ‘The Agency of Definitive Sanctification’ in *Collected Works* 2 (Edinburgh, 1978) 286—emphasis original.

<sup>29</sup> Leenhardt, *Romans*, 155. See also 154-156.

<sup>30</sup> See D J Moo, ‘Romans 6:1-14. An Exegetical Note’, *Trinity Journal* (1982) 216.

<sup>31</sup> Contra F F Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London, 1963) 139, who says, ‘as though...’ they had already entered the resurrection life—emphasis added. There is a very real sense in which believers have entered into resurrection life through Christ and the work of the Spirit (see Eph 1:19-20).

Interestingly, a similar, but not identical, kind of situation is envisaged in relation to Christ and Abraham in Galatians 3:6-14. We can see here that Abraham’s posterity is involved in his blessing: ‘So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith’(v 9). Paul indicates a kind of solidarity of family in this passage. The posterity, thus blessed by God, receives its promise ‘through Christ Jesus’ (v 14; cf v 16); that is, the realisation comes in a representative individual. One writer says here that ‘he is Abraham’s representative in succession to him and also represents Abraham’s seed as the head of the household...’ He continues, ‘As a representative figure in this second way he passes on to those whom he represents and who acknowledge that fact the blessings which he has inherited as Abraham’s seed’.<sup>32</sup> In speaking in this way we must recognise that Paul transposes the physical ideas associated with Abraham into a spiritual key, but also that this seems in keeping with the apostle’s general thrust in that chapter.

### **The present aspect of being in Christ**

I have argued that the primary element of the ‘in Christ’ formula in Paul is that of the objective reality of the individual believer being identified with Christ in his death, and resurrection. The problem now is how to visualize such a union in the believer’s present reality and experience. Moule, for example, rightly sees Christ as a corporate figure, ‘an inclusive personality—one in whom believers find themselves incorporate’. I find it difficult to go further, with him, to conclude that Christ can be spoken of as ‘the locus of the Christian experience and the sphere in which the Christian life is lived’.<sup>33</sup> This seems to rob Christ of his historicity.

1 Corinthians 6:14-20 shows that the apostle had in mind, at least, a present close relationship between the believer and Christ. Writing against the Corinthians’ over-enthusiastic anticipation of the resurrection which led simply to the devaluation of the body, Paul teaches that the future raising of the body provides the standard for present conduct. Within this reasoning he asks, ‘Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself?’ (οὐκ οἶδα τε ὅτι τὰ σώματα ὑμῶν μελη χριστον ἐστιν—v 15) What does Paul indicate by the phrase ‘members of Christ’? The answer to this question may help us to further our enquiries into the believer’s being in Christ. It must be suggested, first, that he has a real connection in mind; that is, it is not merely a figure; and that there is no thought here of mystical union in the sense of absorption. This is obvious from the counterpart presented by Paul—union with a

[p.33]

Prostitute.<sup>34</sup> The apostle is arguing that it should have been clear to them that if they enter into close relationship with a prostitute it is not merely their body which is thus united (although superficially it seems so—see v 16). In a similar, but converse, way when a man joins himself spiritually to the Lord, the implication is that he has committed himself *entirely*—spirit and body. This is what I take to be the implication behind verse 17. The word ‘unite (vv 16-17—κολλώμενος) signifies ‘to join together’, ‘to cling to’, ‘to enter into close relationship with’ and Paul intends them to see that man, in his entirety, is related to the Lord and to his church. Some, at this point, have inferred that the apostle is speaking of the church, the body of Christ; so that to be ‘members of Christ himself’ is equivalent to being members of the

---

<sup>32</sup> A J M Wedderburn, ‘The Body of Christ and Related Concepts in 1 Corinthians’ *SJT* (1971) 88-90.

<sup>33</sup> C F D Moule, *Origin*, 49, 89, respectively.

<sup>34</sup> H Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 111; see footnote 21.

church. Others see this as a reference merely to the person of Christ.<sup>35</sup> Against these extremes I would prefer to say that it cannot, in this context, simply refer to the church because the contrast is a personal one: between being joined to Christ and union with a prostitute (vv 16-17), and yet, it does not seem to indicate Christ personally, alone, for, in the wider context of the letter, union with Christ is union with the church also—a point to which we will return later.

