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**Union with Christ as Participation in the Redemptive Work
of Christ and the Enjoyment of God Forever**

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Introduction

Paul uses the term “in Christ” with its cognates over a 160 times in his letters. Kourie (1987:34) reminds us that although the Pauline use of ‘in Christ’ is distinctive, it is nevertheless a concept not invented by him. The term always has the connotation “Christian”. The believer is therefore seen to be *in Christ*. His whole existence is located in Jesus Christ. What is true of Christ is also true of the one who is *in Christ*. Because he is in Christ, all the benefits that are due to Christ are also his. Therefore, anyone who is *in Christ* is *redemptively, ecclesiologically* and *cosmologically* connected to Christ. The believer is therefore intimately connected to Christ in every way, and any contribution we make redemptively, ecclesiologically or cosmologically is because of this intimacy.

In the consideration of our present topic, we need to discuss the two important texts in the Pauline corpus, which speak of our participation in the sufferings of Christ, namely Colossians 1:24 and Philippians 3:10-11. They have redemptive, ecclesiological and cosmological significance. We must also emphasize that the concept of redemption itself overarches the other two concepts as well. Redemption is ecclesiological. Redemption is cosmological.

1. Redemptively

Jesus, our Passover (1Co.5:7), became our redemption from sin and death. God was in Christ reconciling us to himself by the cross (2Co.5:19). Reconciliation is that process by which the believer is brought near to God. The cross of Christ and the resurrection are the means of reconciliation. Jesus Christ, the God-man is therefore the place where God and man meet. God and the believer, located in Christ, are able there to meet. Redemption is our answer to the dilemma of sin and death; reconciliation is the answer to our dilemma of hostility to God.

It is a common New Testament understanding that Jesus Christ is the believer's substitute and representative, so that before God the believer is seen in Christ and Christ is their mediator. Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures (1Co.15:3). The death of Christ is central in Paul's thinking, and he uses a considerable variety of expressions to refer to it. The death of Christ is also called *the blood* of Christ (Rom.3:25; Rom.5:9; Eph.1:7; Eph.2:13; Col.1:20; etc). The death of Christ is spoken of as *the cross* of Christ (1Co.1:7f; Gal.5:11; Gal.6:12; Eph.2:16; etc). Again, the death of Christ is also called his *crucifixion* (1Co.1.23; 1Co.2:2; Gal.3:1; etc).

God did not spare his own son, but delivered him up for us all, so that we may be redeemed. While this means that Christ died for our benefit, it is equally true that Christ died on our behalf. He is a sacrifice to God on our behalf. He died in our place and his death is the taking of our punishment upon himself; for Christians and for sinners (Rom.5:6ff), for the brethren (Rom.14:15) and for all men (2Co.5:14). That Christ died "for us" always forms the central motif in Paul (Käsemann 1970:158). Yet, "for us" may also mean that Christ died in our place. He became a curse for us (Gal.3:13). He was representative in his death. Because Christ has died for all, therefore all have died (2Co.5:14).

We are justified by his grace through the ‘redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation through his blood’ (Rom.3:24). Ladd (1974:433) asserts that this expression emphasizes the cost of man’s redemption. According to Hooker (1971:358) the statement offers a real clue to the understanding of Paul and of the atonement in Christ. It is closely linked with the idea of the incarnation. The cross is vital, but it is the completion of the whole of Christ’s life in obedience. The result is that in Christ men become what they were intended to be from the creation; obedient.

The representation of Christ is seen particularly in the area of righteousness. Because of what Christ has done on the cross, the believer has been declared righteous. In Christ, the believer comes into a righteous relationship with God. Because God justifies the ungodly (Rom.4:5), the one in Christ does not stand condemned (Rom.8:1). His acquittal comes entirely apart from any good works, but by faith in Christ (Gal.2:16; Gal.3:11). They have been made righteous through faith in Christ. They have peace with God through faith in Christ (Rom.5:1). Justification does not happen by faith apart from Christ, as if faith is the means of justification. It is faith in Christ, so that through Christ they are justified; righteousness by faith and participation in Christ ultimately amount to the same thing (Sanders 1977:506).

