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# Contents

*Acknowledgements* . . . . . 15
*Abbreviations* . . . . . 17

## Introductory Matters

Chapter 1
Introduction and Methodology . . . . . 21
1.1. . . . . Paul and Union with Christ . . . . . 21
1.2 . . . . . An Exegetical-Theological Approach . . . . . 22
1.3. . . . . Determining the Exegetical Data . . . . . 23
1.4. . . . . Prepositions, Formulas, Idioms . . . . . 25
1.5. . . . . The Pauline Canon . . . . . 27
1.6. . . . . The Shape of the Study . . . . . 28
1.7. . . . . The Major Conclusions of the Study . . . . . 29

Chapter 2
The State of the Union . . . . . 31
2.1 . . . . . Introduction . . . . . 31
2.2 . . . . . Adolf Deissmann (1892) . . . . . 32
2.3 . . . . . Wilhelm Bousset (1913) . . . . . 34
2.4 . . . . . Albert Schweitzer (1930) . . . . . 35
2.5 . . . . . Rudolf Bultmann (1948 – 1953) . . . . . 38
2.6 . . . . . John Murray (1955) . . . . . 40
2.7 . . . . . Alfred Wikenhauser (1960) . . . . . 41
2.8 . . . . . Fritz Neugebauer (1961) . . . . . 43
2.9 . . . . . Michel Bouttier (1962) . . . . . 44
2.10. . . . . Karl Barth (1932 – 1968) . . . . . 46
2.11. . . . . Robert C. Tannehill (1967) . . . . . 48
2.12. . . . . W. D. Davies (1970) . . . . . 49
2.13. . . . . E. P. Sanders (1977) . . . . . 51
2.14. . . . . Richard B. Gaffin (1978) . . . . . 53
2.15. . . . . James D. G. Dunn (1998) . . . . . 54

2.16. . . . . Michael S. Horton (2007) . . . . . 55
2.17. . . . . Michael J. Gorman (2009) . . . . . 57
2.18. . . . . Synthesis. . . . . 58
2.18.1 . . . Conceptual Antecedents . . . . . 58
2.18.2 . . . Defining Pauline Mysticism . . . . . 59
2.18.3 . . . Role within Paul's Theology . . . . . .61
2.18.4 . . . Sacramentalism. . . . . 62
2.18.5 . . . Personhood and Deification . . . . . 63
2.18.6 . . . Body of Christ . . . . . 63

## Exegetical Study

### Chapter 3

Ἐν Χριστῷ . . . . . 67
3.1. . . . . Introduction . . . . . 67
3.2 . . . . . Ἐν . . . . . 68
3.3 . . . . . Things Achieved for/Given to People *in Christ* . . . . . 73
3.3.1 . . . . Summary . . . . . 94
3.4 . . . . . Believers' Actions *in Christ* . . . . . 94
3.4.1 . . . . Summary . . . . . .101
3.5. . . . . Characteristics of Those *in Christ* . . . . . .101
3.5.1 . . . . Summary . . . . . .111
3.6 . . . . . Faith *in Christ*. . . . . .111
3.6.1 . . . . Summary . . . . . .113
3.7 . . . . . Justification *in Christ* . . . . . .114
3.7.1 . . . . Summary . . . . . .115
3.8 . . . . . New Status *in Christ*. . . . . .115
3.8.1 . . . . Summary . . . . . .119
3.9. . . . . *In Christ* as a Periphrasis for Believers . . . . . 120
3.9.1 . . . . Summary . . . . . 127
3.10. . . . . Trinity *in Christ* . . . . . 127
3.10.1 . . . Summary . . . . . .141
3.11. . . . . Variations of the ἐν Χριστῷ Idiom . . . . . .141
3.11.1 . . . *In . . . Christ* . . . . . .141
3.11.1.1 . . Things achieved for/given to people *in . . . Christ* . . . . 142
3.11.1.2 . . Believers' actions *in . . . Christ* . . . . . 143