So Paul suggests, at least, union with Christ in the phrase ‘in Christ’. A dominant denotation in this is that of simply belonging to Christ. Believers are called by God to belong to him (Rom 1:6). Notice the emphasis on the historicity of the Lord to whom they are called—he is the one prophesied in the Old Testament, the one shown to be man in the line of David, but also the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead (vv 2-4). Paul seems to clarify the phrase in this way in his first letter to the Corinthians. In addressing the letter not only to the church in Corinth but also to ‘all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ’ he emphasizes just this point in the addition of the next phrase, ‘...their Lord and ours’ (1 Cor 1:2). They belong to him. In his second letter he uses this as proof of his own apostleship: ‘If anyone is confident that he belongs to Christ, he should consider again that we belong to Christ just as much as he’ (2 Cor 10:7). To use a Pauline phrase from elsewhere, Christ is the Church’s husband (11:2; cf Rom 16:1-2, Gal 5:2, etc). Again, in Galatians 3:26-29, the apostle seems to use the words ‘if you belong to Christ’ (v 29) as almost synonymous with ‘all of you were baptized into Christ’ (v 27) and, significantly, with ‘in Christ’ (v 28). This is important as it shows something, though very little, of the ‘mechanism’ of the idea: to be in Christ is to belong to him, is to be baptised into union with him by the Spirit of God (1 Cor 12:12-13) and this is seen in the Christian’s relationship to the church of Christ.

It is interesting to notice that in asserting that in Christ ‘Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value’ Paul sees a corollary to the Galatians’ insistence upon circumcision as ‘alienation from Christ’,

[p.34]

that is, a devaluing to nothing the Christ who has saved them by grace (Gal 5:6; cf v 4, v 2). The opposite seems true of the Ephesians who were once ‘separate from Christ’ but who are now ‘in Christ Jesus’ (Eph 2: 12-13). They have been brought to belong to Christ.

It is the first chapter of that letter which gives the clearest impression of this idea. The pivot of vv 3-14 is represented by the constructions ἐν αὐτῷ, ἐν ᾧ—the piece pivots on an appeal to Christ and his work in salvation; but it is equally clear that the centre of Paul’s thought is, in fact, God himself, and the praise that is due to him (vv 6a, 12, 14).<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, Paul clearly delights in the believer’s being in Christ because of three distinct yet closely related aspects of the concept.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Eg Conzelmann, op cit, 111, takes the former view; whilst F Fisher, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (Waco, 1975) 93, R C H Lenski, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (Minnesota, 1963) 262, J Calvin, *Commentaries XX*, 217, take the latter.

<sup>36</sup> See F Montagnini, ‘Christological Features in Ephesians 1:3-14’ in (ed L de Lorenzi) *Paul de Tarse: Apôtre du Notre Temps* (Rome, 1979) 529-539. C C Caragounis, *The Ephesian Mysterion* (Uppsala University. Doctoral Thesis, 1977) 62, agrees with this analysis: ‘The unity of the section is sustained by the triple repetition of God’s ultimate aim to glorify himself.’ For a recent, detailed and useful study of the structure of Eph 1:3-14 see C J Robbins, ‘The Composition of Ephesians 1:3-14’ *JBL* 4 (1986) 667-687.

<sup>37</sup> For a thorough treatment of this refer to Caragounis, op cit, particularly 45-52; 60-62; 78-91.

First, Ephesians takes the ‘in Christ’ formula further than any other epistle in understanding it as indicative of a dimension in which the believer, paradoxically, has always been: ‘even before his existence in space and time; a dimension in which God makes available to him through Christ the realisation of his *mysterion* and its consequences, one of which is the assumption of his allotted place in the Body of Christ’.<sup>38</sup> This, the predestinarian aspect, is clearly seen in the ideas of God’s choice (vv 4, 11), his predestination (v 5) and his purposes (v 9b) all in Christ. Second, there is the ‘now’ of being in him—the realm of grace, redemption, inclusion, the present experience of the believer (vv 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 13). It is within this context that the Christian is already ‘in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ’ (v 3b). It is here, the place of the throne of Christ, in principle that believer’s dwell (Eph 2:6; cf 1:20-21, Col 3:1). Third, there is also the future eschatological orientation of God’s purposes in Christ: that believers are to be holy and blameless in his sight (v 4) in order to be ‘to the praise of his glory’ (v 12b; cf vv 10, 14). Caragounis’ comment at this point is rightly suggestive: ‘The phrase ἐν χριετω̅ indicates at once the “sphere” in which the believer was placed by election in God’s counsel (1:4) and is now positioned following the saving event (eg 1:1, 2:2), the “sphere” in which all of God’s decisions were made (eg 1:9, 3:11) and have now in the Christ event taken effect (eg 1:9), and the “sphere” in which the salvific event with its resultant blessings becomes realisable for the believer (eg 1:7). And finally, ἐν χριετω̅ indicates also the “sphere” in which the believer shall have his future existence (eg 1:10).’<sup>39</sup>

