

TERESA MORGAN

Being 'in Christ'
in the Letters of Paul

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
zum Neuen Testament
449*

Mohr Siebeck

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449



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Being 'in Christ'
in the Letters of Paul

Saved through Christ
and in his Hands

Mohr Siebeck

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For Bob

ἀγαπητῷ καὶ συνεργῷ

Preface and acknowledgements

In the autumn of 2019, I was working on the nature of early Christian trust and faith when I came to think that to understand what it means, for instance, to Paul to live in a relationship of *pistis* with God and Christ, I needed to take a view on what he means by being ‘in Christ’. I set myself to write a paragraph on Paul’s *en Christō* language. This is that paragraph.

I am grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for the award of a three-year Major Research Fellowship to write about ‘The Invention of Faith’, and to the John Templeton Foundation for the award, with fellow-PIs Daniel McKaughan and Michael Pace, of a three-year grant to study ‘The Philosophy, Theology, and Psychology of Christian Trust in God’. Their support has enabled me, in addition to writing on those topics, to explore a question relevant to both projects which otherwise I could not have pursued at length.

Much of the book was written in ‘lockdown’, during the first wave of the covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. During this time there were fewer opportunities than usual to share work in progress with colleagues in seminars or at conferences, so I was especially grateful to the organizers of the New Testament Seminar at the University of Durham and the Biblical and Early Christianity Seminar at the Australian Catholic University for invitations to present work in progress. Early versions of the material in Chapters Seven and Eight were presented in seminars or as lectures at the Universities of Calgary, Oxford, and Yale, and at the Society of Biblical Literature in 2018. Warm thanks are due to the organizers of all those meetings for the opportunity to speak, and to participants for their stimulating questions and observations.

With the greatest generosity, John Barclay, Cilliers Breytenbach, Andrew Chester, Francis Watson, and Adela Yarbro Collins each read almost the whole manuscript. Their responses challenged me to think harder, strengthen arguments, and explore new questions, and conversing with them was one of the great pleasures of this project. Robert Morgan not only read almost all the manuscript, but let me use his library while university libraries were shut, and argued points of detail inexhaustibly on long walks around Oxford. Philomen Probert explained arguments of the verb to me, and innumerable friends and relations, in social isolation, let me enthuse about the implications of being ‘in Christ’s hands’ via diverse forms of video communication.

Joseph Spooner edited the manuscript with the *doctrina* of a classicist, the *cura* of an editor, and the *curiositas* of a churchgoer. Michelle Leese kindly took time out of preparing her PhD thesis for publication to create the bibliography. Shortly before the manuscript went to press, Barbara Beyer let me see her just-completed doctoral dissertation on being ‘in Christ’ in Paul, and J. Thomas Hewitt shared the proofs of his book *Messiah and Scripture*. Both are important contributions to the field, and I greatly appreciate having been given a preview of both.

Oxford, 19th July 2020

Teresa Morgan

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The phrase *en Christō*, together with its close relatives *en Christō Iēsou*, *en kyriō*, *en hō*, and *en autō*, is one of the most distinctive and most puzzling expressions in the Pauline corpus.¹ It has received sustained attention for over a century, since its importance was recognized by a young Adolf Deissmann in his study *Die neutestamentliche Formel "in Christo Jesu"*.² Deissmann argued that the phrase was original to Paul and highly significant to him, but that it was more difficult to interpret than commentators had recognized.³ After considering possible parallels outside Christian literature and finding none of interest, he examines the Pauline corpus and concludes that the phrase refers to what he terms the 'pneumatic Christ'.⁴ Christians, Deissmann argues, have a relationship with the pneumatic Christ which is not comparable with anything in human relationships, but which is very like being 'in the Spirit'. He suggests further that, though we cannot be certain, Paul probably intends Christians to understand 'in Christ' as a locality: not just in a metaphorical sense, but literally.⁵ Whether or not he is right about this, he says, he is certain that the phrase is Paul's way of expressing as strongly as he can the 'greatest imaginable unity' of the Christian with Christ.⁶ Deissmann's most famous formulation of this theory appears two decades later, in *Paulus: Eine kultur- und religionsgeschichtliche Skizze*.⁷ The living Christ is

