Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology

Union with Christ. According to the New Testament, the religious experience of the earliest Christians was derived from and dependent upon Christ. Christian experience is more than an imitation of the life and teaching of Jesus. It is the present experience of the risen Christ indwelling the believer's heart by the Spirit. Both Johannine and Pauline literature refer to this reality by emphasizing the inclusive and corporate personality of Christ.

Usage. Paul more often than any other New Testament author combines the preposition "in" (en) with some designation for Christ. The phrase and its cognates occur some two hundred times in Pauline literature. The apostle uses the term in more than one sense, and scholars have attempted to interpret the concept in a variety of ways (e.g., mystical, existential, sacramental, local, eschatological, and ecclesiastical). In places, the words "in Christ" can be understood as just another way of designating a Christian (Eph 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 4:16). The idea of instrumentality or causality is an alternate usage of the phrase (Rom 14:14; 2 Cor 3:14; Gal 2:17; Phil 4:13). It is clear, however, that the words "in Christ" also have soteriological meaning for Paul (Rom 8:1; 2 Cor 5:19; Eph 1:20). Being "in Christ" is presented as the only basis for justification and glorification (Col 1:27). This is not a mysticism of absorption, the losing of human identity in the divine, but rather an intimate communion with God through Christ.

Paul expresses the personal appropriation of the work of Christ by the term "in Christ." It is the apostle's favorite term to describe the personal and dynamic relation of the believer to Christ, and appears in a variety of contexts. The phrase is found eight times in Galatians, thirty-four times in Ephesians, and eighteen times in Colossians. A number of these occurrences have nothing to do with the concept of incorporation, but rather, are instrumental. In Ephesians, for example, the phrase "in Christ" is predominantly used in the instrumental sense, signifying Christ as the channel through whom God works his will, elects, redeems, forgives, blesses, imparts new life, and builds up the church. The formula, however, is sometimes descriptive in character (Rom 9:1; 1 Cor 3:1). As such it has the meaning of "being a Christian" (Rom 16:11; 1 Cor 7:39; 2 Cor 12:2; Phil 1:1; Philem 16), and denotes certain identifiable characteristics that define a Christian. The formula is also applied to relations of those who are in the church (Rom 16:12; Gal 3:28; Col 4:7; 1 Thess 1:1). Thus, "in Christ" serves as the bond of unity within the fellowship of believers.

There are some occurrences, however, that use the formula "in Christ" in a locative sense, denoting the idea of incorporation (Rom 8:1; 16:7; 1 Cor 15:22; 2 Cor 5:17; Phil 3:8-9). In this sense, Christ is depicted as the locus of the believer's life. If the preposition (en) is interpreted in a local, spatial sense, and *Christos* is understood mystically as the Spirit of the glorified Lord, then close union of Christ and the Christian is meant (2 Cor 5:17). "In Christ" is an expression of intimate interrelatedness, analogous to the air that is breathed: it is in the person, yet at the same time, the person is in it. Thus, Paul's use of the phrase is similar to his concept of being baptized "into Christ" (Gal 3:27), with connotations of intimate spiritual communion with Christ. Those who have been baptized into Christ are "in him." There are, however, eschatological dimensions of the phrase that indicate a dynamic influence of Christ on the Christian who is incorporated into him.

Union with Christ is the result of an act of divine grace, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Baptized into Christ, the believer is incorporated into the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13). This new position, "in Christ," is the fulfillment of Jesus' promise to his disciples: "On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you" (John 14:20). The phrase "in Christ," thus, has a corporate meaning as well: "those in the community of Christ." Communion

with Christ necessarily involves a social dimension, experiencing the shared life of his body. This community is defined by its relation to its representative head. Being "in Christ" is thus new life shared in community with those who are related to Christ.

The heart of Pauline theology is union with Christ (Rom 8:1; 1 Cor 6:17; Gal 2:20). Although often overlooked in favor of an emphasis on justification by faith, Paul's treatment of the spiritual life in Christ is central to the apostle's understanding of religious experience. Communion with Christ is presented as synonymous with salvation, achieved by faith and consummated in love. Christ "for us" must be kept together with Christ "in us." Union with Christ is organically related to both justification and sanctification (Rom 5:8-10), and as such, life "in Christ" is the essence of Paul's proclamation and experience. The concept, however, is also found in the teaching of Jesus: "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matt 18:20); "Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me" (John 15:4). Thus, the concept is not unique to Paul, but is implicit in the Gospel sayings of Jesus that stress his solidarity with God's people (Matt 18:20; Mark 8:38; John 15:1-11).