The praise of God’s grace in Christ, then, pushes forward to verse 13 where Paul turns his attention to the recipients and explains that they, too, were experientially included in Christ when they heard and believed the gospel. He then adds the significant image of the seal of the Spirit. This forcefully reminds the readers that they are ‘God’s possession’. We can conclude here, then, that to be in Christ is to belong both to Christ and, through him, to God.

Furnish, amongst others,<sup>40</sup> emphasizes the relational element and concludes that ‘in Christ’ is the context of ethics, and that the believer’s

[p.35]

life is ‘in utter dependence upon the one to whom he rightly belongs’. Thielicke, in a different way, stresses the same thing. For him, being in Christ is participating ‘in the divine likeness of the divine Son’ interpreting ‘likeness’ as ‘relationship with God’.<sup>41</sup> If this is so, then it is natural to see the ‘in Christ’ concept as having vital relevance to the believer’s transformation to the image of Christ. Not only is this the case, however, but the idea of transformation also falls under the heading ‘in Christ’ because it is part of the work of Christ’s Spirit who dwells within the believer. It is, thus, the reverse perspective on the matter: the believer lives in Christ, Christ lives within the believer. What does this idea convey, though? Romans 8:9-11 is important. Paul equates ‘the Spirit of God’ and the ‘Spirit of Christ’ (v 9; cf Gal 4:6, Phil 1:19). He further says that ‘Christ is in you’ (v 10). Cranfield rightly suggests that ‘the same Spirit is meant by both πνευμα̅ θεου̅ and πνευμα̅ κριετου̅’;<sup>42</sup> but how do we square this with

---

<sup>38</sup> Caragounis, op cit, 137.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 157.

<sup>40</sup> Furnish, *Theology*, 90-92; 176-180. See, for example, L Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament* 2 (ET Grand Rapids, 1982) 105; A Oepke, ἐν, *TDNT* 2, 541-543; T J Deidun, *New Covenant Morality in Paul* (Rome, 1981) 40.

<sup>41</sup> H Thielicke, *Theological Ethics* 1 (ET Grand Rapids, 1979) 165, 184.

<sup>42</sup> C E B Cranfield, *Romans* 1 (Edinburgh, 1975) 388; see also J Ziesler, *Pauline Christianity*, 49.

the idea of Christ in believers? As Murray explains, '...the variation of terms shows that the indwelling of the Spirit of God, having the Spirit Christ and Christ in us are all to the same effect'.<sup>43</sup> On the grounds that some, for example Deissmann and Weiss, come to the conclusion that Christ and the Spirit are one, we need to stress that there is no identification between Christ and the Spirit in the apostle's thought.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps we can be helped here by looking at a similar instance in Paul's writing. The meaning of the phrase 'Christ is in you' becomes apparent from a comparison with Ephesians 2:22 in which God is said to live in believers 'by his Spirit'. The inference to be drawn from this, I would suggest, is that Christ also dwells in believers by *his* Spirit. It is one and the same thing. Paul alludes to this in the Galatian letter: 'God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father"' (4:6).

Galatians 2:20 takes the same thought a little further. The apostle asserts, 'I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me'. There is much to be said for Ridderbos' view that 'the utterance says something about the existential determination of life. This it is which springs no longer from Paul's natural self, but from Christ'.<sup>45</sup> The fact that he is able to distinguish himself from the person of Christ in the next sentence shows that it is not *simply* Christ who lives but Paul, himself, *in Christ*. However, does Paul also imply that it is the Spirit of Christ who lives in him? This would certainly be in keeping with the equivalence of Romans 8:9f, as we have noted, for example. It would also correlate with the ideas he forwards in later chapters of the letter (for example—5:6, 22-23, 25; cf 6:15. See also 1 Cor 3:16; Rom 8:13-14). Paul further elucidates this in 2 Corinthians 3:18 where he shows that it is the work of the Spirit to transform believers to the likeness of Christ in whom they live. In other words, to be in Christ is to be being transformed to what *he* is like.