The incarnation is therefore important in facilitating reconciliation. Jesus had to become a man so that he could represent man before God and God before man. Reconciliation is the restoration of the justified person to full fellowship with God. Since man was estranged from God because of sin, it was man who needed to be reconciled. Paul never speaks of God reconciling himself to man. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2Co.5:19). God has come to humanity with a gracious deed. Both Jew and Gentile were reconciled through the cross to God. God is the initiator of reconciliation, which he accomplished through Christ. The results of reconciliation are fellowship and peace with God. This peace is grounded upon the redemptive work of Christ.

2. Ecclesiologically

The people who are in Christ are therefore also the people of God. They are bought with a price, and are God’s possession. God’s people are collectively his temple (1Co.3:16-17). As God’s building,

their foundation is Jesus Christ (1.Co.3:11), and he is the cornerstone joining together Jew and Gentile (Eph.2:14ff). The people of God are defined as finding their form and unity in ‘the foundation’ and ‘the cornerstone’. Jesus Christ gave his own body so that they should become his Body. Paul applies the metaphor of Temple and of Body to the universal church (Eph.2:19-22).

The church as his Body is spoken of as ‘one new man’ as it becomes such in Christ, the last Adam. As Christ Himself is the last Adam, and thus the new man, the Church as a new man is also an expression of Christ’s person. If Christ is (as indeed he is) the head of the Church, it does not mean that he is a member of the Body, but that he is its progenitor and Lord. The whole church is His body. It should be noticed that Paul never just speaks of the Church as a body per se, it is always the body in Christ (Rom.12:15) or body of Christ (1Co.12:27). This metaphor is used to express the oneness of the Church with Christ. The metaphor also shows a unity in diversity – one body, many members. Participation in the body of Christ is therefore a participation in his living Body. The baptism with the Holy Spirit (1Co.12:13) is the placement of the believer in the Body. Men who are baptized ‘into Christ’ (Rom.6:3 and Gal.3:27) are baptized into his Body.

Being baptized into Christ or into his Body is at the same time a baptism which identifies with Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom.6:1-4 and Col.2:12). Therefore the death and resurrection of Christ is representative of the Body’s members who have died with Christ (Gal.2:20) and have been resurrected with him (Col.3:1). Paul’s baptismal language speaks more frequently of its application to the Body as a whole than to its members as individuals. The Church is the fellowship of the elect regardless of social status, race or gender, because they are one in Christ.

3. Cosmologically

Jesus is first Lord over his Church. This Lordship, however, is universal, but is expressed specifically in the Church and through the Church over principalities and powers. The Church is the expression of a new creation, the handiwork of the Creator. The Church is the heavenly colony in this present evil world. To Christ every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord. Though that is a reality only in the Church at present, it is to be a reality in all creation when

Christ is exalted. Christ's rule is therefore representative of our rulership with him in the future.

As the last Adam, Christ is put into a position where he can fulfil God's purpose precisely where Adam failed. Adam was supposed to have dominion over all the earth, but failed because of disobedience. The last Adam will exercise full dominion because of his obedience. Paul's Adam christology (Dunn 1998:200) deliberately sets Jesus alongside Adam as the one who answers to the fact of Adam's disobedience. Christ is the eschatological counterpart of primeval Adam. In sin we belong to the first Adam and in Christ we belong to the last Adam. Christ death and resurrection mean that any and all heavenly powers have lost any effective power over those who belong to Christ and any effective say in their destiny (Dunn 1998:230).

Christ's redemption embraces the whole cosmos. Christ is head over every power and authority (Col.2:10). At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil.2:10-11). He disarmed all powers and has made known to them his Lordship over them. By rising from the dead, he became the first born from the dead, demonstrating his power even over death. The one in Christ is therefore God's act of creation in Christ; his workmanship in Christ (Eph.2:10). They are the sons of God who have been set free from the curse by Christ becoming a curse.

All of creation, groaning under bondage, will be set free from their bondage with the manifestation of the sons of God (Rom.8:21ff). The freedom of the sons seems to be the initiation of the freedom of the rest of creation. If in the context of a new creation, we no longer regard Christ as in the flesh (2Co.5:16f), we also think of ourselves no long in mere physical terms; we can therefore expect a 'newness' in the creation when it is set free.