¹ Deissmann (1892, 2 *et passim*) was right that the phrase is among the most common used by Paul, but his 164 instances are an over-estimate: see below, p. 26. Versions of the phrase also occur in the Johannine corpus, which falls outside the scope of this study, but see e.g. Oepke (1964); Moule (1977), 64–5; Malatesta (1978); Macaskill (2013), ch. 10; and Hooker (2017). Other New Testament uses of *en* are well understood and not usually problematic: cf. Oepke (1964), Moulton *et al.* (1976), Bauer (1988), Blass & Debrunner (1961), Harris (2012). This study focuses on the seven undisputed letters of Paul.

² The following discussion is confined to modern New Testament scholarship. In systematic theology, the concept of participation or union with Christ has a long history, notably in the later Church Fathers, Orthodox theology, Aquinas, Anselm, Calvin, and Luther: for an overview see Macaskill (2013), chs. 2–3.

³ His argument for the distinctiveness of Paul is partly a presumption (first on p. 4). Some think *en Christō* likely, as a phrase, to be pre-Pauline, e.g. Kramer (1966), chs. 9–12; Schnelle (1983), 109–112, (2005), 479–82; de Jonge (1988), 41–2; and below, pp. 30, 43.

⁴ Noting differences in the distribution of the phrase between what he views as 'older Paulines', letters of imprisonment or deuterio-Paulines, and the pastoral epistles (pp. 2–3).

⁵ (1892), 97–8.

⁶ P. 98.

⁷ Deissmann (1911), English translation 1912; 2nd ed. 1925, transl. 1926.

the *pneuma*, present and with Christians, and being in Christ is like being in the spirit, so we should speak of the ‘Spirit-Christ’: ‘Just as the air of life, which we breathe, is “in” us and fills us, and yet we at the same time live in this air and breathe it, so it is also with the Christ-intimacy of the Apostle Paul: Christ in him, he in Christ’.⁸

Deissmann’s concept of the ‘Spirit-Christ’ found some early support, notably from Johannes Weiss, but not widespread acceptance.⁹ His underlying arguments, however, that the phrase *en Christō* is distinctive and central to Paul, and that, though difficult to understand, it bears a sense of locality, persisted. The durability of these ideas may be due, in part, to the fact that they themselves rest on two foundations which are mutually independent: a linguistic argument, and the conviction that Paul was a mystic.¹⁰

In the century since Deissmann’s *Paul* was published, many scholars have continued to see Paul as a mystic, though the way his mysticism has been understood has evolved markedly. From being seen by the History of Religion school as Hellenistic in type (cognate, supposedly, with contemporary Greek mystery cults), it has come to be seen (following Schweitzer) as rooted in Judaism, or as related to the idea of *theōsis* in imperial Greek philosophy.¹¹ In all these evolutions, the idea that Paul envisions the relationship of the faithful with Christ as one of mystical union or participation in Christ has been thought attractive in its own right, and it has also drawn support from the argument that there is no good alternative explanation for Paul’s use of *en* with *Christos Iēsous*.¹² Meanwhile, many scholars who are not primarily concerned with Paul’s mysticism have continued to accept Deissmann’s linguistic argument and, at least partly on that basis, have proposed a wide variety of alternative explanations of what Paul means by the phrase *en Christō*.

In *Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus* (1930), Albert Schweitzer recast Deissmann’s theory, arguing that the ‘common denominator’ of Paul’s *en* expressions is the idea that the elect partake with Christ, in a unique way, in the corporeity which

⁸ Deissmann (1926), 138, 140.

⁹ E.g. Weiss (1937.2), 465, cf. Schnackenburg (1964), 162–6. Bousset (2013) also has some sympathy with it (the phrases *en Christō* and *en pneumatī* ‘coincide so completely that they can be interchanged at will’, p. 160), but Bousset understands Paul’s sense of being ‘in Christ’ as one of close personal belonging and spiritual relationship (cf. p. 154: ‘For Paul Christ becomes the supra-terrestrial power which supports and fills with its presence his whole life’).

¹⁰ A view shared when Deissmann was writing, not least, by Wrede (1907), Weinel (1904), and Bousset (2013).