Bearing the image of Christ is an eschatological concept in that it

[p.36]

contains elements both of the 'now' and the 'not yet' of salvation in Christ. Kittel is correct in indicating this.<sup>46</sup> He identifies a similarity between the image and all the gifts in which Christians share because of the salvific work of Christ: '...the εἰκὼν is an ἀπαρχή. This means it now is, and yet that it is still to be.' Paul, therefore, can speak of the transformation involved as a present happening (2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10) and also as a yet future event (1 Cor 15:49; Phil 3:21). The purpose of God is that all believers should be 'conformed to the likeness of his Son' (Rom 8:29).<sup>47</sup> Likeness to Christ, here in the context of a 'fraternal relationship' between Christ and his people (v 29a), is seen to be 'the highest goal conceivable' (v 7) and probably covers both the idea of sanctification and that of final glory (vv 17, 18, 30).<sup>48</sup>

To the Corinthians Paul writes that they, together with him, 'are being transformed into his (ie Christ's) likeness with ever increasing glory ... (τὴν αὐτὴν εἰκόνα μετανοοῦμεθα ἀπὸ δόξης εἰς δόξαν)'. Despite the difficulties of the former part of the verse, the following things

---

<sup>43</sup> J Murray, *Romans* 1 (Grand Rapids, 1968) 288.

<sup>44</sup> A Deissmann, *Paul* (ET London, 1926) 140; J Weiss, *The History of Primitive Christianity* 2 (London, 1937) 465—cited by J K S Reid, *Our Life in Christ* (London, 1963) 18-20.

<sup>45</sup> H Ridderbos, *Galatians* (ET London, 1976) 105.

<sup>46</sup> C W Kittel, εἰκὼν, *TDNT* 2, 397.

<sup>47</sup> Murray, *op cit*, 320, 318 respectively.

<sup>48</sup> See Cranfield, *op cit*, 432.

become apparent. The apostle’s use of the present tense marks a continuous process in the life of the believer. Second, the verse is speaking of transformation of the inner man. Philip Hughes makes this clear with a reference to the word μορφή. He points out that μορφή means real being in contrast with outward appearance; it is in respect of our real being that we are changed: ‘It is transformation of the essential man.’<sup>49</sup> Ladd, in his remarks, qualifies this, ‘The internal work of Christ is to be understood not in terms of a complete transformation of the human personality or the displacement of something human by something divine, but in terms of an influx of the divine power accomplishing a reorientation of the will toward God.’<sup>50</sup> Third, Paul implies that what is restored is the image of God marred through the fall but reclaimed by the work of Christ for every believer (cf Eph 4:24; Col 3:10).<sup>51</sup> Fourth, the —2 Corinthians 4:1-4, for instance. Fifth, the renewing or restoration of the image of Christ in those who are in him is the work and gift of the Holy Spirit. Paul says it comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (v 18c).

The apostle asserts that Christ is ‘the image of God’ (2 Cor 4:4—ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ); that is, in Christ the invisible God becomes visible (see Col 1:15). It is, perhaps, legitimate to interpret Paul as signifying that believers should be a reflection of Christ in the way that they live. Ridderbos claims that the idea of Christ as the Second Adam is prominent in this context<sup>52</sup> and I think that is basically correct; but account has to be taken of Lincoln’s insistence that ‘conformity to Christ’s image is not simply a restoration of something lost by the first Adam but involves a distinctly new element, a new quality of existence’.<sup>53</sup> It is into this context of the apostle’s thought that Romans 13:14, for example, must be fitted. He exhorts, ‘...clothe yourselves

[p.37]

with the Lord Jesus Christ and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature’. Murray’s conclusion is worth noting: ‘Nothing less than the complete negation of vice and the perfection of purity and virtue exemplified in Christ make up the habitude required of the believer.’<sup>54</sup> He adds, significantly, ‘The negative is as exclusive as the positive is inclusive’. It is interesting that the rabbis were the first to speak of imitation of God in the course of the development of the image of God in man and, as we have seen, Paul seems to have a similar view in relation to Christ. It is ‘a laying hold of Christ in the consciousness of one’s own imperfection and letting one’s life be continually remoulded by Christ in obedience to him’.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Hughes, *2 Corinthians*, 118—emphasis added. Here, Hughes quotes Ramsey, *The Glory of God*, 54 to this effect.