3.11.1.3 . . Faith *in . . . Christ* . . . . . 144
3.11.1.4 . . New status *in . . . Christ* . . . . . 145
3.11.1.5 . . Trinity *in . . . Christ* . . . . . 146
3.11.1.6 . . Summary . . . . . 147
3.11.2 . . . *In the Lord* . . . . . 147
3.11.2.1 . . Things achieved for/given to people *in the Lord* . . . . . 148
3.11.2.2 . . Believers' actions *in the Lord* . . . . . 154
3.11.2.3 . . Characteristics of those *in the Lord* . . . . . 167
3.11.2.4 . . Faith *in the Lord* . . . . . 170
3.11.2.5 . . *In the Lord* as a periphrasis for believers . . . . . 171
3.11.2.6 . . Summary . . . . . 175
3.11.3 . . . *In Him* . . . . . 176
3.11.3.1 . . Things achieved for/given to people *in Him* . . . . . 176
3.11.3.2 . . Believers' actions in Him . . . . . 182
3.11.3.3 . . Characteristics of those *in Him* . . . . . 184
3.11.3.4 . . Justification *in Him* . . . . . 185
3.11.3.5 . . Trinity *in Him* . . . . . 188
3.11.3.6 . . Summary . . . . . 190
3.11.4 . . . *In Whom* . . . . . 191
3.11.4.1 . . Things achieved for/given to people *in whom* . . . . . 191
3.11.4.2 . . Characteristics of those *in whom* . . . . . 198
3.11.4.3 . . Summary . . . . . 198
3.12. . . . . Summary . . . . . 198

CHAPTER 4
Εἰς Χριστόν . . . . . 200
4.1. . . . . Introduction . . . . . 200
4.2 . . . . . Εἰς . . . . . 200
4.3 . . . . . Things Achieved for/Given to People *into Christ* . . . . . 203
4.4 . . . . . Faith *into Christ* . . . . . 206
4.5. . . . . New Status *into Christ* . . . . . 207
4.6 . . . . . *Into Christ* as a Periphrasis for Believers . . . . . 208
4.7 . . . . . Trinity *into Christ* . . . . . 209
4.8 . . . . . Other Uses of *into Christ* . . . . . 209
4.9. . . . . *Into Him* . . . . . 211
4.9.1 . . . . Faith *into Him* . . . . . 211
4.9.2 . . . . Incorporation *into Him* . . . . . 211

4.9.3 . . . . Other uses of *into Him* . . . . . .214
4.10. . . . . Summary . . . . . .215

CHAPTER 5
Σὺν Χριστῷ . . . . . .217
5.1. . . . . Introduction . . . . . .217
5.2 . . . . . Σύν . . . . . .217
5.3 . . . . . *With Christ* . . . . . 220
5.4. . . . . *With the Lord* . . . . . 223
5.5. . . . . *With Him* . . . . . 223
5.6 . . . . . Σύν Compounds . . . . . 228
5.7. . . . . Summary . . . . . 236

CHAPTER 6
Διὰ Χριστοῦ . . . . . 237
6.1. . . . . Introduction . . . . . 237
6.2 . . . . . Διά . . . . . 237
6.3 . . . . . Things Achieved for/Given to People *through Christ* . . 239
6.4 . . . . . Believers' Actions *through Christ* . . . . . 248
6.5 . . . . . Justification *through Christ* . . . . . .252
6.6 . . . . . Characteristics of Believers *through Christ* . . . . . .255
6.7 . . . . . Trinity *through Christ* . . . . . 256
6.8 . . . . . Variations of *through Christ* . . . . . 258
6.8.1 . . . . Things Achieved for/Given to People *through Christ* . . 258
6.8.2 . . . . Believers' Actions *through Christ* . . . . . 262
6.8.3 . . . . Trinity *through Christ* . . . . . 263
6.9 . . . . . Summary . . . . . 266

CHAPTER 7
Metaphors . . . . . 267
7.1. . . . . Introduction . . . . . 267
7.2. . . . . Body of Christ . . . . . 268
7.2.1 . . . . Putting the Body Together . . . . . 287
7.3. . . . . Temple and Building . . . . . 289
7.3.1 . . . . The Shape of the Temple Building . . . . . 297
7.4. . . . . Marriage . . . . . 298
7.4.1 . . . . Marriage Matters . . . . . 309
7.5. . . . . New Clothing . . . . . .310

