

St Paul on the Personal Presence of Jesus¹

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Introduction: Where is Jesus?

Paul's view of Jesus as risen and alive raises a basic puzzle of Christian experience. Knowing Jesus to be alive and exalted, does Paul therefore assume him to be present or absent to the believer on earth?

At one level this question is of course so basic that it has impressed itself on all forms of Christian experience and theology ever since antiquity. And in that sense it has evoked a seemingly interminable variety of sometimes highly specified explanations. In the contemporary West, for example, Christians of a traditional Catholic mindset might reply that Jesus is present most concretely in the Eucharist; Lutherans, in Word and Sacrament; many other Protestants, in the reading or proclamation of Scripture; charismatics, in the experience of the Spirit; and so forth. Within this range of Christian expression, some may appeal to a sense of Jesus' presence in experiences of the heart, Ignatian imagination, visionary experience of Jesus or Mary, or in their response to imperatives of charity, community-building or social justice.

What does seem clear from all this is that the temporarily absent Jesus is sublimated to popular Christian experience in remarkably varying ways, which may themselves be a function of theological, cultural and indeed temperamental or psychological diversity.

It does not take long to discover that the Creeds and much of the dogmatic tradition of Christianity are either negative or silent on the question of a personal presence of Jesus. 'From there he shall come to judge the living and the dead' does

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not give much encouragement to a pietistic or mystical assurance that ‘He lives within my heart’.²

But surely, one might object, at least as far as the New Testament is concerned this matter has been resolved after 250 years of critical scholarship? Entire libraries of scholarship deal with a profusion of questions about the identity and status of the person of Christ, whether in himself or in relation to the Father and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. Yet the question of the continued *personal* presence or absence of “Jesus *qua* Jesus” has rarely featured at the forefront of inquiry – indeed at times it has been quite explicitly deemed illegitimate.³

Our topic seems also to have been relatively neglected in New Testament research over the past century.⁴ Three 20th-century giants are worth briefly singling out here by way of illustration.

When Rudolf Bultmann wrote his Jesus book in 1926, he could still afford to do so in a slender volume of just 50,000 words. That achievement was helped by his certainty that virtually nothing of historical significance could be said about Jesus, and even less of any contemporary consequence. Jesus is for Bultmann knowable precisely *not* as a personal presence but exclusively through the Word, the Kerygma about Christ, which calls forth the hearer’s existential response.⁵ But a necessary consequence of approaches like Bultmann’s would seem to be that if Christ is not personal, then Christ is not Jesus. And thus Jesus *qua* Jesus is of course neither absent nor present, but merely dead.

² Alfred H. Ackley (1887-1960), ‘He Lives’. In specific areas, church teaching reflects greater definition and nuance, such as Vatican II’s account of Jesus’ presence in sacrament and community (E.g. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 7).

³ Explicit refusal to engage the dimension of Jesus as person or personality was one of the hallmarks of Rudolf Bultmann’s project; see below.

⁴ Though reference works generally omit entries on ‘presence’ or ‘absence’, there are a few exceptions, incl. e.g. Gowan 2007; Schilson 1995; Thomson 1988. OT and Jewish dimensions are more recently explored in MacDonald and de Hulster 2013; cf. also Wilson 1995. See now Orr 2014, discussed below.

⁵ Bultmann 1926, 180-82.

Shortly afterwards, Albert Schweitzer's paradigm-shifting work on *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (Schweitzer 1930; ET Schweitzer 1931) found Paul's gospel concentrated in the notion of participation in Christ – his Christ-mysticism. Yet the fundamental question of the personal presence or absence of that Christ is not foregrounded, and he himself is little more than the mediator of an impersonal divine power. Indeed, Schweitzer insists that far from locating Christ in the Eucharist, Paul and all other Christians believed Christ to be “in heaven, with God, and nowhere else”.⁶