<sup>50</sup> G E Ladd, *The Theology of the New Testament* (Guildford, 1975) 493.

<sup>51</sup> See A A Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Exeter, 1986) 28: ‘The fact that the image of God must be restored in us implies that there is a sense in which that image has been distorted.’

<sup>52</sup> Ridderbos, *Galatians*, 225-226.

<sup>53</sup> Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 51-52.

<sup>54</sup> Murray, *Romans*, 170. Cranfield, *Romans* 1, 688-689, says that it is ‘to strive to let our lives be moulded according to the pattern of the humility of Christ’s earthly life’.

<sup>55</sup> W Bauder, μιμῆομαι, *DNTT* 1, 491. See Rom 15:15; 1 Cor 11:1; 2 Cor 8:8-9; Eph 5:1-2; 1 Thess 1:6.

## THE COMMUNAL EXPRESSION OF BEING IN CHRIST

We have seen that to be in Christ is an essential idea in the theology of the apostle Paul. Primarily it stresses the idea of solidarity with Christ in his death and resurrection—he is a 'corporate personality' in whom believers are represented before God: his death is theirs, his resurrection is theirs, too. We have briefly examined the present aspect of being in Christ and have seen that here the concept conveys the idea of belonging and union with him now. Because the Christian is in Christ he is presently being transformed into the Lord's image. Now we turn, briefly, to the question: How is this 'in Christ' relationship and experience corporately expressed? That is, how is being in Christ made tangible in the present communal existence of the people of God? The concept of the body of Christ is crucial in our answer.

To put this into a wider context it will be helpful to make one or two introductory remarks at this point. Paul uses the image 'the body of Christ' to give the sense of *corporate unity* in Christ. For the apostle there can be no individual salvation that is completely detached from the community of believers. The origin of the phrase 'the body of Christ' remains obscure.<sup>56</sup> However, the concept should be taken together with other images that the apostle employs—those of 'the people of God',<sup>57</sup> 'the church',<sup>58</sup> 'the temple of God', 'the building in Christ', 'the bride of Christ' and so on.<sup>59</sup> It seems best to take Paul's phrase to mean that the church simply belongs to Christ—he is the source of life and the sustainer of its being.<sup>60</sup> The words themselves imply two things: personal union with Christ and incorporation in the collective Christian fellowship. This is expressed in Romans 12:5, '...so in Christ, we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others'.

### Union with Christ

Romans 12:5 is of importance here in showing that believers owe their organic unity with each other to the fact that they are in Christ—a

[p.38]

phrase that signifies the closest possible unity with him, as we have already seen. The apostle shows that the relationship that exists between the members of the body does so on account of their relationship to Christ; that is, the church has the organic structure which it does by reason of the saving grace of God through Jesus Christ.<sup>61</sup> This relationship is seen also in 1

---

<sup>56</sup> The origin of the phrase 'the body of Christ' has been sought in Stoicism, Gnosticism, cult-meals, Rabbinism and Apocalyptic literature, but this divergence of ideas only indicates the difficulty of the problem of the verbal origin. See Best, *One Body*, 83-93, 112. See also the brief summary in W Goossens, *L'Église Corps du Christ D'Après Saint Paul* (Paris, 1949) 80-98. Goossens concludes that Paul uses an image known to the early Christians and one which well suited the situation, both in terms of a realisation in experience of relationship to Christ, and the vital social union with other believers. 100-102.

<sup>57</sup> R Y K Fung, 'Some Pauline Pictures of the Church' *EQ* (1981) 105-106. According to Fung, the image of the people of God emphasises both the origin of the group as continuous with Israel and the destiny as eschatological new creation.

<sup>58</sup> L Coenen, ἐκκλησία, *DNTT* 1, 291-307. See also Bedale, 'Theology of the Church', 68.

<sup>59</sup> See W A Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven, 1983) particularly ch 3, 'The Formation of the EKKLĒSIA', 74-110. He usefully outlines the models from the immediate environment which seem to parallel the first Christian's concept of the church.

<sup>60</sup> Best, *op cit*, 96. See also J Ruef, *Paul's First Letter to Corinth* (Harmondsworth, 1971) 136.