7.5.1 . . . . Putting On Language . . . . . 320
7.6. . . . . Summary . . . . . 323
Conclusion to Part 2 . . . . . 323

## Theological Study

### Chapter 8

Union with Christ and the Work of Christ . . . . . 327
8.1. . . . . Introduction . . . . . 327
8.2 . . . . . Ἐν Χριστῷ . . . . . 329
8.3 . . . . . Ἐν αὐτῷ . . . . . 330
8.4 . . . . . Σὺν Χριστῷ. . . . . 330
8.5. . . . . Σὺν αὐτῷ . . . . . 330
8.6 . . . . . Σύν Compounds . . . . . 330
8.7 . . . . . Διὰ Χριστοῦ . . . . . 330
8.8 . . . . . Body of Christ . . . . . .331
8.9 . . . . . Temple and Building . . . . . .331
8.10. . . . . Marriage. . . . . .331
8.11. . . . . Synthesis. . . . . .331
8.12. . . . . Dying and Rising with Christ . . . . . 333
8.12.1 . . . Cranfield on Romans 6 . . . . . 333
8.12.2 . . . Tannehill on Romans 6 . . . . . 337
8.13. . . . . The New Adam . . . . . 343
8.13.1 . . . Romans 5 . . . . . 343
8.13.2 . . . 1 Corinthians 15. . . . . 347
8.14. . . . . Participation and Salvation . . . . . 349
8.15. . . . . Conclusion . . . . . .352

### Chapter 9

Union with Christ and the Trinity . . . . . .353
9.1. . . . . Introduction . . . . . .353
9.2 . . . . . Ἐν Χριστῷ . . . . . .353
9.3. . . . . Ἐν αὐτῷ . . . . . 354
9.4. . . . . Σὺν Χριστῷ. . . . . 354
9.5. . . . . Σὺν αὐτῷ . . . . . 354
9.6. . . . . Σύν compounds . . . . . 354
9.7. . . . . Διὰ Χριστοῦ . . . . . .355

9.8 . . . . . Variations of Διὰ Χριστοῦ. . . . . .355
9.9. . . . . Body of Christ . . . . . .355
9.10. . . . . Temple and Building . . . . . 356
9.11. . . . . Synthesis. . . . . 356
9.12. . . . . God the Father and Union with Christ. . . . . 358
9.13. . . . . The Spirit and Union with Christ. . . . . 360
9.14. . . . . The Trinitarian Character of Union with Christ. . . . . 363
9.15. . . . . Conclusion . . . . . 367

CHAPTER 10
Union with Christ and Christian Living . . . . . 369
10.1. . . . . Introduction . . . . . 369
10.2. . . . . Ἐν Χριστῷ . . . . . 370
10.3. . . . . Ἐν κυρίῳ. . . . . 371
10.4. . . . . Σὺν Χριστῷ. . . . . 372
10.5. . . . . Σὺν αὐτῷ . . . . . 372
10.6. . . . . Σύν Compounds. . . . . 372
10.7. . . . . Διὰ Χριστοῦ . . . . . 372
10.8. . . . . Body of Christ . . . . . 373
10.9. . . . . Temple and Building . . . . . 373
10.10. . . . Marriage. . . . . 373
10.11. . . . New Clothing. . . . . 373
10.12. . . . Synthesis. . . . . .374
10.13. . . . Living Out the Death and Resurrection of Christ. . . . 375
10.14. . . . Union with Christ and Suffering . . . . . 380
10.15. . . . Being the Body of Christ . . . . . 381
10.16. . . . Being the Bride of Christ . . . . . 383
10.17. . . . Union with Christ and the Sacraments. . . . . 384
10.18. . . . Conclusion . . . . . 387

