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PARTICIPATION IN CHRIST: AN ANALYSIS OF PAULINE SOTERIOLOGY

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Abstract

Paul's conception and description of God's soteriological enterprise continues to be a prominent focal point in constructions of the apostle's theology. The present essay attempts to provide an outline of this aspect of Pauline theology from inception to corporate participation. The essay is comprised of three parts: (1) an extended examination of the definition of Paul's gospel; (2) a brief analysis of the way in which the gospel relates to Paul's own self-presentation; and (3) a few concluding thoughts concerning the way Paul extends his conception of the gospel to the ecclesial community. The primary argument of the essay develops a construction of the participatory nature of Pauline soteriology, building on the notion that the prophetic scope of Paul's gospel compels the apostle to understand both his own ministry and Christian theology in terms of a participation in the new creation inaugurated within the Christ event.

Keywords

Gospel; Interchange; Participation; Reconciliation; Righteousness; Soteriology; *Theosis*

1. *Introduction*

Paul's conception and description of God's soteriological enterprise continues to be a prominent focal point in constructions of the apostle's theology. Different perspectives – old and new, fresh and stale – have attempted to outline the major components of this portion of Paul's theological framework. It would be almost impossible to overstate the theological importance of this particular category within Paul's theology. Irrespective of the different perspectives that many recent studies have used to approach Paul and the Pauline corpus, their collective strength is their focused energy on defining the various elements that comprise the εὐαγγέλιον that is central to Paul's rhetoric and ministry. Perhaps the major weakness in the elusive search for the "center" of Paul's theology is that it often results in the need to emphasize certain Pauline distinctives over against others. Indeed, the very metaphor of a center likely betrays the interconnected reality of what might be described as Paul's narrative theology. Wherever we locate the central emphasis in Paul's theology, we need to pay attention both to that focal point and the surrounding landscape, ensuring that we do not neglect

the important features that stand in our theological periphery. The potential breadth of the term εὐαγγέλιον seems to offer a constructive lens through which we might begin to ask questions with regard to the nature of Paul's own self-presentation as an apostle and his perception about the nature and purpose of Christian communities. Or, to put it in slightly different terms, I would like to put forward the idea that it is Paul's conception of the gospel as God's soteriological enterprise that is the requisite first step in helping us understand the outworking of Paul's theology. The intent of the present essay, therefore, is to trace this aspect of Pauline theology from inception to corporate participation to demonstrate that Paul's Christology leads to a participatory soteriology. To that end, the essay is composed of three relatively unbalanced parts: (1) an extended examination of the definition of Paul's gospel that engages primarily with the argument in 2 Cor 5:14–6:2 as a window through which to engage the multifaceted nature of Pauline soteriology; (2) a brief analysis of the way in which the gospel relates to Paul's own self-presentation; and (3) a few concluding thoughts concerning the way Paul extends his conception of the gospel to the Christian communities in which he participated.

2. *The Pauline Gospel*

Readers of Paul are often prone to speak in particular categories, such as “Paul's mission,” “Paul's ministry,” or even “Paul's Gospel.” These types of *Paul-centered* phrases are, in one sense, completely understandable given the normal textual parameters within which studies of Paul are frequently constructed. What we may miss, however, is that this is *not* the way that Paul speaks about these matters. For the apostle it is not so much a question of what he does, but of what God does. Take as an example Paul's self-introduction in his letter to Rome in which he refers to himself as a “slave of Christ, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God” (Rom 1:1). One may suggest that this combination of terms represents a rhetorical ploy by Paul in which he establishes himself as the one properly positioned to deliver a message to the Christians in Rome.¹

¹ So Joseph Fitzmyer, *Romans* (AB 33; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 227.

As Beverly Roberts Gaventa helpfully notes, however, this combination of terms does not appear to be a way for Paul to increase his authoritative position either among or over against the Christian community in Rome since there is no evidence throughout the rest of Romans that would suggest this type of ecclesial power play.² In contrast, it seems that “Paul is asserting that he is on the receiving end of the action of God in Jesus Christ. The authority is God’s rather than Paul’s.”³ This emphasis on God’s authority and God’s primary position is born out in the following verses of Romans in relation to the origin of the gospel itself. In particular, Paul’s thesis statement in Rom 1:16–17 – “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to all who believe, first to the Jew and then to the Gentile. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed, from faith to faith, just as it is written: ‘the righteous will live by faith’” – clearly places the gospel within the realm of God’s own activity. This is a crucial reminder that, in the first instance, the gospel is not a human activity, but rather a divine initiative. To put it in broader terms: the creation of apostolic ministry and Christian theology is dependent entirely on God’s own powerful activity in bringing the story of creation to its climax in the messianic narrative of the Son through the empowerment of the Spirit.

This explicitly Trinitarian structure of Paul’s understanding of the gospel develops throughout the argument of Romans, but is explicit already in the first paragraph of the letter (Rom 1:1–7). Although it may be deemed anachronistic by some, understanding that Paul’s conception of the gospel is properly Trinitarian is essential in noting the reality that the gospel is itself a description of God’s own narrative and that the act of becoming identified with the gospel entails becoming an active participant in that narrative.⁴ Indeed, Paul’s initial language in his correspondence with the Christians in Rome is itself defined by *narrative*, this gospel was promised through prophets and came to fruition in the earthly life, death, and resurrection of the Davidic

² Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “The Mission of God in Paul’s Letter to the Romans,” in *Paul as Missionary: Identity, Activity, Theology, and Practice* (ed. Trevor J. Burke and Brian S. Rosner; LNTS 420; London: T&T Clark, 2011), 66.