Ernst Käsemann, by contrast, stressed in Paul a more concrete and personal lordship of the exalted Christ at work on earth through the Spirit, above all in the church as his body but also in individual believers and in the world more generally. Indeed in a favourite turn of phrase he refers to the ordinary believers as the ‘placeholders’ (*Platzhalter*) for the crucified Christ.⁷ Jesus’ lordship in the world is not so much about the personal presence of Jesus *qua* Jesus; indeed the supreme Lord is not primarily a ‘person’ at all.⁸

To be sure, more recent New Testament work has paid welcome fresh attention to the christological *identity* of Jesus; this has also provided richer context for the origins of trinitarian thought. And in marked departure from some of the historically gradualist and minimalist excesses of an earlier generation, 21st-century New Testament scholarship thus far generally argues that even the earliest Christian authors are largely unintelligible unless one assumes an articulate christology pretty much from the start. Despite these positive developments, my impression is that enhanced understanding of so-called ‘early high christology’ has not brought a comparable focus on Paul’s account of whether and *how* Jesus is experienced or conceived as either present or indeed absent. Considering just four whopper-sized

⁶ Thus clearly Schweitzer 1953, 33.

⁷ So e.g. in the commentary on Romans 8.2, 10: Käsemann 1974, 212 (quoted in Orr 2014, 24). See further Käsemann 1982, 18; Käsemann 1969b, 13. Also cf. more broadly the idea of humanity (Käsemann 1968, 239; Käsemann 2005, 106) or even the world as God’s intended placeholder (Käsemann 1962, 282).

⁸ So e.g. in Käsemann 1968 (ET Käsemann 1969a); cf. further documentation in Orr 2014, 22-38.

English-language Paul books by Barclay, Campbell, Sanders and Wright in the last five years, none seem to take a sustained interest in this issue.⁹ The Paul of some recent studies seems more concerned with the transactional dimension of narrative or ideas *about* the ‘Christ event’ than any experienced engagement with him.

By contrast, the present study particularly focuses on the question of a personal encounter with Jesus *qua* Jesus rather than, for example, as sublimated or subsumed within a range of God-language, christological conceptions or through a set of conventions in worship and praxis. Simply put, ‘Where is Paul’s Jesus now?’¹⁰

Method

How might we proceed to answer this? Clearly no one method will grant access to every dimension of this question. Here I want very briefly to tip my hat to two possible approaches before proceeding somewhat pragmatically on a third.

The Ancient Greek and Jewish Religious Setting

Cultural context and formation has of course been a familiar toolkit to biblical scholars for over a century, and it continues to yield prolific service. In our case a ‘religious backgrounds’ approach would focus on Paul’s account of the presence of God or of Jesus in the light of Jewish and Graeco-Roman religion. Experiences of divine presence or proximity are certainly well developed in Graeco-Roman sources, both literary and non-literary, philosophical and popular. These attest the piety of local shrines of gods like Pan or Asclepios, mystery cults of Isis or Mithras, practical recipes of magic, or on the other hand the more philosophical conviction, familiar even to the New Testament apostle, that in the deity ‘we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17.28, possibly drawing on popular traditions associated with

⁹ Barclay 2015; Campbell 2009; Sanders 2015; Wright 2013.

¹⁰ For fuller discussion of this theme in the gospels see Bockmuehl 2015. In relation to Acts, Max Turner and his students rightly foreground the significance of Jesus’ continued saving agency as *kyrios* in Acts (Turner 1994, 421; cf. more fully Turner 2000; also Sleeman 2009.). Recent systematic theology recognizes this theme of absence vs. presence as a key flashpoint in any theology of the ascension: e.g. Farrow 1999, 165-254 and Farrow 2011, esp. 63-88, also in dialogue with Burgess 2004, 135-61.

Epimenides¹¹). Both localized and more generally providential notions of divine presence are familiar in Graeco-Roman religion.