¹¹ Gladd (2008, 8–16) gives a compact history of scholarship; cf. Wikenhauser (1960), Brown (1968), Segal (1990), Marguerat (1996), Meier (1998), Ashton (2000), Shantz (2009), Rowland (2017), Yarbro Collins (2018), and below, p. 148–55.

¹² I use ‘the faithful’ throughout as the best common translation for *hoi pistoi* and *hoi pisteuontes*, and as preferable to *hoi adelphoi* because it is gender-neutral. I use ‘Christians’ sparingly and interchange ‘churches’ with ‘communities’, to remind myself, and perhaps also readers, to be wary of anachronistic assumptions about either.

is capable of resurrection. Being ‘in Christ’, which Schweitzer argues is key to Paul’s theology (more so, in particular, than the doctrine of justification by faith), is an abbreviation of the concept of partaking in the mystical body of Christ, which Paul often presents as the antithesis of being in the corporeal body, the flesh, sin, or the law.¹³ Both the idea that Christ is in us and the idea that we are in Christ, Schweitzer proposes, are expressions of this union.¹⁴ Schweitzer understands the mystical body of Christ, in Paul’s thinking, not as an image or a symbol, but literally, as an entity. Only by interpreting it in this way, he argues, can we understand how Paul believes that Christ can suffer for the elect and the elect for Christ and for one another.¹⁵ In this union, the baptized person loses his or her ‘creatively individual experience’ and ‘natural personality’ and becomes a manifestation of the personality of Jesus Christ.¹⁶ Schweitzer sees Paul’s mysticism, including his understanding of being *en Christō*, as deriving from Jewish eschatology. Through their union with Christ, believers are not only already part of the new creation, but look forward to receiving the glorified body and resurrection life for which they are destined after the final judgment.¹⁷

Schweitzer’s language of Pauline mysticism, like Deissmann’s ‘Spirit-Christ’, has not gained many followers,¹⁸ but, like Deissmann’s, Schweitzer’s affirmation of the centrality of being ‘in Christ’, described as participation in Christ or union with Christ, together with the close connection he makes between being in Christ and Paul’s references to the body of Christ, and his argument that being in Christ is eschatological, have all been widely accepted. His interpretation, together with his view that Paul intended his language of participation to be heard literally, was given further weight by E. P. Sanders in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.¹⁹ Sanders follows Schweitzer in arguing that eschatology is central to Paul’s thought and calls his ‘pattern of religion’ ‘participationist eschatology’.²⁰ He summarizes this view by saying,

God has appointed Christ as Lord and saviour of the world. All who believe in him have the Spirit as the guarantee of future full salvation and are at present considered to par-

¹³ Schweitzer (1931), 122–3.

¹⁴ P. 122; so also are being ‘with’ Christ, putting on Christ, and being baptized into Christ.

¹⁵ P. 127.

¹⁶ P. 125.

¹⁷ P. 132, cf. 130–40. On the importance of eschatology to Paul, see also e.g. (1964a), 205, and (1971a), 18, with Way (1991), 119–76; Sanders (2007), 445–53; de Boer (1989); and Martyn (1985, 2000).

¹⁸ Though see e.g. Stewart (1935), 148–50; Wikenhauser (1960), 54; Bauer (1988), col. 521; Dunn (1988); and Jewett (2007) *ad Rom.* 6.11. Campbell (2009, 59) identifies it with ‘union with Christ’. *Contra*, see e.g. Barth (1922), *ad Rom.* 8; Büchsel (1949), 145–54; and Macaskill (2013), 40; cf. Wright (2013), 529–37. Compare Cranfield (1975–9); and Barrett (1991) *ad Rom.* 6.11. Neugebauer (1961, 19) rejects Deissmann’s and Schweitzer’s mysticism.

¹⁹ Sanders (2007), especially 435–523.