Paul gives particular emphasis to the "in Christ" theme in his epistle to the Ephesians. This is especially evident in 1:3-14, where the phrase (or a variant) occurs some eleven times. The majority of references in Ephesians posit God as the one acting "in Christ." Those "in Christ" are in the thought and eternal purpose of God (1:3, 4, 9, 11; 2:6, 10; 3:9-11). Saints are elect "in Christ" (1:3-14). Christ is not only the means of election (1:5), but is depicted as the first elect (1:9). Election is made "in Christ," denoting the execution of God's purposes in and through his Son. Inclusion in Christ is to be united to his body. Those "in Christ" become part of God's family (1:5; 2:18). Given the corporate nature of Paul's "in Christ" formula, election "in Christ" entails God's gracious choice of a people, a corporate election relative to the election of the Son. The blessings of redemption are stored by God "in Christ" (1:3, 6, 7, 13). Ephesians also utilizes the phrase to depict the sphere of the Christian's daily life and experience (1:1, 3), and to describe the focal point of God's plan to unite all things (1:10; 2:21)—a unification now in progress for those who are "in Christ" (2:13, 15, 21; 3:6).

Elsewhere, Paul uses the phrase to describe a mode of existence in which the believer identifies with the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom 6:11); shares in his wisdom and holiness (1 Cor 1:30); and receives a new life or existence (2 Cor 5:17). This is expressed in the epistle to the Colossians by relating the theme of Christ's "fullness" to the believer's position "in him" (2:8-15). In Christ, who is the "fullness of the Deity" (v. 9), believers "have been given fullness" (v. 10). They have been circumcised by the "circumcision done by Christ" (v. 11), "buried with him in baptism, "and "raised with him through … faith" (v. 12). Faith-union with Christ, therefore, makes possible incorporation into a new sphere of existence marked by "fullness," covenant relation, and resurrection life.

For the apostle, to be "in Christ" is the same as having "Christ in me" (Gal 2:19-20). In fact, the message of "Christ in you" is the revelation of God's "mystery" and the "hope of glory" for believers (Col 1:27). Through faith and love the believer is united with his Lord. Present by his Spirit, Christ indwells believers and makes possible their adoption as sons and daughters of God (Rom 8:14-16; Gal 4:6). The Spirit of Jesus is given the believer and conforms the individual to the image of Christ. Thus, the clue to understanding the concept of fellowship with Christ is found in the phrase "in the Spirit." The New Testament teaches that the Spirit mediates Christ's presence to the believer. Paul develops this connection and identifies being "in Christ" with being "in the Spirit" (Rom 8:9). The apostle perceives the Christian as existing in the Spirit and

having the Spirit within. By making Christ real to the Christian, the Spirit provides the environment within which the believer lives "in Christ."

Union with Christ is the result of an act of divine grace, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Baptized into Christ (Gal 3:27), the believer is incorporated into the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13). A variety of biblical metaphors describe this union: vine and branches (John 15:1-6); head and body (Eph 1:22-23; 4:15-16; 5:23); marital relation of Christ and the church (Eph 5:23-32). The result of identification with Christ is organic union and spiritual life. Although Johannine literature depicts this incorporation as mutual and symmetrically reciprocal, Paul emphasizes the relationship of believers "in Christ" more than the indwelling of Christ in believers. The reverse, however, is the case with Paul's treatment of the Spirit. There is more emphasis on the Christian being indwelt by the Spirit than on the believer in the Spirit. Thus, for Paul, the major agent of indwelling is the Spirit.

Incorporation and the Second Adam. "In Christ" denotes a profound personal identification with Christ that serves as the basis of salvation and new life. This is closely associated with the notion of sharing in Christ's death and resurrection (Rom 6:1-11; 8:17; Gal 2:20; Col 2:12; 3:1). Underlying these meanings is the concept of corporate personality. By faith believers are incorporated into the representative head of the new humanity, the Second Adam. For Paul, union with Christ results in the personal appropriation of the effects of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and glorification. By sharing in these events, the believer experiences them as living realities. In this way, Christ comes to live in and through a person.

Rather than interpreting this phrase as an isolated mystical experience, it is more appropriate to view it as describing a spiritual reality that interpenetrates all of life and finds corporate expression in the body of Christ. Thus, "dying and rising with Christ" is to be understood objectively as a participation in the historical death and resurrection of Jesus. This reality is expressed by Paul in the parallel drawn between Adam and Christ (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:21-22). As representatives of old and new humanity, the actions and futures of these "corporate personalities" are paradigmatic for all those who belong to them.