Somewhat more distinctively formative, perhaps, Judaism of the immediate pre- and post-Christian centuries furnishes plenty of pertinent religious reflection and experience. One thinks here of the defining belief in God's presence in the sanctuary at Jerusalem, reinforced for many with increased conviction by the renewal commemorated in the Hasmonean festival of Hanukkah. Away from the physical Temple, divine presence as mediated through angels or hosted in corporate life, worship and scriptural interpretation was also a staple at Qumran as apparently in Egyptian communities known to Philo of Alexandria. Judaism of the early rabbinic period, although marked by the undoubted trauma of two catastrophic wars resulting in the loss of Jerusalem and its Temple, nevertheless frequently retained a lively sense of the divine presence or *shekhinah* in prayer, worship and Torah study as well as in visitations by Moses, Elijah or, more popularly, by angels or demons.

More specifically, and very importantly for the Pauline context, there is extensive evidence of visionary or mystical participation in the world and worship of the heavenly sanctuary. This surfaces in biblical and post-biblical literary apocalypses, in heavenly ascent texts like the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* at Qumran or Masada and in cognate chariot mysticism texts of the rabbinic period. Key scholars foregrounding this aspect of Paul's religious formation have included Christopher Rowland as well as Alan Segal and Bernhard Heininger.¹²

These and other sources clearly furnish a rich tapestry of cultural context for the Pauline texts, and are particularly relevant to certain passages like that describing Paul's vision of Paradise and personal word of reassurance in 2 Corinthians 12. Nevertheless, they are relatively lacking in close analogies to our

¹¹ Rothschild 2014, 6 and *passim*.

¹² E.g. Heininger 1996, 2004; Rowland 1982; Segal 1977, 1980, 1990.

focused question of whether and how the crucified and risen *Messiah* is personally either absent or present to Paul's Christian experience.

Psychological Dimensions of the Problem of Presence

A second possible approach arises from the evident religious importance of temperamental or psychological disposition. Recent New Testament scholarship has witnessed an increasing interest in religious experience. This is to some extent conducted in conventionally historical mode, but also applies modern cognitive and experiential psychology to Paul's letters.

Pioneering work on this subject goes back to the early 20th century, but the most influential and formative study was that of Gerd Theissen about 30 years ago.¹³ Theissen engaged in a 'psychological exegesis' of Paul's writings by applying to them the then definitive theories of socially learned experience, Jungian psychodynamics of the unconscious and cognitive psychology of 'religion as the construction of an interpreted world'. The project was at once cutting edge and rather a product of its time, both in terms of psychological theory and in its own somewhat 'Lutheran' unconscious, foregrounding elements of interiority and cognitivity that in turn led it to focus overwhelmingly on texts like Romans 7-8 as well as 1 Corinthians 2 and 14. Theissen's book was hailed by reviewers in its day and gave rise to a steady trickle of other studies that built on his approach or otherwise examined Paul from a psychological angle.¹⁴ From related but rather different perspectives, John Ashton has attempted to explore Paul's charismatic, mystical experience of 'religion' in comparison with shamanism, while Calvin Roetzel has rightly stressed ascetic dimensions of Paul's character and practice.¹⁵

Some provocative and intriguing recent work considers the function and neurological basis of ecstasy in Paul's religious experience.¹⁶ Colleen Shantz places

¹³ Theissen 1983 (ET Theissen 1987).

¹⁴ Callan 1990; Reichardt 1999; Theissen 2007.

¹⁵ Ashton 2000; Roetzel 1998.