The cosmological effect of Christ's work for creation is found in Christ's total power. The point is to proclaim the universality of Christ's Lordship. The final redemption of creation, which was purposed before creation is a result of Jesus' redemptive work. The cosmic recognition of Christ's redemptive work is found in the ecclesiological expression of that work. That means that the cosmological effect comes after the ecclesiological effect. The redemption is first ecclesiological before it is cosmological. The

cosmic confession of Christ's Lordship is one that appreciates both his humiliation and his exaltation (Gibbs 1970:273). The relation between creation and redemption was from the beginning implied in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, because only as Lord could he overcome cosmic evil. With the exaltation of Christ as Lord, God's redemptive purpose for creation is consummated when the creation responds in affirming that Lordship.

The setting free of all of creation does not posit the idea of *universalism*. The creation was subjected to bondage, not out of its own will, but by the will of God.

It was subjected because of the failure of humankind. Humans had a free will; not the creation. Therefore, humanity will be culpable for its disobedience to God and the salvation that he has provided. Man must come to faith in a subjective way. So, when it comes to humanity, Paul understands that there are two categories; those who are 'in Christ' and the 'rest of men who have no hope' (1Thes.4:13f). The freedom of man depends on faith in Jesus, and the freedom of creation depends on the manifestation of those who placed their faith in Jesus. The sons of God are those who are led by the Spirit (Rom.8:14). The doctrine of *universalism* is therefore untenable.

Death as a tyrannical cosmological power is overcome by Christ's resurrection (Black 1984:419). Death is the manifestation of sin's reign (Rom.5:21). Death became the medium by which Christians are liberated from it. Only when there is death, there can be resurrection. Death needed to be conquered by resurrection. Only resurrection could conquer death. Through the resurrection from the dead Jesus Christ demonstrated his cosmological ruler-ship (Pelser 1973:158). Therefore, his victory over death, not even death can separate the believer from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus (Rom.8:37).

4. Participation in the Redemptive Work of Christ

Redemptively, we have been crucified with Christ, even though we live, it is Christ who is living in us (Gal.2:20). The life we now live is a life lived in Christ. His righteousness was imputed on us, and we share in his death and resurrection. While other historical aspects of Christ's life does not feature much in Paul's writings, the death and resurrection is central to all of his theology. Never in Paul's mind was there room for the death of the Messiah without his resurrection. On

the Damascus road he met with the living Christ. That appearing of the Lord was accompanied by such glory that Saul of Tarsus was blinded by it. This experience changed his life and became the power of a changed life.

The Gospel was clearly defined in terms of 1Co.15:1-3; that Christ died according to the Scriptures, which Paul believed, that he was buried and raised again on the third day according to those Scriptures. The Gospel is about what Christ has done in terms of redemption. His redemptive work is complete in its provision, but its propagation must continue. We may agree with Stewart (1935:127), that Paul's personal experience with Christ was the foundation of his gospel message. Damascus coloured all his theological perspective. The only Christ Paul knew or cared about was the Christ who was crucified. Paul's theology is fixed here (Käsemann 1970:165). Paul understood the death of Christ to operate redemptively (Gal.4:4-5). In his death, Christ expressed his utmost obedience to the Father (Phil.2:6f). It is in the area of propagation that we become partners with Christ.

The propagation of the Gospel as the message of Christ's complete provision of redemption has its own demands. It almost inevitably demands that we suffer in its propagation. In fact, for Paul, the single cause of his suffering is the propagation of the Gospel. The world's stance towards the Gospel for the most caused a hostile response to its propagation. To the Jews the Gospel is a stumbling block and to the Gentiles it is foolishness; but to him and to all those who are being saved it is the power of God to salvation (1Co.1:18, 22 and Rom.1:16). The hostility that was endured because of the propagation was received gladly because according to Paul "we are fools, we are dishonoured, we suffer need, we are brutally treated, we are cursed, we are persecuted and slandered for the Gospel's sake and for Christ's sake" (1Co.4:10-13).