CHAPTER 11
Union with Christ and Justification. . . . . 388
11.1. . . . . Introduction . . . . . 388
11.2. . . . . Ἐν Χριστῷ . . . . . 389
11.3. . . . . Ἐν αὐτῷ . . . . . 389
11.4. . . . . Διὰ Χριστοῦ . . . . . 389
11.5. . . . . Synthesis. . . . . 390

11.6. . . . . Justification: What Is It? . . . . . 390
11.7. . . . . Union with Christ and Justification: Levels of Importance? . . . . . 395
11.8. . . . . Resurrection as Vindication . . . . . 397
11.9. . . . . Imputation . . . . . 399
11.9.1 . . . Luther. . . . . 401
11.9.2 . . . Calvin. . . . . 403
11.10 . . . . Conclusion . . . . . 404

CHAPTER 12
Defining 'Union with Christ' . . . . . 406
12.1. . . . . Introduction . . . . . 406
12.2 . . . . Union, Participation, Identification, Incorporation . . . 406
12.2.1 . . . Describing 'Union with Christ' . . . . . 407
12.2.1.1. . Location . . . . . 408
12.2.1.2. . Identification . . . . . 408
12.2.1.3. . Participation . . . . . 408
12.2.1.4. . Incorporation . . . . . 409
12.2.1.5. . Instrumentality. . . . . 409
12.2.1.6. . Trinity . . . . . 409
12.2.1.7. . Union . . . . . .410
12.2.1.8. . Eschatology . . . . . .410
12.2.1.9. . Spiritual Reality . . . . . .411
12.2.2 . . . Defining 'Union with Christ' . . . . . .412
12.3 . . . . Antecedents of Union, Participation, Identification, Incorporation . . . . . .414
12.4 . . . . Conclusion . . . . . 420

CHAPTER 13
Implications and Future Directions . . . . . 421
13.1. . . . . Introduction . . . . . 421
13.2 . . . . Importance. . . . . 421
13.2.1 . . . Important Passages . . . . . 424
13.3. . . . . The Structure of Paul's Thought . . . . . 435
13.3.1 . . . The 'Centre' of Paul's Theology? . . . . . 437
13.3.2 . . . The 'Key' to Paul's Theology?. . . . . 439
13.3.3 . . . The Role of Union with Christ in Paul's Thought . . . 441

13.4. . . . . Future Directions . . . . . 442
13.5. . . . . Conclusion . . . . . 444

*Bibliography* . . . . . 445
*Scripture Index* . . . . . 464
*Subject Index* . . . . . 469
*Author Index*. . . . . .476

Chapter 1

# Introduction and Methodology

## 1.1 Paul and Union with Christ

The theme of union with Christ in the writings of the apostle Paul is at once dazzling and perplexing. Its prevalence on every page of his writings demonstrates his proclivity for the concept, and yet nowhere does he directly explain what he means by it. This creates a problem for any student of Paul's theology, since union with Christ is both important yet obtuse.

These two realities have amply been demonstrated in the New Testament scholarship of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The volume of scholarly activity conducted in search for Paul's meaning speaks to the obtuseness of union with Christ. The degree of controversy surrounding the theme speaks to its importance. Consequently, two of the central concerns addressed in this book include what union with Christ actually is and what role it performs in Paul's theology.

The path to addressing these concerns is not straightforward. As explained below, we cannot presume to speak of Paul's theology before engaging his writings through detailed exegesis. And yet, it is difficult to know what to look for in exegesis if we have not already determined what Paul considers to be relevant to the theme of union with Christ. While building on previous advances of scholarship, I take nothing for granted in this book. Instead, it represents a fresh investigation of the Pauline material, examining the exegetical minutiae and moving

through to the wide spheres of Paul's thought. The work is therefore self-consciously exegetical-theological, allowing exegesis to shape theology and vice versa.