²⁰ P. 549.

ticipate in Christ's body, to be one Spirit with him. As such, they are to act in accordance with the Spirit, which is also to serve Christ as the Lord to whom they belong.²¹

In the wake of Sanders' reassessment of Schweitzer, discussions of *en Christō* and its relatives have burgeoned, and most have accepted that the concepts of participation and union (usually treated as interchangeable) are key to our understanding of the phrase.²² To explore what participation or union means, scholars have cast the net increasingly widely, to include discussion of phrases such as *eis Christon*, *syn Christō*, *dia Christou*, and *en pistei*, together with Pauline ideas about the body, divine or social, physical or spiritual union, marriage, the seed of Abraham, corporate personality, the *eschaton*, the Church, the temple, the people of God, the family, baptism, the eucharist, the covenant, and the narrative of Christ's death and resurrection.²³

Some commentators have seen the phrase as having one, or one dominant meaning. For Rudolf Bultmann, being in Christ means above all being a member of the *ekklēsia*.²⁴ W. D. Davies too sees being in Christ primarily as social, though also as involving an intensely personal relationship between Christ and the believer.²⁵ For N. T. Wright, it means belonging to the people of the Messiah and the community of the new covenant.²⁶ In *Dying and Rising with Christ*, Robert Tannehill explores how Christ-confessors partake in the crucifixion and resurrection, dying to their old lives with Christ and rising to new life individually, as a community, and at the end time.²⁷ Michael Gorman, in a series of studies, identifies being in Christ with 'resurrectional cruciformity' and the *theōsis* of believers.²⁸ Richard Hays argues that 'in Christ' involves imaginative identification with the narrative of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection: the story of Jesus 'summons his hearers (and readers) into a symbolic world in which cross, resurrection, and

²¹ P. 463. Sanders observes that, however difficult we find it, there is no sign that Paul regards his 'in Christ' language as strange or incomprehensible.

²² Following especially Schweitzer, but looking back to (modern interpretations of) patristic *theōsis* and *homoīōsis*. Several recent studies have included extensive literature reviews, especially Campbell (2012), ch. 2; Macaskill (2013), ch. 1; and Vanhoozer (2014). Cf. Bouttler (1962), with an astute assessment of Deissmann's influence down to the time of writing, and Parsons (1988).

²³ An approach already advocated by Strong (1913), 19–35. Perhaps the only interpretation which has been generally rejected, other than Deissmann's own, is that based on H. Wheeler Robinson's theory of corporate personality (1964), though more recent arguments for 'corporate unity' or the incorporation of his people into the Messiah: e.g. Wedderburn (1985), Wright (1991), 46–7, and Powers (2001), 109–11 can be seen as softer or metaphorical relatives of Wheeler Robinson's theory.

²⁴ (2007), 1.312, 2.177, 192–3.

²⁵ (1970), 85.

²⁶ E.g. (2013a), 109.

²⁷ (1967).

²⁸ (2017); cf. (2001), and (2009), 218.

Parousia are the events that define and shape the meaning of history'.²⁹ Susan Grove Eastman argues for the relationality of participation in Christ, in a universe in which relationships shape us, change us, and make us, physically and socially, who we are.³⁰ Grant Macaskill links being in Christ with the state of existence which is brought about by the crucifixion and resurrection and the 'eschatological gift of the new covenant'.³¹ Michael Wolter emphasizes that for Paul being 'in Christ' (and 'with Christ') is a state of existence and belonging which is an 'objective datum', an existential reality of the same 'ontological dignity' as the construct of reality which is the everyday world.³²

The diversity of these interpretations hints at the difficulty of applying any one explanation of *en Christō* language to the range of Paul's usage. Any single interpretation of the phrase that has enough specific content to be interesting fits some passages much better than others. It is therefore unsurprising that an increasing number of studies sees *en Christō* as bearing a cluster of loosely related meanings.³³ Albrecht Oepke, in his article on the preposition *en* in Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, suggests that the phrase can denote, in some sense, membership of Christ or membership of the Church; it can characterize an activity or state as Christian; it can point to the basis of fellowship with God, for instance by qualifying *charis* or *sōtēria*; and it can refer generally to the gathering of many into one.³⁴ Michel Bouttier defines Paul's use

²⁹ (2008), 345, cf. 345–8. Hays also argues that, for Paul, participation can also mean participation in the family or political, military, or ecclesial community of Christ. Hays' argument for narrative participation is highly attractive to a 21st-century reader, but Stowers' criticism (2008, 354–5) that it relies on a modern, not a first-century concept has point. It is common in antiquity to treat narratives of great men as exemplary, sometimes to be imitated, and even to be identified with: e.g. Morgan (2007), Langlands (2018), and Roller (2018). Exemplary stories, however, are typically treated as examples of e.g. a moral (or immoral) quality; the story can be quite malleable and the moral drawn highly variable. The suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ are not treated as malleable material for moral reflection in this way by Paul (or any other early Christian writer).