³ Gaventa, “Mission of God,” 66.

⁴ On the use “Trinitarian” language in connection with the Pauline epistles see especially Francis Watson, “The Triune Divine Identity: Reflection on Pauline God Language, in Disagreement with J.D.G. Dunn,” *JSNT* 80 (2000): 99–124.

messiah. Whatever claims we desire to make about Paul's gospel or its theological corollaries must be rooted in the reality that Paul's theology is itself the extension of an already existing narrative, namely that of Israel's covenant God.⁵

The notion that Paul's conception of the gospel is narrational stems from the transparent reality that Paul himself frequently defines the gospel in terms of Israel's overarching story, particularly that narrative developed in the theological formulation of Israel's prophets.⁶ In an essay that attempts to define the nature of Paul's gospel, Roy Ciampa argues concisely that:

for Paul the content of the gospel was filled by his understanding of the whole of the prophetic message concerning the coming eschatological age of salvation that had been inaugurated by Christ. The term 'gospel,' then, serves as a sort of shorthand for the eschatological message of salvation which is at the core of the prophetic Scriptures.⁷

In the language of Paul's epistle to the Romans, this gospel is that which has been "promised beforehand through [God's] prophets in the holy Scriptures" (Rom 1:2). Students of Paul have frequently noted the significant influence across the Pauline corpus that Israel's prophets have on both the shape of Paul's own self-presentation (or self-understanding) and the shape of Paul's theological (or rhetorical) framework.⁸ I earlier attempted to trace the reality of this influence in Paul's correspondence with the Christian community in Corinth, particularly in the argument of 2 Corinthians.⁹ The section of 2 Corinthians that has been the most prominent in discussing the influence of the prophetic tradition on Paul is 2 Cor 5:14–6:2, especially in view of the explicit quotation of Isa 49:8 in 2 Cor 6:2.¹⁰ This specific Isaianic text summarizes the overarching theme of eschatological salvation that Ciampa develops in his own delineation of Paul's gospel. It is the

⁵ For an introduction to the narrative elements of Paul's theology see the essays in Bruce W. Longenecker, ed. *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

⁶ Roy E. Ciampa, "Paul's Theology of the Gospel," in *Paul as Missionary: Identity, Activity, Theology, and Practice* (ed. Trevor J. Burke and Brian S. Rosner; LNTS 420; London: T&T Clark, 2011), 180–81.

⁷ Ciampa, "Paul's Theology," 181.

⁸ See especially Karl Olav Sandnes, *Paul — One of the Prophets? A Contribution to the Apostle's Self-Understanding* (WUNT 2/43; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991).

⁹ Jeffrey W. Aernie, *Is Paul also among the Prophets? An Examination of the Relationship between Paul and the Old Testament Prophetic Tradition in 2 Corinthians* (LNTS 467; London: T&T Clark, 2012).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Aernie, *Is Paul also among the Prophets?*, 139–58; G.K. Beale, "The Old Testament Background of Reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5–7 and Its Bearing on the Literary Problem of 2 Corinthians 6.14–7.1," *NTS* 35 (1989): 550–81; Mark Gignilliat, *Paul and Isaiah's Servants: Paul's Theological Reading of Isaiah 40–66 in 2 Corinthians 5.14–6.10* (LNTS 330; London: T&T Clark, 2007).

prophetic message of restoration developed particularly in the narrative of Isaiah that Paul sees breaking into the present in the person and work of Christ, who is crucially defined in 2 Cor 4:4 as the image of God.

The intersection of Paul's argument with Isaiah's narrative in 2 Cor 5:14–6:2 makes it a useful text through which to examine Pauline soteriology in light of the importance of the prophetic message of eschatological salvation for Paul's broader conception of the gospel. My intention within this essay is not to suggest that 2 Cor 5:14–6:2 is the only text in which Pauline soteriology emerges. The dual foci of this passage – new creation and reconciliation – also function prominently in other parts of the Pauline corpus (e.g., Romans 5–6; Galatians 6).¹¹ In conjunction with those texts, 2 Cor 5:14–6:2 develops certain aspects of Paul's soteriology. However, the convergence of a number of interconnected dimensions of Paul's soteriology in this passage (e.g., incorporation, new creation, participation, reconciliation, and righteousness) may suggest that this portion of Paul's argument provides a summary of the apostle's coherent expression of this aspect of his theology.¹² The central argument in the present essay, therefore, will revolve primarily around this section of 2 Corinthians. The intention within the following discussion is to argue that the specific content of 2 Cor 5:14–6:2 gives us a summary of Paul's gospel from inception to participation, from Christ's love to Christ's indwelling.

a. Divine Initiative in Pauline Soteriology

Although the word εὐαγγέλιον – gospel – does not occur in this particular passage, the rhetorical content of this section is surely connected with the overarching theme of 2 Corinthians 2–7 concerning the ministry of Paul and his co-workers. Indeed, Paul's introduction of the ministry of reconciliation (τὴν διακονίαν τῆς καταλλαγῆς) in 2 Cor 5:18 develops a linguistic connection with Paul's earlier discussion of his ministry (τὴν διακονίαν ταύτην) in 2 Cor 4:1–6 where the language

¹¹ On "reconciliation" in Romans 5–6 see Richard N. Longenecker, *Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul's Most Famous Letter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 337–43. On the language of "new creation" in Gal 6:15 and its significance in the Pauline corpus see Douglas J. Moo, "Creation and New Creation," *BBR* 20 (2010): 39–60.