<sup>61</sup> There is no adequate reason to argue here for a corporate mystical experience of Christ as does J S Bosch, 'Le Corps du Christ et les charismes dans l'épître aux Romains' in *Dimensions de la Vie Chrétienne* (Rome, 1979) 54-57. C E B Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary* (Edinburgh, 1985) 302, is correct in stating that 'in Christ' indicates that the unity of those whom Paul is addressing... is a matter neither of nature nor of human

Corinthians 12:12, ‘The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.’ The last phrase (οὕτως και ὁ χριετός) has caused difficulties. Is it to be taken literally—meaning Christ himself? Cerfaux takes it in this way and sees no reason for giving the name any special significance.<sup>62</sup> Does it imply the identification of Christ and the church?<sup>63</sup> Is Lenski correct in suggesting that it is speaking of Christ as the head of the church, and therefore identifying both but not dissolving the person of Christ?<sup>64</sup> Is it, as Conzelmann believes, merely figurative language? That is, does the phrase simply mean ‘So it is also, where Christ is’?<sup>65</sup> Is it merely an example of an ellipsis?<sup>66</sup> Given the wider context of the whole paragraph (vv 12-30) and particularly verses 27-28 which identify the body of Christ and the church, it seems reasonable to accept the last named interpretation. Paul is using ellipsis and means ‘the body of Christ’ (= the church). The fact that he can do this, however, emphatically highlights the close relationship between Christ and the church that is implied in the phrase ‘the body of Christ’. Again, this is linked in thought with Romans 12:5.

The idea of relationship with Christ is expressed in another way. In a number of passages Paul identifies Christ as the head of the church, his body (eg Eph 4:15; cf 1:22, 5:23, Col 1:18). In an important study Bedale argues that Paul uses the idea of ‘head’—not because of the importance of the brain, an idea which would, of course, be anachronistic—but rather as conveying the sense of the beginning of something. He claims that the word ‘head’ (κεφαλή) speaks of source, *not* of authority.<sup>67</sup> However, two later studies contradict this view. Sampley, for example, rightly claims that κεφαλή speaks of authority and does so from Ephesians 1:22-23 and 4:15. Batey, on the other hand, uses Bedale’s ‘source’ argument to conclude that κεφαλή implies authority which is grounded in priority of being. Certainly Grudem’s recent examination of κεφαλή lends support to this conclusion.<sup>68</sup> Believers, then, are related to Christ as those under his authority, and this has to be borne in mind when we consider how the Christian’s being in Christ is to be manifested in the world in the ethical ramifications of such a union.

In 1 Corinthians 10:14f, for example, in exhorting the believers to flee from idolatry the apostle brings in the fact of their close relationship to Christ as a motive to live in godliness in

---

contriving but of the grace of God. See also R C H Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Minnesota, 1961) 757; J Schlosser, ‘Le Corps en 1 Cor 12:12-31’ in (ed V Guénel) *Le Corps* (Paris, 1983) 108.

<sup>62</sup> L Cerfaux, *Christ in the Theology of St. Paul*, 338-339. This he calls, ‘a realistic interpretation’.

<sup>63</sup> Eg M E Thrall, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (Cambridge, 1965) says, ‘...the church exists as an extension of the personality of Christ’. This needs to be carefully qualified.

<sup>64</sup> R C H Lenski, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (Minnesota, 1963) 513. See also, Moule, *Origin*, 72.

<sup>65</sup> Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 211, see footnote 11. He cites J Weiss and H Schlier’s work, *Christus and die Kirche*.

<sup>66</sup> Eg Calvin, *Commentaries XX*, 405; C K Barrett, *1 Corinthians* (London, 1968) 287-288; Fisher, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 199-200; F W Grosheide, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, 1972) 291-293.

<sup>67</sup> S F B Bedale, ‘The Theology of the Church’, 64-75: particularly 71.