¹⁶ Shantz 2009.

particular emphasis on the reality of ecstasy in Paul's religious experience and language. She criticises the tendency of earlier treatments (including Schweitzer's) to reduce Paul's mysticism to ideas and frequently to confine his ecstatic experience to his conversion. While her concern for scientific study of Paul's ecstatic religious experience has been warmly appreciated, criticism has highlighted that this work does not escape a certain totalizing naturalism at the expense of the ancient author's most passionate *explicit* concerns in their own terms. Shantz claims that Paul's religious experiences exceed the force of his theological ideas to such an extent that the latter may be no more than 'inadequate and even misaligned substitutes for something that was more important to Paul'.¹⁷ The result is both exciting and somewhat reductive: as one interdisciplinary team of reviewers put it, she overrates the evidence, explanatory force and unity of neuroscience while underrating Paul's theological realism, 'the possibility that God can be a constraint on the sense of God'.¹⁸

In practice psychological studies like this have had little to say about Paul's personal sense of Jesus, visionary or otherwise. But certainly a number of Pauline texts do merit exploration from a psychological perspective; when modestly articulated such a perspective need not be wedded to scientific reductionism.¹⁹

Here I am less interested in the phenomenology of Paul's experience than in his stated convictions about the presence or absence of Jesus – the ideas that shaped and were shaped by his experience.

The Presence of Jesus in the Writings of Paul

Paul appears at first sight unambiguous in his affirmations of the near-mystical presence of Christ to the believer, a theme often associated with Paul's visionary

¹⁷ Shantz 2009, 207.

¹⁸ Deeley and Rowland 2010, 319.

¹⁹ See Collicutt 2012, 20-22 and *passim* and note e.g. the SBL series *Experientia*: Flannery *et al.* 2008-12.

experience on the Damascus road. Consider the following key passages in the Pauline corpus:

It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal. 2.20)

And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" (Gal 4.6)

Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? (2 Cor 13.5; cf. Rom 8.10)

The Lord is near. (Phil 4.5)

...How great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. (Col 1.27)

For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. (Col 3.3)

I pray that... Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. (Eph 3.16-17)

Many more passages could be added. Yet the last two centuries of critical scholarship make painfully evident that these passages have long since ceased to be self-interpreting, if indeed they ever were.

The Liberal vs the Mystical Paul: Schweitzer and his Heirs

Classic 19th-century liberal theology favoured assessments of this Pauline evidence in terms of a subjective feeling of nearness to the soul of believers.²⁰ While the optimism of romantic and idealistic anthropologies abounded throughout the long 19th century, such views were rudely disrupted in the wake of World War I, when Karl Barth's Romans commentary and the rise of dialectical theology put paid to this perspective with its Kierkegaardian emphasis on the 'infinite qualitative difference' between God and humanity, eternity and time.²¹

Historical scholarship on Paul more specifically felt a similarly bracing effect in the work of Albert Schweitzer, whom we briefly encountered earlier. In his classic

²⁰ E.g. Grieve 1918, 267.

²¹ Barth 1922; for references and discussion cf. e.g. Deede 2003; Oh 2006.

1930 study *Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus*, he argued that Paul's religious experience must be understood not in psychologizing and subjectivist terms but in its Jewish eschatological context and particularly in relation to its emphasis on *participation* in Christ. But for Schweitzer this participation is also necessarily *mediated*, through the Spirit and the body of Christ. Moreover, he notes that this mystical participation both anticipates the returning Christ and rules out any form of God-mysticism.²²

Whether Schweitzer was right or wrong about this absence of God-mysticism remains a point of fruitful debate in the light of certain Pauline passages (e.g. Rom 8.28-29; 11.33-36; 1 Cor 15.24-28). His account was to have a lasting effect, for example on subsequent treatments of whether participation in Christ or forensic justification by faith stands at the heart of Pauline theology, or indeed whether Paul's mysticism is fundamentally a function of a romantic anthropology or of his conviction about God's decisive action in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Quite recently, writers like Daniel Marguerat 2013 have reasserted the intensely 'Christic' focus of Pauline mysticism, rightly recognized by Schweitzer.²³ The question since Schweitzer has been no longer *whether* Paul had ecstatic experiences but *what these meant* for him and to what extent they lie at the heart of his theological style of argumentation.