¹² The term "coherent" stems from E.P. Sanders, "Did Paul's Theology Develop?," in *The Word Leaps the Gap: Essays on Scripture and Theology in Honor of Richard B. Hays* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 325–50.

of *gospel* is at the forefront of the apostle's argument. Consequently, the overarching argument of 2 Cor 5:14–6:2 further clarifies the shape of Paul's conception of the gospel and, in light of its position in the overall argument of 2 Corinthians, seemingly develops Paul's central emphasis in this part of the letter.

Paul defines the starting point for his conception of the gospel as the love of Christ (ἡ γὰρ ἀγάπη τοῦ Χριστοῦ συνέχει ἡμᾶς; 2 Cor 5:14). Christ's love is here a uniquely forceful entity that moves Paul in the direction of Christian ministry. In the words of Murray Harris, Christ's love is "a dominating power that effectively eradicates choice in that it leaves [Paul] no option but to live for God."¹³ The way that this love compels Paul in particular is through the conviction that one died for all. Christ dies for all – that is all humanity – so that those who live – that is Christians – would be turned from self-sufficiency and self-focus toward a focus on the one who died and was raised for all (2 Cor 5:14–15). In other words, Christ represents humanity in his death and resurrection, and through his death and resurrection changes humanity from being self-focused to being Christ-focused.¹⁴ This formulation of the Christ event in 2 Cor 5:14–15 provides the foundation for Paul's explicit description of the outcome of Christ's compelling and active love in 2 Cor 5:16–17. Paul begins here by noting that his transformed thinking about the Christ event ultimately shapes the way he views others. More specifically, Paul asserts that he no longer regards anyone *κατὰ σάρκα* – according to the flesh.¹⁵ That is to say, he no longer regards others by merely human or external standards, such as wealth, status, ethnicity, or reputation. Rather, the key for Paul is Christ himself. Paul's changed or transformed understanding about who Christ is and what Christ has done has not only reshaped what he thinks about Jesus of Nazareth, but has changed the way he views and thinks about all of humanity.

¹³ Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 419; cf. Thomas Schmeller, *Der Zweite Brief an die Korinther (2Kor 1,1–7,4)* (EKKNT 8/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag; Ostfildern: Patmos-Verlag, 2010), 321–22.

¹⁴ On the notion of representation in this passage see Moyer V. Hubbard, *New Creation in Paul's Letters and Thought* (SNTSMS 119; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 172.

¹⁵ See Harris, *Second Corinthians*, 427, for a summary of the differing viewpoints about the precise meaning of this phrase.

The dramatic extent of this change becomes clear in Paul's paradigmatic statement about the new creation in 2 Cor 5:17: ὥστε εἴ τις ἐν Χριστῷ, καινὴ κτίσις. This is certainly a brief statement, but it would be nearly impossible to overstate its theological significance. This language of new creation is an explicit link to Israel's prophetic narrative. Indeed, the immediately following assertion that the old has gone and the new has come loudly echoes language from the narrative of Isaiah (e.g., Isa 43:18–19; 65:17). The immediate theological impact of this connection in Paul's argument is that to regard neither humans nor Christ according to human or worldly standards is to understand that God's work in Christ has changed the present era in such a way that the new creation or new age has already started to break in or become a part of the present reality. Notice, for example, Paul's explicitly temporal interpretation of the Isaianic narrative in the second-half of 2 Cor 6:2: "I tell you, *now* is the time of God's favor, *now* is the day of salvation" (my emphasis). For Paul, then, the gospel entails God's breaking into the world in Jesus in order to bring about the beginning of its cosmic re-creation.

Although this grand scheme of cosmic re-creation is clearly part of the structure that Paul develops here, it is not the only dimension that needs to be emphasized.¹⁶ In conjunction with the overtly cosmic reality of Paul's statement is an emphasis on the anthropological dimension of this situation as well. The cosmic significance of God's re-creation comes to fruition *within* humanity – "Therefore, if *anyone* is in Christ, [that *one* is a] new creation" (2 Cor 5:17; my emphasis). This anthropological focus connects well with the overarching narrative of Israel's history that is at the forefront of Paul's mind throughout his extant letters generally and in 2 Corinthians particularly.¹⁷ It is precisely *within* humanity that the destruction and defilement of creation takes place. It is *in* Adam that sin and death entered the world (Rom 5:12–14). And as Paul demonstrates in both the context of Romans 5 and here in 2 Corinthians 5, fallen humanity does not have the power to re-

¹⁶ On the eschatological and cosmic focus of Paul's new creation language, see T. Ryan Jackson, *New Creation in Paul's Letters* (WUNT 2/272; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 119–23; Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* (WBC 40; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), 152. For the notion that Paul's argument is entirely anthropological, see Hubbard, *New Creation*, 177–83.

¹⁷ Scott J. Hafemann, "Paul's Use of the Old Testament in 2 Corinthians," *Int* 52 (1998): 246–57.

create itself. Instead, returning to the language of 2 Cor 5:15, it was necessary that one die for them and be raised again.¹⁸ This emphasis on humanity's place within God's cosmic re-creation is defined clearly by Edward Adams, who argues that:

Paul's meaning is that the individual believer (τις) as part of the believing community (ἐν Χριστῷ), in advance of the coming physical destruction of the universe, already participates in the life of the new eschatological world. Though the final eschatological event lies in the future, for Christians, in some partial and non-material way, the old things have passed away, and new things have already come (τὰ ἀρχαῖα ... καινά). Again, the underlying thought is that Christ's death and resurrection has in some way set in motion the change of the ages.¹⁹