³⁰ Eastman (2017).

³¹ Macaskill (2013), 1–2, 249–50, (2019). Against the centrality of the covenant, however, see e.g. Martyn (1997b), 141–56, de Boer (1989); cf. Watson (2016), arguing that though Paul refers to the history of the covenant, he does not see God's actions in Christ as continuous with it, but as a new departure.

³² Wolter (2015), 228, 231, 228–40.

³³ Büchsel (1949), though assessed by Bouttier (1962, 20) as a less influential synthesizer than many, offers an early cluster definition of 'in Christ'.

³⁴ All these are widely accepted as making sense in some Pauline contexts, but continue to attract less discussion than participation. With Oepke see especially Longenecker (2015), 167–70, and the nuanced account of Seifrid (1995), who makes clear the complexity, and sometimes fluidity of Paul's usage. Oepke is substantially followed, among others, by Best (1955, 1 *et passim*), showing that some of Oepke's meanings, together with one or two others which he draws out of Oepke's broad categories, are best described as instrumental. Best points e.g. to the instrumentality of the ideas that 'God gives us/does something for us in Christ', God gives us gifts 'in Christ', and 'in Christ' all things are created. In his article on *en* in Aland and Aland eds (1988), col. 521, Walter Bauer entertains the possibility that being 'in Christ' is sometimes

of the phrase as instrumental when Paul uses it to refer to what God accomplishes through Christ in the crucifixion, inclusive and communal when it refers to the elevation of Christ to God's right hand and his presence in the Church, and eschatological when it refers to the establishment of the kingdom of God.³⁵ For Günther Bornkamm, *en Christō* can be equivalent to 'Christian' or 'as a Christian'; it can refer to membership of a church; it sums up what has come about for believers through Christ; and it signifies 'the new basic and all comprehending reality into which believers are transferred'.³⁶ C. F. D. Moule argues that most uses of *en Christō* are instrumental, but that a handful cannot be interpreted as anything but participatory, and, in these, Christ is 'an inclusive personality – one in whom believers find themselves incorporate'.³⁷

Two recent studies, by Constantine Campbell and Grant Macaskill, both view Paul's use of *en Christō* language as complex within the broad concept of 'union with Christ'. For Campbell, Paul's use of *en Christō* language, together with phrases such as *eis Christon*, *syn Christō*, *dia Christou*, and a series of recurring metaphors of the body, buildings, and marriage, is part of the 'webbing' which holds Paul's theological thinking together.³⁸ Campbell teases out what he identifies as the meaning of each usage of *en Christō*, arguing that we should understand the phrase, according to context, as instrumental or locative; as referring to the redemption 'associated with' Christ, or to Christians' participation in the death of Christ, or to being Christian; as the new status Christians have in Christ, or as being 'in the sphere of' Christ; and as having ethical and eschatological dimensions, as well as being closely related to justification by faith.³⁹ Macaskill, as noted above, sees Paul's understanding of union between God, Christ, and human beings as above all covenantal, presented in terms of the formal union between God and Israel.⁴⁰ Within that framework, he sees 'in Christ' as used in various ways, but most often as locative, 'where it demarcates a sphere (or state) of existence that is eschatological and that has come to realization in, and through, the incarnational narrative of the crucified and risen

more spatial than temporal (he is attracted to the meaning 'in the presence of' or 'in the court of' which is common elsewhere in Greek), but thinks it captures the idea of a close relationship more than anything else.

³⁵ (1962), 87–133.

³⁶ Bornkamm (1971), 154–6.

³⁷ Moule (1977), 49, 55–69. There may be a dozen such passages, at most, but some of them (e.g. Rom. 8.1, 1 Cor. 15.22, Gal. 3.26) occur at such significant points in Paul's letters that they must form an important aspect of his thinking.