<sup>68</sup> J P Sampley, *“And the Two Shall Become One Flesh”: A Study in Tradition in Ephesians 5:21-33* (Cambridge, 1971) 123; R A Batey, *New Testament Nuptial Imagery* (Leiden, 1971) 241, respectively. The latter writer holds that the discussion of headship is dependent on 1 Corinthians 11:3 which signifies authority and that Paul uses κεφαλή to mean ‘ruler’ or ‘chief’—manifesting a direct influence from the LXX (eg Isa 9:14-15). W Grudem, ‘Does κεφαλή mean “source” or “authority over” in Greek literature? A Survey of 2336 examples.’ *Trinity Journal* (1985) 38-59 [[http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/tj/kephale\\_grudem.pdf](http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/tj/kephale_grudem.pdf)]. His conclusion is worth quoting in full: ‘This survey is probably sufficient to demonstrate that “source”, “origin” is nowhere clearly attested as a legitimate meaning for κεφαλή, and that the meaning “ruler, authority over” has sufficient attestation to establish it clearly as a legitimate sense for κεφαλή in Greek literature at the time of the New Testament.’ (59)

this area: ‘...we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf’ (v 12). However, Ephesians 5:21-23 gives the fullest expression to Paul’s idea in an ethical setting.<sup>69</sup> Batey usefully sees this passage as dividing into three

[p.39]

components. First, verses 21-24 show the headship of Christ which is expressive of his authority over the church, which, in turn, submits to him (v 24). This is given as an analogy in order that wives should, likewise, submit to their heads, their husbands (vv 22, 24; cf Col 3:18, 1 Pet 3:1)<sup>70</sup> Second, verses 25-27 demonstrate the love of Christ for his body. In Sampley’s words, ‘...death functions as a definition of the love’.<sup>71</sup> The sacrificial love of Christ is an example for husbandly affection. The apostle here uses three significant purpose clauses: (1) to sanctify the church (v 26), (2) to present it glorious at the Parousia, the consummation of the marriage (v 27), (3) he designs the church to be holy at that time. This brings the concept into the eschatological thinking of the apostle, of course. Third, verses 28-33 show clearly the unity of Christ and the church in the ‘one-flesh’ image. Husbands are therefore exhorted to love their wives and to provide for them—‘just as Christ does the Church’ (vv 29, 33).<sup>72</sup>

We see then not only that the believer’s being in Christ is made tangible by being related to him in his body, the church, but also we see something of how this idea is used by the apostle Paul as motivation in his writing. Another aspect, however, demands brief attention and that is the idea of the believer’s relationship with other members of Christ.

### **Union with believers**

It is clear that the phrase ‘the body of Christ’ emphasizes the church as a fellowship of believing people. It is concerned with the internal life of the church, not its relationship with the world. In what way is this unity—which is itself a part of what it means to be in Christ—envisaged by Paul?

The body metaphor is used to signify a unified yet many-membered organism in which each member has its function and which could not remain alive without its members individually. It is not exaggerating to speak of a ‘tension’ between multiplicity and unity within the body.<sup>73</sup> This is what Berkhof terms ‘a community of renewed people’, ‘a totality of personal relationships’.<sup>74</sup> Wibbing, however, helpfully points out that this alone is not enough to

---

<sup>69</sup> See Sampley, op cit, and Batey, op cit, for a fuller discussion of this passage.

<sup>70</sup> Batey, op cit, 21; Sampley, op cit, 123. A Verhey, *The Great Reversal* (Grand Rapids, 1984) 126, has a significant remark here: ‘The author of Ephesians does not disown the traditional authority of the husband, but he transforms it by his analogy to Christ’s authority over the church.’

<sup>71</sup> Sampley, op cit, 128. The relationship between ‘the body of Christ’ and ‘the bride of Christ’ metaphors is brought into play here. This, of course, suits the context.

<sup>72</sup> Batey, op cit, 30: ‘The author sees in the “one flesh” concept where the husband and wife become one body a key for understanding the unity maintained by Christ and his body, the church.’ And later, 31: ‘The logic is that since husband and wife become one flesh by virtue of their marriage union, their relationship illumines the relationship sustained by Christ and his body, the church.’ Similarly, Sampley, op cit, 157: ‘According to the author of Ephesians marriage is a reflection of the paradigm relationship that subsists between Christ and his church.’ The fact that these two writers come at the conclusion from opposite ends, as it were, shows the ambiguity and complexity of the thought of the apostle at this point—ie Eph 5:21-33.

<sup>73</sup> V Guenel, ‘Tableau des Emplois de Sōma dans la première lettre aux Corinthiens’ in (ed V Guenel) *Le corps* 77, speaks both of a correct and a necessary tension; as does J Schlosser, ‘Le Corps’, 97-110, particularly 98-100, in the same volume.