Indeed, this emphasis on Jesus' death and resurrection is crucial for understanding both the anthropological and eschatological dimensions of Paul's rhetoric. Paul can speak of an eschatological new creation breaking into the world precisely because Jesus inaugurates this new reality in both his *incarnation* and his *bodily* resurrection. Thus, Paul's soteriology is not merely an esoteric or ephemeral notion, in which an individual's soul is redeemed after death. In contrast, Paul's conception of God's soteriological activity involves the in-breaking of a new creation, both within the individual and within the cosmos.²⁰ What the new creation means for individuals presently is that the messianic kingdom has re-constituted the ability of hard-hearted humanity to relate to God and to participate within God's own narrative. In other words, this divine act of re-creation is simultaneously noetic, somatic, and pneumatic. This holistic conception of Pauline soteriology was already foreshadowed by the apostle in 2 Cor 3:18: "And we all, who with unveiled faces *contemplate* the Lord's glory, are being transformed into the same *image* from glory to glory, just as from the Lord who is the *Spirit*" (my emphasis). We are transformed into Christ's own image²¹ and so experience the first fruits of the divine act of re-creation that was inaugurated in Christ's first advent and will be brought to final consummation in Christ's second advent.

¹⁸ Cf. Richard H. Bell, "Sacrifice and Christology in Paul," *JTS* 53 (2002): 1–27 [8–9].

¹⁹ Edward Adams, *Constructing the World: A Study in Paul's Cosmological Language* (SNTW; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 235.

²⁰ Cf. Steven J. Kraftchick, "Death in Us, Life in You: The Apostolic Medium," in *1 and 2 Corinthians* (ed. David M. Hay; vol. 2 of *Pauline Theology*; ed. Jouette M. Bassler, David M. Hay, and E. Elizabeth Johnson; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 167.

²¹ See M. David Litwa, "2 Corinthians 3:18 and Its Implications for *Theosis*," *JTI* 2 (2008): 117–33.

The particular emphasis in Paul's rhetoric that God's soteriological activity is brought to fruition within Christ's embodiment means that the gospel is *both* punctiliar – a dramatic and singular apocalyptic activity – *and* linear – a divine action that occurs within the temporal reality of humanity. That Paul uses the very language of new creation is a stark reminder that this activity is a uniquely divine solution to the cosmic dilemma created by humanity's disobedience. It is what Francis Watson has rightly called a "divine incursion into the world."²² And, yet, while Watson himself would not want to move beyond the "vertical" dimensions of this incursion, his own language reminds us that this activity also affects the "horizontal" plane. It is an incursion *into* the world. Richard Hays' critique of Watson, therefore, is especially important for us as we reflect on the nature of Pauline soteriology. Hays argues that any

dichotomy between 'horizontal' and 'vertical' imposes upon us a false choice. Any talk about the 'act of God' which denies its temporal/narrative concreteness necessarily denies that it is a real *act* in time and therefore threatens to undo its soteriological reality *pro nobis*, its actual engagement in the life of creation.²³

This emphasis on engagement is precisely the reason that Paul's argument in 2 Corinthians 5 does not conclude with the introduction of the new creation theme in 2 Cor 5:17. Paul moves on to speak about the outcome of this divine re-creation within the present situation of humanity, focusing specifically on God's act of reconciliation in Christ and the requisite call to participate *with* God as co-workers (2 Cor 6:1) in the ministry of reconciliation – God's own soteriological initiative.

b. Incorporation and Participation in Pauline Soteriology

Introducing the concept of *synergism* into a discussion of Paul's soteriology may cause some concern or hesitation among students of Paul. And yet, we need to take seriously Paul's use of the term *συνεργέω* in 2 Cor 6:1. Paul's emphasis on working *with* God will eventually lead us into a discussion of the participatory nature of Paul's soteriological framework, but what is necessary to affirm at this stage of the discussion is that our participation in the soteriological enterprise is

²² Francis Watson, "Is There a Story?" in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* (ed. Bruce W. Longenecker; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 232.

²³ Richard B. Hays, "Christ Died for the Ungodly: Narrative Soteriology in Paul?" *HBT* 26 (2004): 48–68 [67]. Original emphasis.

always and only a derivative of God's divine action in Christ that is brought about by the empowerment of the Spirit.²⁴ Paul has repeatedly emphasized the derivative nature of Christian ministry throughout 2 Corinthians, most explicitly in 2 Cor 3:5–6, where the apostle argues that the sufficiency of he and his co-workers as ministers of the new covenant was not something that stemmed from their own initiative, but from God's. One of the remarkable dimensions of this divine initiative, however, is that it functions not in spite of human insufficiency, but *within* it. God's in-breaking into the world is not an incursion *against* humanity, but is an incursion *for* humanity. Humanity is redeemed and restored – made whole – only because of this communion with the divine.²⁵ Transformation into the image of Christ is not a destruction of the human image, but rather an act of incorporation into the image of the Son who is both the image of the invisible God and the firstborn over all creation (Col 1:15).²⁶ Incorporation into the cruciform and resurrected life of Christ, therefore, is a fulfillment of the *telos* of humanity. This is precisely the emphasis of what Michael Gorman refers to as cruciform *theosis*.²⁷ Our incorporation into the cruciform and resurrected life of Christ is a means of being unified to and participating in the true narrative of both humanity and God.

Paul expands this emphasis on the divine initiative in the gospel through the introduction of the uniquely Pauline theme of reconciliation. The general semantic range of reconciliation in the ancient world revolved around notions of exchange or substitution.²⁸ The Christological dimensions

²⁴ See especially Otfried Hofius, "Sühne und Versöhnung: Zum paulinischen Verständnis des Kreuzestodes Jesu," in *Paulusstudien* (WUNT 51; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 48); cf. Hays, "Christ Died for the Ungodly," 62.