³⁸ P. 441, though he rightly emphasizes (pp. 26, 29) that his theme of union with Christ is not fully captured by *en Christō* language, and, indeed, that 'union with Christ' does not convey all Paul includes in Campbell's theme, which includes participation, identification, and incorporation.

³⁹ Campbell (2012, 2014).

⁴⁰ (2013), 1–2.

Son, sent by the Father'.⁴¹ It has become increasingly common, in recent years, to speak of Christ-confessors as being in the 'sphere' of Christ or Christ's activity: a term used by Ernst Käsemann to refer to the sphere of Christ's lordship or power, but adopted by other scholars with more spatial, relational, or existential overtones.⁴²

Cluster definitions have the attraction that, between them, the elements of the cluster can account for most, if not all, instances of *en Christō* language more easily than can any single interpretation. On the other hand, the internal connections in cluster definitions often seem rather loose: more a matter of convenience than interpretative necessity. No doubt, for example, it is true that Paul is concerned, in his letters, with both ecclesiology and eschatology, but in itself this does not explain why he should choose to use *en Christō* language in both contexts, so it falls short of explaining his understanding of the phrase. Almost all cluster definitions, moreover, include at least one relatively weak element to cover a range of the more difficult instances. There is something paradoxical about claiming that *en Christō* language is centrally important to Paul and then positing that, in a large proportion of cases, he uses it simply to mean 'Christian' – unless we can explain in more depth why it matters to Paul to use this phrase for that purpose, and how this use of the phrase connects with others.⁴³

Amid all this activity, it is surprising how few scholars have gone back to examine the linguistic basis of their arguments in Deissmann's *Die neutestamentliche Formel*.⁴⁴ The main exception is Fritz Neugebauer, who, in *In Christus: Eine Untersuchung zum paulinischen Glaubensverständnis*, considers Deissmann's philology (fairly briefly but astutely), finds it wanting, and argues for an interpretation of *en Christō* and related phrases rooted in the instrumental.⁴⁵ Neugebauer's is one of the most stringent and consistent readings

⁴¹ In this context, being in Christ and being in the Spirit go together, though they are not the same (249–50).

⁴² E.g. Käsemann (1964a), 1.20/118–9, cf. e.g. Matera (1992) *ad Gal.* 2.17, 3.26–9; Schnelle (2005), 481; Campbell (2012), ch. 3.7; Macaskill (2013), 249–50; and Vanhoozer (2014), 28. Thüsing (1965, 233–7), however, argues against the concept of the sphere of Christ's power, seeing *en Christō* as directly focused on Christ's person. Thüsing also emphasizes the importance of instrumentality in Paul's language of the salvific relationship between God and Christ.

⁴³ It is true, for example, of *pistis* language that it is both centrally important to Paul and often used to mean 'Christian', but in that case, more has been done to show how *hoi pistoi/hoi pisteuontes* relate to the rest of Paul's usage (Morgan (2015a), chs. 6–7).

⁴⁴ Deissmann's philology has finally been given thorough critical scrutiny in Beyer's excellent dissertation (2020), ch. 4.

⁴⁵ Neugebauer (1961), 18–21, with criticism too (pp. 22–30) of the History of Religion school's 'mystical' interpretation of the concept. Büchsel (1949) had already argued for the dominance of an instrumental meaning. Bouttier (1962, 24–7) praises Deissmann's pioneering work on *koinē* in general, but notes that Blass' fundamental grammar of New Testament Greek (first published in 1898, so available to Deissmann for most of his working life, though not when he wrote *Die neutestamentliche Formel*) does not agree with Deissmann's dismissal of the instrumental meaning of *en* with the dative, and agrees with Blass. Moule (1977, 49, 55–69) ag-

of Paul's *en Christō* language. He argues that it means something like 'determined by the Christ event' or 'in a Christ-conditioned way'⁴⁶ and that Paul uses it, in his account of salvation history, to describe the objective reality of Christian existence in light of God's work through the death of Christ.⁴⁷ Those who propose cluster definitions of *en Christō* also tend, in practice, to include meanings (such as instrumental or eschatological meanings) which Deissmann would have excluded. The legacy of Deissmann and Schweitzer, however, together with the work of Bultmann, Bouttier, Käsemann, Sanders, Martyn, Hays, Wright, and a growing number of younger scholars, ensures that union and participation continue to form the main focus of writing about being 'in Christ'.