There is a paradox that continually encouraged Paul in his propagation of the Gospel (2Co.4:16f). For the Gospel's sake he was suffering on the outside, but by suffering, he was being renewed in the inner man. Suffering for the Gospel's sake was achieving an eternal glory that, in fact, far outweighed all the suffering he endured. Suffering was temporal and the glory was eternal. In 2Corinthians 11:16-33 Paul even goes to the extent of boasting about his sufferings

for Christ's gospel. He silences the Judaisers by this boast - His actual boast is in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ (Gal.6:14-16). He suffers because he carries the Gospel. He suffers in order to exalt Christ (Phil.1:20-21). Whatever loss he suffered was for the sake of Christ, his Lord (Phil.3:7-11).

The point of this present discussion must bring Paul's statement in Colossians 1:24 into focus: Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of the body, which is the church. The primary theological problems revolve around the questions related to the full sufficiency of the sufferings of Christ (Sumney 2006:664). Interpreters offer four possible solutions, but we want to offer a fifth, more-or-less in line with Petr Pokorný (1991: 96-100). The four solutions generally are like this: 1. Christ's suffering may be supplemented by good works; 2. there is a distinction between suffering for sin and suffering for edification; 3. a mystical union between Christ and the believer. We need to briefly explain this: this view posits so close an identification of the church with Christ that the suffering of the members can reasonably be called the suffering of Christ. Thus, in some ways, the sufferings of all Christians fill up the sufferings of Christ (Sumney 2006:666); and 4. part of the messianic woes that must be fulfilled before the parousia.

The fifth proposal includes some elements of the second proposal. Edification is certainly a product of it. We see Paul's suffering (and that of all believers in the task of Gospel propagation) as vicarious and mimetic, but not as expiatory. The vicarious nature lies in the priestly duty of the evangelist – *to be a minister of Christ to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit* (Rom.15:16). What lacks in the afflictions of Christ is found in the aspect of propagation and the sufferings that go with that. It is the believer's task to propagate the Gospel. The Gospel needs propagation, which we do by God's power through the Holy Spirit. Our ability to suffer for the Gospel's sake comes by God's empowering. Our Lord, alone, provides expiation, and preachers of the Gospel, in their propagation of it, suffer also.

We would be remiss not to include Philippians 3:10-11 in this discussion. Preaching the Gospel, and the suffering for it, does not

come from any personal confidence or achievement. Paul shuns any idea of self-achievement and self-righteousness as something that stands in the way of a true relationship with Christ. A true relationship with Christ comes from God and by faith (Phil.3:9). Sharing in Christ's sufferings is precisely that which is found in the furthering of the Gospel. These very sufferings form in us an eternal weight of glory. In this way his sufferings are mimetic. He follows Christ's example. The Apostle Peter had the same outlook when he said, *To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps* (1Pt.2:21). Yes, we are partners with Christ in the spreading of the Gospel, but we are participants in his sufferings when we suffer in the spreading of it. Only believers are called upon to suffer in the Gospel's spreading. Paul's suffering was necessary in the spreading of the Gospel. It thus had redemptive significance. The Gospel of Christ was at the centre of Paul's Christian existence and task.

Ecclesiologically, in Christ, both Jew and Gentile have been made 'one new man', that is, the Church, the Body of Christ (Eph.2:14f). The Church therefore, having been made alive in Christ, bares the image of the heavenly man (1Co.15:49). Being in Christ is the expression of the most intimate relationship that the Christian can have with the living spiritual Christ. We live in the atmosphere in which Christ is. Just as the air of life which we breath, is in us and fills us, yet at the same time we live in this air and breathe it, so it is also with the Christ-intimacy; Christ in him, he in Christ (Deissmann 1926:140). This statement is particularly true of the whole Church, the body of believers (Penna 1996:236). The believer no longer lives in the flesh and no longer in the world in confined dimensions, but in Christ (Penna 1996:257). Fellowship is therefore with Christ and with other believers.

Stewart reminded us that when we speak of being in Christ, we are consciously or unconsciously making a confession of faith. Not only are we showing the privilege we have, but we are showing by it that Christ is a living and present spirit, whose nature is the very nature of God (1935:154). Christ is the redeemed man's new environment. He has been lifted out of his earthly lot into the sphere of Christ. As Christ's body, the church has a corporate personality. If Christians share in the dying and raising with Christ they also share in

his sufferings; and he with theirs (Garland 1998:121). This point can be demonstrated by the fact that if one member in the body suffers, all members suffer with it (1Co.12:26).