<sup>74</sup> H Berkhof, *Christian Faith* (ET Grand Rapids, 1979) 392, 411; also 341, 499. See Ladd, *Theology*, 545.

describe the Pauline emphasis: ‘Rather, it is the task of the members that highlights their corporate nature in their diverse functions.’<sup>75</sup> This certainly epitomizes the emphasis of Romans 12:4-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:14-31, yet the latter passage is also based on the oneness achieved by possession of the Spirit from whom, interestingly, the diversity proceeds and, more importantly for this present study, from the relationship which each member of the community has with Christ himself (1 Cor 12-13). Again, at 1 Corinthians 10:17, the unity of the body is said to be derived from participation in, and relationship with, Christ.

It is obvious from the writing of Paul that he is no mere theoretician

[p.40]

—he desires that his theology be worked out in the lives of those to whom he writes. It is, therefore, conceivable that Paul had the concept of the body of Christ in mind whenever he exhorted to love, forgiveness and unity. However, he explicitly brings the subject to the fore in 1 Corinthians 12, for instance. In reasoning with the Corinthians that every gift is important in the Spirit’s purpose (vv 4, 7, 11, 25) Paul exhorts them to see that as the body is made up of many different members, so is the body of Christ (vv 12, 14). It is on this basis that he reminds them, ‘Now you are the body of Christ and each one is a part of it’ (v 27)—therefore each should hold the other in peace and honour (cf v 25).<sup>76</sup> From this develops the argument that love, in fact, is the greatest gift (ch 13). It is significant that the qualities that Paul stresses are those which enhance his general teaching on unity in the body. Love, therefore, is said to be patient, with the implication of putting up with things from others; it shows kindness even to those who do no harm. Love doesn’t envy, neither on the other hand, is it proud (see 4:6, 18, 19; 5:2; 8:1). Christian love does not behave in an unseemly manner (cf 7:36) nor does it seek its own advantage (cf 10:24). Love is not ‘touchy’ and doesn’t keep a record of wrongs; it does not rejoice at unrighteousness in others, but rather it rejoices in the truth. Positively, love protects—perhaps, concealing, rather than exposing, evil in others (cf 1 Pet 4:8), it trusts and hopes. No rebuff ever makes love cease to love—it never fails.<sup>77</sup>

The importance of the idea of the body of Christ is seen also in Ephesians. In chapter 4 the believers are counselled to be ‘completely humble and gentle’, to be patient with one another, to bear with each other in love and to keep the unity, knowing that there is one body and one Spirit. It is thus in this way that the body will grow—‘as each does its work’ (cf vv 15-16).

## CONCLUSION

We have seen, then, that the ‘in Christ’ formula is important in the thought of the apostle Paul. It primarily designates a close and indissoluble relationship with the Lord, but more than that it speaks of solidarity with Christ in his death and resurrection as the representative head of his people, the church. However, in its implication the term underlies much of the apostle’s explanation of the believer’s awareness of the sanctifying work of Christ’s Spirit conforming

---

<sup>75</sup> S Wibbing,  $\sigma\omega\mu\alpha$ , *DNTT* 1, 237. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 264, calls this aspect ‘the ongoing creative event’ of the body of Christ.

<sup>76</sup> A similar use is found in Romans ch 13. Humility is enjoined on the grounds that in Christ ‘each member belongs to the others’ (v 5). Therefore, they are reminded that they ‘have different gifts, according to the grace given’ (v 6).

<sup>77</sup> Barrett, *1 Corinthians*, 305, gives an interesting insight into Paul’s possible intention. He concludes, ‘If my relationship with my fellow-man is soured by his rebuffs it is not love’. This thrust of the apostle here needs to be taken in the context of both the division in the church (1:10-17; 3:1-23) and its pride (4:6, 8, 18, 19; 5:2, etc).

him to the image of the Lord to whom he belongs and in the manifestation of this relationship in the life and communion of the body of Christ, the church. We have also seen, in passing, the importance of this teaching as it relates to Paul’s ethical thinking and exhortation. Lives in the present are to evidence the believer’s characteristic union with Christ in godliness and in obedience to him within the context of his church and by the power of his Spirit.

---

© 1988 *London School of Theology* (<http://www.lst.ac.uk/>). Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in March 2009 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---