The evidence for what is called Paul's mysticism can be easily rehearsed from his own assertions: he frequently speaks in tongues (1 Cor 14.18). As an apostle he works powerful charismatic signs (2 Cor 12.12), among which the book of Acts lists exorcisms, healings and resuscitating the dead.²⁴ He recounts at least one experience of being raptured to the third heaven (2 Cor 12.1-7), but in fact relates this to the

²² Schweitzer 1930; cf. Schweitzer 1953, 5-6.

²³ Marguerat 2013, 90-91; cf. Schweitzer 1930. Other classic early 20th-century treatments included Adolf Deissmann who detected in Paul a sense of the Christian's intimate fellowship with the 'living spiritual Christ' (Deissmann 1926, 140 quoted in Dunn 1998, 391); also cf. Wikenhauser 1928 (2nd edn 1956, ET Wikenhauser 1960); Büchsel 1926, 285-303; and Bousset 1921 (ET Bousset 1970, esp. 154-57), on the living presence of the *Kyrios* manifested in communal worship. Leading post-war contributors included Fritz Neugebauer and C.F.D. Moule, among others.

²⁴ E.g. Acts 13.9-11; 14.3; 19.11-13; 20.7-12; 28.3-9 (cf. Marguerat 2013, 80).

‘exceeding greatness’ of plural ‘visions and revelations of the Lord’ (2 Cor 12.1, 7). And Paul identifies his life-changing apostolic encounter with the risen Son of God as both a ‘revelation’ and a resurrection experience of ‘seeing the Lord’ (Gal 1.12, 16; 1 Cor 9.1; 15.7).

These visionary participation texts have been widely scrutinized both in Schweitzer’s day and in the intervening century, in relation not only to Paul’s language of believers being ‘in Christ’ and ‘with Christ’ but also to the trope of heavenly journeys in Jewish mystical texts. Most recently some younger scholars have renewed interest in the topic of union with, particularly with reference to themes of covenant and theosis.²⁵

Paul on the Presence of Christ: A Conversation with James Dunn

During the last 40 years, however, the most articulate Anglophone voice on Paul’s charismatic experience of participation in Christ has arguably been that of James Dunn.²⁶ In my view many key issues are still usefully pursued in dialogue with him. While early works pursued the question of Christ’s presence primarily through the Holy Spirit,²⁷ the mature *Theology of Paul the Apostle* provides a well-developed chapter on participation in Christ and Christ-mysticism,²⁸ even if one finds little about whether or ‘how’ Jesus is present. Here Dunn gives a useful survey of Paul’s texts on ‘in Christ, in the Lord’, ‘with Christ’, ‘into Christ’, ‘through Christ’, ‘of Christ’, ‘body of Christ’ and ‘Christ and Spirit’. He concludes that while ‘in Christ’ language does also have an ‘objective’ reference in the reality of Christ’s saving work, nevertheless ‘in some sense [Paul] experienced Christ as the context of all his being and doing’,²⁹

²⁵ See Blackwell 2011; Campbell 2012; and Macaskill 2013.

²⁶ The important Pauline theology of Michael Wolter 2015 (German original 2011), for example, also has brief chapters on the Spirit (147-75), on ‘Christ Mysticism’ and ‘Participation in Christ’ (221-51), but these tend to be confined to language about ‘in Christ’ and ‘with Christ’.

²⁷ E.g. Dunn 1970, 1975; Dunn 1980, too, discusses the presence of Jesus exclusively in terms of the Spirit.

²⁸ Dunn 1998, 390-412.

²⁹ Dunn 1998, 399.

providing constant personal and emotional strength.³⁰ Likewise, this sense of presence shaped the everyday lives and gatherings of Paul's churches.³¹

This Pauline theme of presence can deploy strikingly concrete imagery. 'Body of Christ' language necessarily raises for Dunn the question of participation or even identification with the present Christ in places like Rom 12.3-8; 1 Cor 12.12-27; and of course in a Eucharistic text like 1 Cor 10.16-17. The 'in Christ' (ἐν Χριστῷ) language similarly suggests to many interpreters a deliberately locative connection: Christ is in some sense *the location or space or sphere* into which believers are introduced by baptism and in which they exist.³² This alone, of course, need not entail a specific personal presence for Jesus any more than 'in Adam' (1 Cor 15.22; cf. Rom 5.12-21) does. A more explicit alternative (and rarer) affirmation is of Christ as a personal presence 'in' or 'among' believers.³³