## 1.2 An Exegetical-Theological Approach

Within the literature concerning the theme of union with Christ, there appear two opposite tendencies among various methodological approaches. Some contributors write of union with Christ as a broad theological concept that is used within a theological matrix of ideas and themes within the Pauline canon. It is discussed in relation to justification, trinitarianism, ethics, and so forth. This is a valid and important direction to be pursued, since union with Christ *is* connected to many such themes within Paul's writings; it is a theologised concept. One weakness of such an approach, however, is that the theme almost immediately turns abstract, sometimes without careful analysis of the key texts that give rise to the conception of union with Christ — that is, without an exegetically derived description of what union with Christ is. While it is important to understand how this theme relates to other themes and to Paul's theology as a whole, the conclusions of some investigations must be received with caution, since the detailed groundwork has yet to be established.

By contrast, some contributors investigate union with Christ on a purely terminological basis, focusing on a Pauline 'formula' — usually ἐν Χριστῷ — and exploring the various uses of the formula in the contexts in which it is found.[1] Again, this is an important and valuable endeavour since it is the kind of exploration that produces the groundwork sometimes missing from the aforementioned approach. A weakness here, however, is that the discussion can become severely limited, as though a phrase such as ἐν Χριστῷ tells the whole story of the theme of union with Christ.[2] Even from a purely exegetical approach, it is apparent that the ideas expressed by ἐν Χριστῷ are related to other phrases too, such as σὺν Χριστῷ, εἰς

1. Neugebauer's monograph, for instance, is restricted to the phrases ἐν Χριστῷ and ἐν κυρίῳ; Fritz Neugebauer, *In Christus: Eine Untersuchung zum paulinischen Glaubensverständnis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961).

2. Admittedly, some such studies are not interested in 'union with Christ' per se; they are only interested in a feature of Paul's language as it pertains to his body of writings.

Χριστόν, and διὰ Χριστοῦ.[3] In other words, 'pure exegesis' leads away from a narrow investigation of ἐν Χριστῷ alone and requires the inclusion of other elements of Paul's language.

But is there such a thing as 'pure exegesis' in the first place? Paul was a theologian and, while not 'systematic' in modern terms, he presented his thinking through the interaction of themes that are broader than the use of so-called formulas. Consequently, a proper approach to Paul must be theological as well as exegetical. Indeed, for a theological writer such as Paul, the two approaches become inextricably entwined. In this book, therefore, exegesis and theology will be conducted hand in hand, while the structure of the book (to be explained below) will move from an exegetical pole to a theological one. We will begin with attention to the details of Paul's language, investigating the relevant phrases in context, then widening the scope to consider metaphorical devices. From there, the interest becomes dominantly theological as the results of the exegetical analyses are interpreted with respect to Paul's broader thought. This study, then, is exegetical-theological, belonging to the discipline of New Testament theology. It will be apparent that this differs from traditional systematic theology in that it begins with textual minutiae and develops through to the conceptual big picture; it does not start with the whole, but progresses from one pole to the other.

## 1.3 Determining the Exegetical Data

In order to begin at the 'exegetical pole' of the topic, we must address the essential task of determining which data this will include. Such an endeavour is at once both simple and complex. On the one hand, it involves surface-level analysis. We are concerned to ask which texts within the Pauline canon are relevant to the wider task at hand. This is simply a question of what's in and what's not; what are the parameters of the discussion from a textual point of view? Along such lines, the task here is to delineate which texts are of interest.

On the other hand, the manner in which the relevant texts are

3. This is Bouttier's advance beyond Neugebauer's contribution; his net is cast wider than the phrase ἐν Χριστῷ; Michel Bouttier, *En Christ: Étude d'exégèse et de théologie Pauliniennes* (EHPR 54; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962).

ascertained is far from simple. The most perplexing question concerns the issue of how we know which texts are about union with Christ and which are not. Clearly, the use of some notable phrases will automatically signal a text's relevance. But how far does the concept permeate when such phrases are not extant? Which other phrases may be regarded as related to the topic? Which ideas and metaphors are connected to the concept of union?