Christ has accomplished his redemptive work "for us" through his suffering, death, and resurrection (Rom 5:6-8; Gal 1:4; 3:13). What took place "in Christ" makes possible the relationship of being "in him" (2 Cor 5:17). The application of both past and future dimensions of his redemptive work to the believer is characterized by the phrase "with Christ." Christians are identified as those who have died and been resurrected with Christ (Rom 6:5; Col 2:12-13, 20; 3:1, 3), who sit with him in heaven (Eph 2:6), and who will appear with him in glory (Col 3:4). The relation of Christians to Christ is one of faith, not mystical absorption. When the apostles John and Paul speak of being "in Christ," they are referring to solidarity with a corporate personality. Just as humankind is "in Adam, "and Israel is God's son (or the Servant of Yahweh), so the New Israel is "in Christ." Those who believe in Christ and are baptized into him are a part of the new humanity; they are incorporated into the corporate personality of Christ. The biblical doctrine of representative humanity is also the basis for understanding the expressions "Christ in you" (Rom 8:10; 2 Cor 13:5; Col 1:27), Christ dwelling in his disciples (Eph 3:17), and being in or abiding in them (John 14:20; 15:4, 7; 17:23, 26; 1 John 3:24).

Through identification with the crucified and resurrected Savior, the believer dies to the old humanity and is incorporated into the new humanity made possible by the Second Adam. "In Christ" there is a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17), the believer having entered an entirely new sphere of existence. Union with Christ thus means to be enlivened by the power of his resurrection, to live in the realm of the Spirit. Christ's presence is directly connected to the eschatological gift of

the Spirit. In Christ, the Spirit is at work carrying out God's redemptive purposes. These purposes are summed up by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:14-21. God has reconciled the world to himself through Christ. Not only through him, but "in him" there is redemption and reconciliation. It is through solidarity with Christ as the Second Adam that humanity has the possibility of a new course (Rom 5:14; 1 Cor 15:21-22, 45; Col 1:18). Paul identifies this new mode of existence with being indwelt by the Spirit of Jesus. The glorified Christ lives in his followers by his Spirit (Rom 8:9-11; Gal 4:6). In him, who is the Head of the new humanity, there is life eternal.

In close connection with the Adam-Christ parallel are Paul's references to the "old" and "new" nature (Rom 6:6; Eph 4:22-24; Col 3:9-10). These are terms that not only represent the status of an individual before and after conversion, but also signify the change that has already taken effect in Christ's death (Rom 6:6 — "we know that our old self was crucified with him"). On the cross, the old nature was judged, condemned, and put to death (Rom 8:3). In identifying with this death, believers have died to the old nature (Rom 6:2; Col 3:3), and have been freed from the tyranny of sin. "In Christ," they have been transferred to a new order of existence, that of the "new nature." Thus, "old" and "new" signify more than personal and ethical change, but are also to be understood as terms referring to old and new humanity in the scope of salvation history.

Incorporated into Christ's death, believers have "put off the old nature." Through identification with Christ's resurrection, they have likewise "put on the new nature." Being in solidarity with Christ makes possible the new creation, renewal in the image of the Creator (Col 3:10). "In Adam, "old humanity experiences solidarity with him in sin and death. "In Christ," however, the creation of a new humanity is made possible, which experiences solidarity with him in righteousness and life (Rom 5:18-21). Thus, just as humankind bears the image of the first Adam by virtue of corporate identification, those who have become incorporated into Christ are recreated in the image of the Second Adam (Eph 2:10). The corporate nature of this identification is emphasized by Paul in his treatment of the new creation, referring to the whole body of Christ as "the one new man" (Eph 2:15).

Being "in Christ" is not only the basis of Christian individual and corporate identity, but also serves as the basis of transformed relationships (Gal 3:26-29). Those "in Christ" are not only Abraham's seed and heirs to the promise (v. 29), they also are meant to manifest a oneness that knows no barriers, whether racial, social, or sexual (v. 28). The concept of being "in Christ" refers not only to the believer's vertical relationships ("sons of God" who "put on Christ, " vv. 26-27), but also to the horizontal relationships of daily living ("neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, " v. 28). "All" who respond to Christ "through faith" (v. 26) and are "baptized into Christ" (v. 27) are "one" (v. 28). Incorporation into Christ by identification with his death and resurrection means to become part of a body. To be joined to the corporate Christ is to become part of an organic whole, under his headship (1 Cor 6:15; 12:12-13; Gal 3:28; Eph 1:22-23; 2:14-16; 3:6; 4:4, 12-16; 5:23, 30; Col 1:18; 2:19; 3:15). The principle of incorporation is also highlighted in Paul's use of the temple metaphor. Christ is the foundation and cornerstone of the temple, while believers are the stones built together into a corporate whole and indwelt by God (1 Cor 3:16-17, 19; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:20-22).