²⁵ J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 43; cf. Hofius, "Sühne und Versöhnung," 46, who argues: "Damit wird deutlich: Christus ist nach Paulus nicht bloß neben den Sünder getreten, um ihm etwas – nämlich seine Sünde und Schuld – abzunehmen; sondern Christus ist mit dem Sünder identisch geworden, um ihn durch die Lebenshingabe seines eigenen Blutes in die Verbindung mit Gott zu führen und ihm so neue Gemeinschaft mit Gott zu eröffnen." Cf. Otfried Hofius, "Das vierte Gottesknechtslied in den Briefen des Neuen Testaments," *NTS* 39 (1993): 414–37 [424].

²⁶ Cf. Hofius, "Sühne und Versöhnung," 41, who refers to the Christ-event as "*inkludierender*." See also Hofius, "Das vierte Gottesknechtslied," 424–25.

²⁷ Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), *passim*.

²⁸ For lexical analyses of *καταλλάσσω* and its cognates in Paul, see Cilliers Breytenbach, *Versöhnung: Eine Studie zur paulinischen Soteriologie* (WMANT 80; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1989); I. Howard Marshall, "The Meaning of 'Reconciliation,'" in *Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology: Essays in Honor of George E. Ladd* (ed. Robert A. Guelich; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 117–32; Stanley E. Porter, *Καταλλάσσω in Ancient Greek Literature, with Reference to the Pauline Writings* (Cordoba: El Almendro, 1994).

of the present argument in 2 Corinthians, however, highlight that Paul is here focused on a notion of *relational* exchange. God exchanges the hostile relationship between creator and created in order to produce a situation in which God can relate to humanity within the new creation established in and through the Christ event. Thus, there is here in the argument of 2 Corinthians a close connection between the concepts of reconciliation and sin. This thematic correlation coordinates with what has already been noted about the anthropological and cosmological dimensions of the new creation. The divine act of reconciliation entails the restoration of both individual humans and the whole world (2 Cor 5:19). Again, Paul's soteriology is not merely individualistic. The gospel is the narrative of God's kingdom breaking into the world in Jesus in order to restore *both* humanity and creation. The relational rebellion that sin causes between God and humanity is crushed with Christ on the cross, but that reality is not the totality of either Pauline soteriology particularly or the gospel generally, because it cannot fully incorporate everything that Paul asserts about the Christ event. Christ's narrative does not end at the cross, but proceeds to the resurrection in which Christ becomes the first fruits of a new creation. And so, God's act of restoration or reconciliation in Christ is the re-creation and reconciliation of the entire created order.

It is important to assert here again that Paul's soteriological argument is not meant to be either esoteric or ephemeral. This is not merely an abstract philosophical category for Paul. It is a theological category, and, therefore, by definition, one that has practical significance because of its relationship to spirituality or to the lived Christian experience. Within the following verses, 2 Cor 5:18–19, Paul advances the notion that those who have been consumed by this new reality in Christ are made participants in the ministry of reconciliation that is at the heart of this divine act of re-creation. The story or message of this divine reconciliation is entrusted to us. We become, in Paul's language, Christ's ambassadors, those who represent in their very existence the message and authority of the one who sent them.²⁹ In light of the divine initiative in establishing a new creation

²⁹ Cf. N.T. Wright, "On Becoming the Righteousness of God," in *1 and 2 Corinthians* (ed. David M. Hay; vol. 2 of *Pauline Theology*; ed. Jouette M. Bassler, David M. Hay, and E. Elizabeth Johnson; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 206.

defined by the narrative of relational reconciliation between God and the world, we are drawn into this same narrative as active participants of its message and effect. To put it another way: through his life, death, and resurrection, Christ has *inaugurated* the new creation. And as we become identified with him, as God draws us into this newly created reality in Christ, Paul argues that we are called to speak and act as Christ did, to be the agents or ambassadors through which the ministry of reconciliation continues to reshape the world. God's completed act of reconciliation in Christ becomes our narrative. We are brought into the new creation established in Christ and so begin to experience its transformation. The apostle argues that we are mutual participants – God's co-workers (2 Cor 6:1) – in the narrative of the gospel.

Our incorporation into the reality created by God's act of reconciliation is stated once more in the final phrase of 2 Cor 5:21, that this relational exchange, Christ being made sin for us, happened "so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Paul's use of the phrase δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ has received a significant amount of attention in recent decades, especially in light of its occurrences in Romans.³⁰ Without entering into the complexities of that specific lexical discussion, it seems reasonable to argue that Paul's introduction of the phrase at this point is directly connected to the narrative of Christ that undergirds this section of 2 Corinthians. More specifically, Paul argues in 2 Cor 5:21 that the result of God's complete identification with sinful humanity in the Christ event (τὸν μὴ γνότα ἁμαρτίαν ... ἁμαρτίαν ἐποίησεν) is that humanity is now brought into God's righteousness through their union with Christ (ἐν αὐτῷ).³¹ In other words, Paul here stresses that the Christ event creates a new reality in which humanity is conditioned by and incorporated into God's righteousness.³² To *become* the righteousness of God is an explicit statement about the reality that Christians are defined by their participation in Christ's story or

³⁰ For a concise overview see A. Katherine Grieb, "So That in Him We Might Become the Righteousness of God' (2 Cor 5:21): Some Theological Reflections on the Church Becoming Justice," *ExAud* 22 (2006): 58–80.

³¹ For the notion that ἐν αὐτῷ expresses the notion of union see Constantine Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 185–87.