The issue is more complicated than merely chasing down the phrase 'in Christ' and describing how it is used and what it means. That Paul may discuss the concepts raised by the phrase 'in Christ' without actually using the phrase in certain instances is a reasonable presupposition. Observation of the workings of human language demonstrates that we may speak of concepts and ideas through variegated expressions. Rarely, if ever, is the communication of a concept limited to one phrase or peculiar locution. Sophisticated language users may summon synonymous, parallel, symmetrical, analogous, metaphorical, and otherwise related means by which to speak of their chosen themes.[4]

As such, our endeavour to demarcate the texts of relevance to the theme of union with Christ is more complicated than it first appears. To find the theme, we must first know what the theme is. What is union with Christ? How are we to define this topic? What are the essential ingredients that establish the concept of interest? The problem here, of course, is that we cannot know what the theme is until we examine the relevant texts. And yet we have already established that we may not know what the relevant texts are until we are able to recognise the theme within them. The task at hand, therefore, is inevitably circular. We must examine texts that deal with union with Christ in order to know what union with Christ is, and yet we cannot know which texts deal with union with Christ until we know what union with Christ is.

This kind of circularity is not unique. Several areas of research are beset

4. Indeed, it is possible to discuss a concept at length *without* the explicit use of the most obvious phrases or terminology. While many examples of this phenomenon could be offered, one from popular culture seems apt. The film *The Godfather* is a fictional account of the inner workings of the Mafia. The basic subject of the film is never in question and is implied by a plethora of subtle and unsubtle indicators. And yet the term that most obviously describes the subject matter of the film is entirely absent. The term *Mafia* is not once mentioned in the film. In spite of such an omission, the subject matter is securely grounded beyond doubt. The concept indicated by this key word may also be indicated by a combination of other features, even in its absence.

with similar problems of definition and method. In the study of verbal semantics within linguistics, for example, the issue of semantic circularity is at once a foundational and highly obtuse problem of methodology.[5] In order to secure data, texts are examined with semantic presuppositions already in place. As the data are assessed, evidence is gathered to support the semantic conclusions that were assumed at the outset. Thus, the evidence is corrupted from the beginning because it is assembled in order to prove propositions that are already accepted. If a different set of propositions was presupposed, the data would lead to a different result, which would be in keeping with those presuppositions. And so it goes.

The methodological circularity identified here is unavoidable, and yet the point at which one 'enters the circle' will affect the shape of the discussion that ensues. In order to minimize the distorting effects of circularity, the starting point at which we enter must be determined as objectively as possible. We must search for an objectively derived tangent into the circularity—a 'way in' that will lead to commendable results rather than weak conclusions skewed by unwitting circularity.

The most obvious tangent into the methodological circularity is the phrase ἐν Χριστῷ. Scholars unanimously regard this phrase to be central to the theme of union with Christ, so beginning here is uncontroversial. It will be necessary to observe all the uses of this phrase to gather our preliminary data. The two most important questions that we will seek to address are as follows. First, what appear to be the unifying features of the usage of 'in Christ' language? Second, how may we move out beyond this phrase to detect other phrases or indicators of the theme of union with Christ? These two questions will shape how we move from the phrase ἐν Χριστῷ into the broader discussion.

## 1.4 Prepositions, Formulas, Idioms

The prepositional phrase ἐν Χριστῷ is often described as a *formula*. What that means differs, but it usually connotes the conviction that the phrase refers to the same thing each time it is used. The idea is that the 'formula'

5. On this problem for the Koine Greek verbal system, see my *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative: Soundings in the Greek of the New Testament* (SBG 13; New York: Peter Lang), 29–30.

compresses a theological conviction into a convenient locution, and its usage conveys the fully orbed concept it represents. Scholars have firmly rejected this assumption, however, particularly those of the second half of the twentieth century. No proposal as to what is meant by the 'formula' has ever found wide acceptance, which is why Markus Barth, for instance, concludes that the phrase is flexible.[6]

In fact, ἐν Χριστῷ has a range of usage determined by the elasticity of the preposition ἐν, and close exegesis of the phrase in context demonstrates this, as we will see in chapter 3. Consequently, it is best to abandon the term *formula* when referring to the phrase ἐν Χριστῷ; it is misleading at best. Strictly speaking, ἐν Χριστῷ is a prepositional phrase, and there is no reason not to label it such. Paul's fondness of the phrase, however, suggests that it might also be described as an *idiom*. Its frequency indicates that it is not an accidental combination of preposition and proper name, and yet it does not convey a fixed meaning every time it occurs. *Idiom* usefully captures these nuances. Thus, ἐν Χριστῷ is a frequent Pauline idiomatic expression with flexible usage.