Thus, the nature of the Christian is described by Paul with the formula "in Christ." This meant for the apostle that those who put their faith in Christ identified with him as the head of a new humanity. The phrase is a social concept; to become incorporated into this new humanity is represented as belonging to the church as the true community of God. At the same time, however, Paul's understanding of being "in Christ" involved a personal and intimate relationship

with Christ. Although the corporate meaning of the formula is important, this does not preclude the apostle's emphasis on personal faith-union and fellowship with Christ. The theme of incorporation is found outside the Pauline corpus, especially in the Johannine writings (John 14:10-11; 15:4-5, 7; 17:21-23; 1 John 2:5-6, 24, 27; 3:6, 24; 4:4, 12-13, 15; 5:20). These passages speak of a variety of relationships that are represented in terms of a reciprocal indwelling.

Christ-Mysticism and Union with God. Paul's teaching on union with Christ has often been labeled as Christian "mysticism." This is an appropriate term if understood in a qualified sense. Paul viewed communion with God as an act of divine grace, coming not by any spiritual exercises, but by God's self-revelation (Gal 1:16). Thus, union with Christ is something to accept by faith, not something to achieve by human effort. Neither does being "in Christ" involve the loss of individuality, nor the absorption of the individual into the divine Spirit (Rom 8:14, 16; Gal 2:20), but the heightening of individual qualities and characteristics. In addition, being "in Christ" is more than mystical union; it involves a moral union that provides the ethical dynamic for Christian living. This is more than a gospel of ethical example (an impossible ideal), but the indwelling of Christ who provides the motive power to live in obedience to God.

For Paul to be "in Christ" was to be "in the Spirit." Paul distinguishes between Christ and the Spirit, but views the function of the latter as mediating the former to believers. As the operative agent of God in the Christian's life, the Spirit never Acts apart from Christ. Thus, although distinct entities, Christ and the Spirit are experienced together, and are the means by which persons come into relation with God. Pauline mysticism, however, is a communal or corporate mysticism. "In Christ" is used in a way that is similar to Paul's understanding of Christians being fellow members of the body of Christ. Incorporation into this body is by faith in Jesus Christ. Having identified with the death and resurrection of Christ, the body is empowered by his Spirit to manifest his presence to the world. The Christian lives in vital union with Christ, expressing corporately the love of Christ personally appropriated by faith.

Union with Christ is union with God. Although Christocentric, Paul's theology is grounded on the premise that "God was in Christ" (2 Cor 5:19). Fellowship with Christ is fellowship with God (Rom 8:11; cf. 1 John 1:3). Although union with God is dependent on God's gracious initiative, it also requires a human response (Eph 2:8). Central to Paul's notion of being "in Christ" is the fact of faith. It is the indispensable condition for salvation, a placing of one's trust in the God revealed in Jesus Christ. This faith is the basis for intimate union with Christ, since it is the self-abandonment of the redeemed to the Redeemer. Faith-union thus finds its focal point in the death and resurrection of Christ. At the same time, being "in Christ" also has eschatological implications. Union with him involves looking beyond the present to the future. Even though the believer experiences communion with Christ, there is a yearning for more intimate knowledge and relationship (Phil 1:23; 3:10). Present union with Christ is still "absence from the Lord, "and hence seeks fulfillment in his future advent or "presence" (*parousia*).

Conclusion. The notion of union with Christ is multidimensional in theological significance. "In Christ," believers identify with his death (Rom 6:3,5-11), his burial (Rom 6:4), his resurrection (Col 3:1), his ascension (Eph 2:6), his lordship (2 Tim 2:12), and his glory (Rom 8:17). As a result, certain characteristics of Christ's person and work are attributed to those in communion with him. The "in Christ" formula is thus a comprehensive term, tying together soteriological, pneumatological, and ecclesiological dimensions of Christian experience. At the same time, it is a mystical concept, in that union with Christ is experienced "in the Spirit." The phrase also has an ethical dimension, as reflected in the idea of a new humanity made possible in

solidarity with the Second Adam. Last but not least, "in Christ" has eschatological significance, in describing the status of the believer, whose life has been transformed by the presence of the kingdom of God experienced in Christ. (R. David Rightmire, "Union with Christ," pp. 789-92)