³² Hofius, "Sühne und Versöhnung," 47; cf. Bell, "Sacrifice," 13–14.

narrative, that they are defined by their participation in this new creation.³³ This emphasis on participation in the ministry of reconciliation recalls Paul's earlier assertion in 2 Cor 4:10–11 concerning the relationship between his ministerial existence and the Christ event: "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body." Paul's presentation of that explicit correspondence between the nature of his apostolic ministry and Christ's ministry evokes the very essence of his focus on the notion of participation in Christ. The dramatic significance of this participatory language is the reality that it reflects both our participation *in him*, that is, *in Christ*, and God's participation in humanity's situation *through* Christ. The emphasis on participation in Paul's letters is "first of all divine participation in the human plight, which makes possible human participation in God's Son."³⁴ That is the poetic reversal that Paul highlights in 2 Cor 5:21: Christ clothes himself with the consequence of humanity's sin so that humanity can be clothed in the life of resurrection *in him*.

c. Interchange in Pauline Soteriology

God's divine initiative in embodying humanity's narrative in the person of Jesus is the means by which humanity is able to participate in God's narrative. This is the root of the language of *interchange* developed so clearly in the writings of Morna Hooker, who builds on the classic statement of the Christian apologist Irenaeus that Christ became what we are so that what we might become what he is (*factus est quod sumus nos, uti nos perficeret esse quod est ipse*).³⁵ Most clearly, Hooker argues that this notion of interchange does not mean:

that Christ and the believer change places, but rather that Christ, by his involvement in the human situation, is able to transfer believers from one mode of existence to another. Underlying this understanding of redemption is the belief that Christ is "the last Adam" (I Cor. 15.45), the true "image of God", who by sharing fully in humanity's condition – i.e.

³³ Cf. Thomas D. Stegman, "Paul's Use of *DIKAIÖ*-Terminology: Moving Beyond N.T. Wright's Forensic Interpretation," *TS* 72 (2011): 496–524 [500–4].

³⁴ Robert Tannehill, "Participation in Christ: A Central Theme in Pauline Soteriology," in *The Shape of the Gospel: New Testament Essays* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2007), 229; cf. Bell, "Sacrifice," 13–14.

³⁵ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.Pr.1; cf. *Haer.* 3.10.2; 3.16.3; 3.18.7; 3.19.1; 3.20.2; 4.33.4.

by being “in Adam” – opens up the way for men and women to share in his condition, by being “in Christ”.³⁶

This concept of interchange is, I suggest, one of the essential elements of Pauline soteriology. The inherent notion of participation is essential for Paul precisely because it maintains the concrete connection between his understanding of soteriology and his understanding of the Christ event. We become the righteousness of God only because we are in Christ. As Richard Bell argues, “soteriology depends on Christology.”³⁷ To state it in another way: Paul’s soteriology is participatory. “We receive salvation insofar as we are united with Christ and belong to him.”³⁸ Furthermore, Paul does not say here in 2 Corinthians 5 that we become *righteous*, a statement that might simply be confused as an ethical abstraction, but that we become the *righteousness of God*.³⁹ Our position in this newly created reality may never be construed as a product of our own ingenuity or initiative, our incorporation into the righteousness of God is entirely dependent in Paul’s argument on God’s own activity in Christ (τὰ δὲ πάντα ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ; 2 Cor 5:18).⁴⁰ This position is, to return to an earlier idea, the product of a “divine incursion.” In the language of Robert Tannehill:

Participation in Christ, including the participation in Christ’s death that frees people from slavery to sin, depends upon God’s identification with humanity in its need, which takes place through the sending of God’s Son to share the human plight, an act of self-giving by God the Father and by God’s Son. This divine act of identification is primary and makes available divine transforming power. But there is an answering act of identification, which is the believer’s response of faith in Christ. . . . Faith in Christ for Paul is not only a trust-bond with Christ but also an act of identification with Christ, an identification that responds to and remains dependent on Christ’s identification with needy humanity.⁴¹

³⁶ Morna D. Hooker, *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 5; cf. Morna D. Hooker, “A Partner in the Gospel: Paul’s Understanding of His Ministry,” in *Theology and Ethics in Paul and His Interpreters* (ed. Eugene H. Lovering Jr. and Jerry L. Sumney; Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 91. On the essential Pauline phrase “in Christ,” see Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*.

³⁷ Bell, “Sacrifice,” 11.

³⁸ Hays, “Christ Died for the Ungodly,” 62.

³⁹ This is parallel with Paul’s statement in 2 Cor 5:21 that God made Christ sin (ἁμαρτίαν). Sin here is not an ethical category (i.e., God made him sinful), but an ontological category (i.e., God placed him in the condition of sinful humanity). See Bell, “Sacrifice,” 26–27.

⁴⁰ Cf. Hofius, “Sühne und Versöhnung,” 48.

⁴¹ Tannehill, “Participation in Christ,” 235–36.

The import of this mutual identification or interchange is that our story is always intricately related with that of Christ's. Paul's "soteriological narrative hinges on the death and resurrection of Jesus."⁴² Indeed, as Otfried Hofius argues:

Der Kreuzestod und die Auferstehung Jesu sind in ihrem differenzierten, aber untrennbaren Zusammenhang die *eine*, Sühne und Versöhnung schaffende Heilstat Gottes: die Heraufführung des der Sünde gestorbenen und zum Leben in der Gottesgemeinschaft befreiten *neuen* Menschen.⁴³

The narrative of Christ's death and resurrection becomes the defining characteristic of the new humanity that God creates through Christ. This is, as Gorman has rightly noted, a type of *theosis*, a participation in God's own life. But, again, as Gorman notes, this participation in God's own life for Paul only happens *in Christ* and is, properly, a form of *Christosis*⁴⁴ or cruciform *theosis* – a "transformative participation in the kenotic, cruciform character of God through Spirit-enabled conformity to the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected/glorified Christ."⁴⁵ The Pauline gospel, therefore, is the narrative of God's faithful re-creation of the world through the in-breaking of Israel's Messiah into the life of humanity so that through Spirit-enabled faith humanity might reach its *telos* in a transformed participation in the character and life of Israel's covenant God.