We have already noted that the theme of union with Christ is not limited by the idiom ἐν Χριστῷ; there are other related phrases, perhaps also idioms, that contribute to the theme. What has yet to be ascertained is how these phrases are distinct and what such distinctions tell us about their functions. The key element that distinguishes these phrases is their prepositions. What meanings are evoked by the ἐν of ἐν Χριστῷ? And how do they differ from the εἰς of εἰς Χριστόν? What is meant by the σύν of σὺν Χριστῷ? The syntax and semantics of Greek prepositions are complex, and it will not be possible to offer a full treatment.[7] Nevertheless, given the

6. 'The impossibility of elaborating a final definition of the meaning of "in Christ" may well have a simple cause: namely that Paul used the formula *in more than one sense*'; Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary on Chapters 1–3* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 69 [italics are original].

7. As Heinfetter, writing in 1850, laments: 'Is there a Scholar that will venture to deny, that many of the differences between men, qualified to judge, not only in respect of their learning, but also of their Truth and Sincerity, exist, in the Ambiguous Senses now attributed to the Greek Preposition? by [*sic*] which, not only the same Sense is supposed to be conveyed by various Prepositions, but even the same Preposition, is considered to convey, not only different, but even opposing Senses; a state of things, in which the wonder is not, that differences of opinion exist, but rather, that any Material Point of Union can be found'; Herman Heinfetter, *An Examination into the Significations and Senses of the Greek Prepositions* (London: Cradock, 1850), 5.

importance of prepositions to the theme of union with Christ, it is necessary to explore the function and meaning of the relevant prepositions, at least in a limited way.

On this lexical issue, the role of BDAG is both essential and troublesome. Despite its flaws,[8] BDAG currently remains the standard lexicon for our literature and is drawn into the discussion at several points. While the lexicon is explored for the range of usage of each preposition, its conclusions about how each prepositional occurrence *functions* are not accepted prima facie. The editors of BDAG have listed particular occurrences of prepositions under certain functions by observation of context and through exegesis. We will reproduce those steps here and are therefore not dependent on the lexicon's analyses. As such, this study relies on BDAG insofar as it describes the scope of possible functions for each preposition. Beyond that, BDAG is a useful companion with which we are free to disagree, as we can do with any commentator.

Subsequent chapters will investigate each preposition in turn and the functions of the idiomatic phrases to which they belong. Finally, some synthesis of how each preposition contributes to the theme of union with Christ will be attempted.

## 1.5 The Pauline Canon

In keeping with the current climate in New Testament scholarship, most recent studies of Pauline theology are based on a truncated canon, putting the Pastoral Epistles, and often Ephesians and Colossians, to one side. While these so-called 'deutero-Pauline' letters are sometimes addressed in appendices, they are not integrated into the fabric of Paul's reconstructed thought. The approach taken in this book, however, is to work with the entire Pauline corpus, in keeping with the arguments advanced by Brevard Childs.[9] The goal of his 'canonical hermeneutic' is 'to reflect on the

8. For his devastating critiques of BDAG, see John A. L. Lee, *A History of New Testament Lexicography* (SBG 8; New York: Peter Lang, 2003); idem, 'The Present State of Lexicography of Ancient Greek', in *Biblical Greek Language and Lexicography: Essays in Honor of Frederick W. Danker* (ed. Bernard A. Taylor et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 66–74.