The believers' union with Christ also expresses their union with one another. That is why every believer, having been baptized into Christ, is in close fellowship, both with Christ and his fellow believer. There is no union with Christ that does not have far-reaching effects in the ethical sphere, because union with Christ is not a human achievement; it is a gift of God. There is therefore both an indicative union with Christ and an imperative union which relates us ethically to one another as believers in Christ. Having been baptized into Christ, we have put on Christ (Gal.3:27). The believer is therefore also exalted to 'put on the new man' (Eph.4:24; Col.3:10). This new man, Paul says is created after the image of Christ.

From our Colossians text, we glean that Paul suffered to fill up on Christ's affliction, for the sake of his body, which is the church. We cannot miss the ecclesiological overtones. O'Brien (1982:78) sees that in some way or other a benefit was conferred on the church. Two things happen in relation to the Body of Christ, namely, Paul reduced the tribulations of other believers, especially these Gentile believers at Colossae (Perriman 1991:64) in the first place. Secondly, Paul's apostolic, missionary, evangelism and teaching gifts added to the church both in number (quantity) and in knowledge (quality). Even sufferings brought upon Paul could not stop his resolve to benefit the church. Indeed, they served to benefit the church. The love of God sustained Paul in the midst of his sufferings (Rom.8:38f). The exercising of his spiritual gifts was for the benefit of the church. Paul did what he did by the commission of God (Col.1:25). Christ's afflictions are regarded as the type of all those that are endured by his followers on behalf of the Church (Abbott 1923:232).

The fellowship in the sufferings of Christ did not mean that Paul wished to suffer for human sin, for only Jesus could do that. Paul wished to join in Christ's suffering, to stand with Christ in such an indivisible union that when the abuses and persecution came, he would receive them as Jesus did (Boice 2000:187). In this way he became an encouragement to all who went through suffering for Christ's sake. His statement in Philippians (1:12-14) demonstrates our point: *Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to*

me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. Paul's sufferings had ecclesiological significance in that it must have taken some of the suffering of other believers, it added to the Body in an edifying way, and it encouraged others in the task of preaching the Gospel, even in the face of sufferings.

Cosmologically, the creator, sustainer and redeemer of all things, is Christ. Our text in Colossians boldly states that meaning and coherence of it all are in Jesus Christ. Christensen (2007:320) correctly takes his departure in reference to this text by saying, "Salvation is not escape, but participation in the right relationship with all things. In Christ, God has established dominion over the other powers of the world, so that we will know our appropriate relationship to the powers and to God...." The focus of the Colossian passage is cosmic.

The death of Christ functions as a means to overcome principalities and powers in their hold over those who belong to Christ. Christ having died, neither sin nor death anymore has a hold over him, and in effect, over those who belong to him (Rom.6.7-11). The cross has become that which stripped the rulers and authorities, 'exposing them to public disgrace, leading them in triumph in Christ' (Col.2.15). This is Christ's cosmological victory. By dying and rising with Christ, the believer also appropriates what Christ has done when he died and rose again.

Christ is the firstborn over all creation. He created all things, visible and invisible; whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities. He is also head of the church in that he is the firstborn from among the dead. Every believer enjoys the resurrection life, so that death has no power over him. The Philippians 3 passage is applicable here. In the one sense, we enjoy the resurrection power in our living, and in another sense we will attain to the resurrection in our dying (Phil.3:11). The resurrection is the essence of the new creation. *Christ died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again* (verse 15).

Finally, the word of God is presented to us in its fullness. Believers may now share in the mystery of God (Col.1:26). This mystery has now been disclosed to the saints. The disclosure comes from God himself. We cannot know anything about God unless he reveals or discloses it to us. Through them too, God has chosen to make known his glorious riches. This mystery is in actual fact Christ in us, the hope of glory (Col.1:27). This eternal hope present in us is also the hope of all creation, which in turn, awaits the manifestation of those who possess the mystery of God revealed (Rom.8:19-27). Our participation in Christ has cosmological significance. With us everything will finally be made new.

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