3. Apostolic Ministry as Participation in Christ

This persistent emphasis on the participatory nature of the gospel in Paul's theological framework forces us to remember that Paul understood his own ministry to be that of a participant in this divine gospel narrative. Within Paul's own rhetoric there is no separation between his apostolic identity and his theological ministry. Paul's apostolic narrative is an extension of the overarching story of the gospel, which, as we have seen, is itself an extension of the narrative of Israel's covenant God. In the same way that the gospel is both punctiliar and linear – a singular dramatic and apocalyptic event that occurs within the scope of human history – Paul's own story reflects both of those

⁴² Hays, "Christ Died for the Ungodly," 62; cf. Bell, "Sacrifice," 9, who argues that by "participating through faith in Christ's death and resurrection, the believer is made a new creation."

⁴³ Hofius, "Sühne und Versöhnung," 48.

⁴⁴ For the development of this terminology see Ben C. Blackwell, *Christosis: Pauline Soteriology in Light of Deification in Irenaeus and Cyril of Alexandria* (WUNT 2/314; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

⁴⁵ Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 7; cf. Stegman, "Paul's Use of *DIKAIOS*-Terminology," 522–23.

dimensions. In the words of John Barclay: “Paul both *lives from* the story of Jesus (it happened, crucially, once in history) and *lives in* it: it happens again, time and again, inasmuch as Christ lives in him.”⁴⁶ Paul’s very identity is shaped by the new reality inaugurated by the gospel, the soteriological enterprise defined by the divine declaration of God’s own righteousness in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth through the power of the Spirit. If we consider briefly, for example, the argument of Galatians, it may be possible to see that the autobiographical rhetoric that develops in Galatians 1–2 is *not* in the first instance the development of Paul’s autobiography; rather, it is what we might call the development of the gospel’s autobiography.⁴⁷ God’s dramatic, apocalyptic revelation of the Son to Paul on the Damascus road was not only the transference of a particular proposition, but a speech-act that reiterated the transformation of human history generally and Paul’s life specifically in light of the eschatological scope of the Christ event. “Thus any first-person narrative can be only secondarily about Paul himself: it will be primarily about the gospel of which he is the instrument and witness.”⁴⁸ Even further, the gospel is not merely an entity that exists outside of Paul, but is the entity which in fact *defines* Paul.⁴⁹ The close identification between the narrative of Christ and Paul that we saw in 2 Corinthians 4 reflects a point made more explicitly by the apostle in Gal 2:20 where he argues that: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Paul’s own personal history has been completely incorporated into the culminating story of Christ, so that Christ’s *faithfulness* becomes the paradigm

⁴⁶ John M.B. Barclay, “Paul’s Story: Theology as Testimony,” in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* (ed. Bruce W. Longenecker; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 155. Original emphasis. Inasmuch as Barclay follows Ernst Käsemann and J. Louis Martyn in emphasizing the punctiliar nature of the Christ event, he may not concur with this expression of the “linear” dimensions of both the Christ event and its effect on Paul’s own narrative. Nevertheless, the way in which Paul *narrates* the Christ event – as the climax of Israel’s history – seems to suggest that it was indeed a dramatic element within an ongoing story. This is not meant to detract from the dramatic significance of the Christ event. Indeed, as David Horrell notes in his response to Barclay in the same volume, it is essential to argue that for Paul “the Christ event (as generative beginning) gives meaning to a temporal narrative of God’s creative and saving purposes, and then, seen within it, gains meaning from that narrative” (David G. Horrell, “Paul’s Narratives or Narrative Substructure? The Significance of ‘Paul’s Story,’” in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* [ed. Bruce W. Longenecker; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002], 157–71 [here 167 n. 18]).

⁴⁷ John Howard Schütz, *Paul and the Anatomy of Apostolic Authority* (SNTSMS 26; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 136–50; cf. Barclay, “Paul’s Story,” 141.

⁴⁸ Barclay, “Paul’s Story,” 141; cf. Horrell, “Paul’s Narratives,” 171.

⁴⁹ Cf. Hooker, “Partner in the Gospel,” 97.

that shapes Paul's existence and message. Christ's love, manifest in his incarnation, his death, and his resurrection, is the divine initiative that draws Paul into a distinctly new existence marked by Christ's indwelling. And it is this indwelling or union that defines Paul's participatory existence. The life he now lives is an extension and expression of Christ's own life (cf. 2 Cor 5:17).