Modern discussions of union and participation, however, suffer from two difficulties. The more committed they are to the idea that the faithful are 'in' Christ as a person or a distinct being, the less they can explain what that means. But the more they broaden the idea to include being with Christ, in faith, in the church, in the people of God, in a body, a marriage, or a temple, the less distinctive content the terms 'union', 'participation', 'in', or even 'Christ' bear.

It has become a *topos* of writing about being 'in Christ' as a person for the writer to admit that they cannot really explain what it means. Augustus Hopkins Strong, who was among the first scholars in the Anglophone world to take up Deissmann's ideas, already recognized this as a problem. He seeks to describe 'union with Christ', finds he cannot, and offers instead a string of Pauline terms as if they were explanatory. Union with Christ

is a union of life, in which the human spirit, while then most truly possessing its own individuality and personal distinctiveness, is interpenetrated and energized by the Spirit of Christ, is made inscrutably but indissolubly one with him, and so becomes a member and partaker of that regenerated, believing, and justified humanity of which he is the head.⁴⁸

Schweitzer, as we have seen, suggests that being 'in Christ' is an abbreviation of the idea of partaking in the mystical body of Christ, a phrase which is no more self-explanatory than 'in Christ' itself. He asserts that the mystical body of Christ is an actual entity, without explaining what such an entity might be.⁴⁹ Sanders, in

rees largely with Neugebauer, but on grounds of sense rather than because he has reconsidered Deissmann. Klaiber (1982, 86–7 and n. 67) is also critical of Deissmann and argues for an instrumental interpretation in many passages.

⁴⁶ Paul uses this idea, he suggests, both adjectivally and adverbially.

⁴⁷ Cf. Neugebauer (1958). Kuss (1956) makes a similar argument very briefly. Wedderburn (1985) fairly criticizes Neugebauer for not entertaining seriously enough the possibility of other meanings, in particular whether there is a local sense of 'in' in some passages. Cf. Smedes (1983), 65, who is indebted to Neugebauer: 'to be "in Christ" is to be in the new historical order created by Jesus Christ and kept alive by His Spirit'.

⁴⁸ (1913), 17. Strong notes that at the time of writing union with Christ is a neglected topic which deserves more discussion.

⁴⁹ (1931), 122–3, 127. As Stowers (2008, 353) observes, 'he never tells us how the idea of one person being in another person or sharing in the experiences of another would make sense to Paul or to others in his culture'.

a passage which has been widely quoted by other scholars to express their own *aporia*, comments,

It seems to me best [*contra* Bultmann] to understand Paul as saying what he meant and meaning what he said. Christians really are one body and Spirit with Christ ... the end really will come and those who are in Christ will really be transformed. But what does this mean? How are we to understand it? We seem to lack a category of 'reality' – real participation in Christ, real possession of the Spirit – which lies between naïve cosmological speculation and belief in magical transference on the one hand and a revised self-understanding on the other. I must confess that I do not have a new category of perception to propose here. This does not mean, however, that Paul did not have one.⁵⁰

Blass and Debrunner's *Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* lists several uses of *en* with the dative, among which it gives prominence to instrumentality, before concluding, with a hint of philological frustration, that '[t]he phrase *en Christō* (*kyriō*), which is copiously appended by Paul to the most varied concepts, utterly defies definite interpretation ...'.⁵¹ The difficulty of explaining exactly what participation in the person or being of Christ means leaves major commentaries on the letters, understandably but unsatisfactorily, either glossing over the question or suggesting, tantalizingly but obscurely, that, for instance, in Christ Christians are 'ontologically united with Christ', or that the phrase is 'a pregnant expression of corporate mysticism'.⁵²

Increasingly, since the mid-twentieth century, interpreters have responded to this difficulty by suggesting that the 'Christ' in *en Christō* language is metaphorical or metonymic. Being 'in Christ' (as we saw in some of the examples above) means being in a relationship with Christ or in the sphere of Christ's activity, in the new covenant, or in a new state of existence; it means having a new status or identifying imaginatively with the narrative of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, and more.⁵³ Clearly, Paul does think that to be a Christian means to have a relationship with Christ, to be part of the church, to live in a new state of