9. Informing Childs' approach is his understanding of the nature of canon: 'The essence of canon was not, however, its formal privileging of texts. Rather, the act of canonization derived from its substance, the christological content of Scripture. The canon served as a rule designating the arena within which the truth of the gospel was heard. It functioned also as a

theology expressed in various forms within the Pauline corpus'.[10] While he acknowledges that there may at times be a distinction between the theology of the 'historical Paul' and that of the Pauline corpus, Childs resists 'any permanent separating of a reconstructed "historical Paul" from the witness of the "canonical Paul"'.[11] The failure of scholarly approaches to Paul lies in 'the assumption that one could recover Paul's theology apart from its ecclesial reception'.[12]

This means that the Pauline authorship, or otherwise, of various elements of the canon is not taken into account here. Childs does not assume direct Pauline authorship of all the letters bearing his name, but rather acknowledges 'their status within a traditional apostolic collection'.[13] The author(s) of each letter that bears his name will be addressed as Paul, regardless of which part of the canon is in view. Some readers may prefer to understand the author as 'Paul (so-called)', depending on the letter in question, but no such distinction will permeate this study.

As Childs suggests, the study of Pauline theology is not ultimately for the purpose of reconstructing a purified 'theology of Paul', but rather to operate within the larger context of the Bible, in order 'to understand the full range of the message of the Pauline corpus whose witness continues to instruct, admonish, and sustain the apostolic faith of the church'.[14] Finally, then, acceptance of the entire Pauline canon is necessary here because this book is not for academia alone. It is also for the church.

## 1.6 The Shape of the Study

The book consists of three parts. Part 1 raises introductory matters in this chapter, and the following chapter provides a selective survey of major academic developments through the twentieth century to the present time.

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negative criterion to mark off those claims of truth that fell outside the circle of faith'; Brevard S. Childs, *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 16.

10. Ibid., 77.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid. After all, 'the historical Paul of the first century has been transmitted by Christian tradents who have received and shaped their testimony into the form of a canonical Paul' (ibid., 256).

13. Ibid., 79.

14. Ibid., 112.

Part 2 comprises roughly half the book, addressing the exegesis of relevant texts. Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 each deal with a prepositional phrase and their respective alterations: ἐν Χριστῷ, σὺν Χριστῷ, εἰς Χριστόν, and διὰ Χριστοῦ. Chapter 7 explores Paul's use of metaphor for expressing union with Christ. Part 3 draws on the results of the exegetical studies conducted in Part 2 and seeks to integrate them into the broad spheres of Paul's thought. Chapters 8, 9, 10, and 11 address the work of Christ, Paul's trinitarian thought, Christian living, and justification, respectively. Chapter 12 draws together the fruit of the entire study in order to articulate a comprehensive description of union with Christ. This chapter also includes a discussion about the conceptual antecedents of Paul's thought. Chapter 13 explores the implications of the book's conclusions and marks out future directions for research. The two implications explored are, first, the role of union with Christ in Paul's theological framework vis-à-vis other themes and concerns, and, second, the theological structure of his thought.

## 1.7 The Major Conclusions of the Study

The major conclusions and implications of this study are established in chapters 12 and 13, but it is worth outlining them from the outset. First, the term 'union with Christ' is deemed insufficient to convey all that Paul includes in the theme. Indeed, other terms such as 'participation' and 'mysticism' are likewise insufficient. To do justice to the full spectrum of Paul's thought and language, the terms *union, participation, identification, incorporation* are adopted, in place of previous terminology. These four umbrella terms successfully capture the full range of prepositional phraseology, metaphorical conceptualisations, and theological interactions that Paul draws on to communicate what it means to be united to Christ. Some of the characteristics of the metatheme of *union, participation, identification, incorporation* include locality, instrumentality, trinitarianism, eschatology, and spiritual reality.

Second, certain conceptual antecedents that give rise to Paul's metatheme of *union, participation, identification, incorporation* can be found in Jewish theology and the Old Testament, but most profoundly in the words of Jesus, beginning with his words *to Paul* on the Damascus road. While such antecedents inform Paul's thinking, his conception remains boldly original in its language, scope, and pervasiveness.

Third, the metatheme of *union, participation, identification, incorporation* is regarded to be of utmost importance to Paul, yet does not occupy the 'centre' of his theological framework. It is, rather, the essential ingredient that binds all other elements together.