In light of Paul's own argument that his very existence is now shaped distinctly by a participation in the very life of Christ it should not come as a surprise to us that Paul understands his life to revolve entirely around τὸ εὐαγγέλιον – for we have seen that the gospel itself is the divine declaration of God's righteousness in the Christ event that re-shapes humanity in and through the power of the Spirit (cf. Rom 1:16–17; 8:1–4). Paul then is not merely a recipient of God's saving activity (i.e., God's grace), but a participant in it. God's declaration of righteousness has made Paul (as well as all Christians) that righteousness (2 Cor 5:21). It is for this reason that Paul describes himself as God's co-worker (2 Cor 6:1). Or, to use the language of 1 Corinthians 9, Paul claims to be a co-partner of the gospel itself – a συγκοινωνὸς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου (1 Cor 9:23). Despite the unfortunate rendering of 1 Cor 9:23 in a number of modern English translations (e.g., ESV; NIV; NRSV), which develop the notion that Paul's participation in the gospel is as a participant in its benefits, it seems most likely, given the focus in 1 Corinthians 9 on Paul's apostolic *activity*, that the language is here an expression of Paul's active participation in the gospel's nature and effect.⁵⁰ “Paul is claiming to be a partner *with* the Gospel, sharing in the work of the Gospel itself.”⁵¹ It can certainly be affirmed in a general sense that Paul is a recipient of the benefits of the gospel, but the emphasis in this particular context is one of *active participation*. Indeed, Paul's description of his own apostolic enterprise as becoming all things to all people (1 Cor 9:22) is an explicit description of this participation, as Paul models the “interchange” of Christ's activity as he seeks to proclaim the reality of the gospel. In other words, Paul's own apostolic ministry takes on the kenotic and cruciform shape of Christ's ministry precisely because it

⁵⁰ Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 707–8.

⁵¹ Hooker, “Partner in the Gospel,” 89; cf. David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 436–37.

is Christ who lives in him (Gal 2:20).⁵² To return to an earlier assertion, it is important to note again that the creation of apostolic ministry and Christian identity is dependent entirely on God's own powerful activity in bringing the story of creation to its climax in the messianic narrative of the Son through the empowerment of the Spirit. Or, to put it in reverse: Spirit empowered ministry and Spirit defined identity reflect the reality of the gospel, the climatic narrative of the Christ event in which Israel's covenant God re-creates humanity and the cosmos as a divine declaration of God's own glory and righteousness.

4. *Participation in the Ecclesial Community*

Although for the most part we have focused on Paul's discourse and Paul's ministry, it is crucial for us to note that the overarching implications of the divine narrative manifest in the gospel extend far beyond Paul. The emphasis on the theme of the re-creation of both humanity and the cosmos in 2 Corinthians 5 draws our attention once again to the immense scale of the soteriology outlined in 2 Corinthians specifically and Paul's letters generally. The immensity of this "divine incursion" is wrapped up, however, in a single individual, Jesus of Nazareth, through whom humanity is restored to the unmarred image of God. We are recipients of this soteriological enterprise – incorporated into God's righteousness – by our participation in Christ's narrative.⁵³ Paul, then, is not atypical as a participant in the life of Christ and a partner of the gospel. Everything that we have said in connection with Paul's ministry is definitive for the entire Christian community. As Hays has helpfully argued, an emphasis on the participatory nature of Pauline soteriology "ensures that salvation always has an *ecclesial* character: we are not saved as solitary individuals, but we become incorporate in Christ, so that our fate is bound together not only with him but also with our brothers and sisters in him."⁵⁴ Our justification or salvation, therefore, is not something that is parsed out to us as individuals in isolation, but is in essence a corporate reality as we are all incorporated into the

⁵² Cf. Hooker, "Partner in the Gospel," 92–97.

⁵³ Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*, 398.

⁵⁴ Hays, "Christ Died for the Ungodly," 62. Original emphasis.

same Christ-shaped narrative. The corporate nature of this soteriological enterprise was already explicit in the very language of 2 Corinthians 5, specifically in the first personal plural in 2 Cor 5:21: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him *we* might become the righteousness of God” (my emphasis).⁵⁵ That language, “which has particular significance for Paul’s own understanding of discipleship and ministry, becomes an invitation to others to share in the divine activity. What Christ is to us—righteousness, wisdom, sanctification, redemption—Christians must now be to the world.”⁵⁶ God’s work in Christ, therefore, does not result *only* in the declaration of a status; rather, the effect of the gospel narrative is an incorporation into the very life and identity of Christ which results in the new community of God’s people living out Christ’s narrative in the world, declaring God’s ongoing activity of re-creation and reconciliation, and participating in and with the gospel. In other words, the gospel is what Gorman has called a “performative utterance.”⁵⁷ It is an effective declaration that creates a transformed reality in which Christ’s faithfulness (both a status and activity) becomes the defining paradigm by which the Christian community is identified. Through our incorporation into Christ we become participants in the divine narrative we refer to as the gospel. The gospel, therefore, is something we must both proclaim and live as we are drawn into the narrative of Israel’s covenant God as the very body of Christ. The life we now live is an extension and expression of Christ’s own life.

⁵⁵ Cf. Grieb, “Theological Reflections,” 65.

⁵⁶ Morna D. Hooker, “On Becoming the Righteousness of God: Another Look at 2 Cor 5:21,” *NovT* 50 (2008): 358–75 [375].

⁵⁷ Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 110. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*, 390–95, argues that Gorman has stretched the definition of justification too far by incorporating both juridical and ethical elements. However, once we affirm that justification is inherently tied to the concept of union or participation, then ethics necessarily become part of the active dimension of this reality, something Campbell himself realizes in his well developed taxonomy of Paul’s “in Christ” language, as he notes that all four of his key terms: union, participation, identification, and incorporation, “entail ethical expectations” (413). Placing the ethical expectations *within* the definition of justification (or Paul’s soteriology more broadly) does not suggest that humanity enacts its own justification, but rather that the ethical expectations of the new creation stem directly from Christ himself. Our participation in his life, death, and resurrection *necessarily entails* that we will partake in his faithfulness, especially that manifest in his faithful *obedience*.