⁵⁰ (2007), 522–3. The likelihood that Paul did not, in fact, have such a category is indicated by 1 Cor. 15.39–42: 'Not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for human beings, another kind of flesh for animals ... So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown corruptible; it is raised incorruptible ...'. Paul sees human beings, including the faithful, as having one type of body, which is changed at the resurrection into another kind, not a kind which is changed once (or added to) by being 'in Christ' and changed (again) at the resurrection. Nevertheless, a few scholars have taken on the challenge of identifying such a category, notably Stowers (2008), Hays (2008), Macaskill (2013), and Wright (2013), 510–46. Others have continued to highlight the complexity and multi-valency of participation and union, e.g. Schoberg (2014), and Campbell (2012).

⁵¹ 9th–10th ed. transl. Funk (1961), 118 n. 4. Cf. Moule (1977), 48–51; Schnelle (1983), 107–8; Wedderburn (1985), 89–90; and Powers (2001), 70–2. See also Strong (1913), 80–1: one of the qualities of union with Christ is that it is inscrutable.

⁵² Fitzmyer (1993), and Jewett (2007) *ad* Rom. 6.11. It is telling in itself that it is more common than not for commentaries to gloss over the meaning of *en Christō* where it occurs.

⁵³ Most recently, Hewitt (2020, e.g. 124–5, 193–6) speaks of 'solidarity' and 'inclusion' as alternatives to incorporation or participation, without either defending or giving up the concept of participation.

existence, and so on (though we should note that these are not necessarily equivalent to each other), but identifying any or all of these as forms of union with Christ or participation in Christ brings its own problems. We speak routinely, for instance, of participating in relationships, but not of participating in a sphere, and we speak of participating in relationships, covenants, and narratives in rather different senses, so when ‘participation’ is used for all these, even by different scholars, its meaning is being stretched very thin. Some interpretations invite the objection which many commentators have made to Deissmann, that they turn ‘Christ’ into something less personal than he is for Paul by identifying him with the community, the new covenant, or a form of life. Most problematic of all, perhaps, metaphorical or metonymic explanations of *en Christō* language do not explain why Paul should talk about being in the church, say, or being in a new state of existence, using this phrase specifically. Paul has, and uses, other ways of expressing these ideas. It seems preferable to assume, at least as a starting point, that when he uses *en Christō* language, he means something distinct by it which is indicated by the use of *en* with *Christos*, *kyrios*, and so on, rather than that he uses the phrase to mean something else.

Theologically, the perceived elusiveness of some of Paul’s uses of *en Christō* and its relatives has provided rich food for thought, stimulating interpreters to probe more deeply the mysteries of incorporation, eschatology, or the meaning of the eucharist. There is ample room to explore further what Paul’s language might mean for modern Christians, and this is a valid exercise in its own right. Historically, however, the investigation of Paul’s *en Christō* language is better focused if we start from the assumption that the phrase means something *per se*; if we explore the connections between *en Christō* language and other Pauline ideas without trying to fit them all under one umbrella concept of ‘participation’ or ‘union’; and if we confine the language of participation to its original meaning of participation in the person of Christ and do not extend it to a point where it is so multivalent as to be almost a vacant sign.

What follows will try to follow these guidelines. I will occasionally argue against a ‘participatory’ interpretation of a particular passage, and my objection in these cases will usually be to the claim that the passage refers to participation in the person or body of Christ. It is worth making clear that I think many of the studies cited above which explore what it means, for Paul, for the faithful to have a personal relationship with Christ, to be in the church, to identify with the story of Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection, to be in a new state of existence, to live in the sphere of Christ’s activity, and more, make major contributions to our understanding of Paul. These contributions, in my view, would be no less persuasive or significant if they were not tied to an over-extended language of participation.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ One could say, for instance, with Susan Grove Eastman’s remarkable *Paul and the Person* (2017), that human beings are inescapably embodied, relational and social, ‘porous’ and ‘entan-

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