We may add a range of other texts that point in a similar direction. Not only does 'body' language invoke the presence of Christ upon the gathering of the *ekklesia*, particularly the fellowship constituted in the Eucharist (1 Cor 10.16-17; 11.23-27; 12.27), but that same concrete sense of presence is also implicit in the language of dying and rising with Christ in baptism (Rom 6.1-11; more fully Col 2.12-13; cf. Eph 2.5), or indeed of the communal invocation 'Maranatha' (1 Cor 16.22) in a context in which Paul affirms the Lord's presence with the believers as judge and Spirit (16.22; cf. 2 Cor 3.17). That intriguing Aramaic phrase is described by one leading study as 'an invocation addressed to the glorified Jesus appealing either for his presence in the worship setting or for his eschatological appearance.'³⁴ Indeed, it may be considered alongside that other notable Aramaic exclamation used in Paul's churches: 'Abba, Father!' gives voice to the worshippers' baptismal adoption in union

³⁰ Dunn 1998, references Phlm 20, Phil 1.8; 2.1 (p. 400).

³¹ Dunn 1998, 408.

³² Cf. e.g. Thate *et al.* 2014, Campbell 2012 and Macaskill 2013 for recent discussion.

³³ Citing, perhaps a little too inclusively, Rom 8.10; 2 Cor 13.5; Gal 2.20; Col 1.27; Gal 1.16 and 2 Cor 4.6; also 'giving birth to Christ within the Galatians' (Gal 4.19).

³⁴ Hurtado 2003, 110.

with the Son of God by responding to his presence ‘in our hearts’ by his Spirit (Gal 4.6).

In this same sense, even while it is significant that ‘seeing’ the Lord is as such now predicated only in past tense verbs (1 Cor 9.1; 15.8; 2 Cor 4.6), Paul still claims to experience the personal presence of Jesus both in visions (2 Cor 12.1) and in direct personal words of comfort (12.9).³⁵

As Dunn rightly points out, Paul’s language on this presence oscillates in sometimes conflicting terms from spatial to personal or modal: between Christ as the mediator or instrument of access to God’s grace, as a metaphorical or physical body of which believers are members, or as a powerful agent equivalent or identified with the Spirit of God.³⁶

Precisely the question of the exalted Christ’s continuity with the person of Jesus of Nazareth has long been disputed. The Christ who matters to Paul is the exalted Lord. There is in Paul no complete discontinuity between the pre- and post-Easter Jesus, nor any concerted disinterest in the former (contra Bultmann on 2 Cor 5.16³⁷). But the Pauline evidence permits one at least to wonder if the articulation of a seamless identity between them is not as important to this Apostle as it is to Matthew or Luke or even John. Might this be because the experience of Jesus’ presence makes Paul’s lack of historical connection less problematic?

Person Without Personality?

Here and in subsequent work on the origins of christology, it seems to me that Dunn theologically accommodates what one might call a ‘personality deficit’ in the presence of Jesus, by stressing the sublimation of that presence in the body of Christ

³⁵ See also Acts’ portrayal of Paul’s visionary experiences (see Dunn 1998, 409). Luke and Paul are more ambiguous about whether such experiences are in principle accessible to *all* Christians or primarily mediated by apostolic or prophetic figures (cf. e.g. 2 Cor 5.20; Heb 12.25).

³⁶ Dunn 1998, 409-10 concludes that ‘for Paul the spiritual reality of Christ was not reducible to the faith experience of individuals or to the tangibility of the church. Christ was still a personal reality... in direct continuity with Jesus of Nazareth... But “personal” in a sense which is no longer the same as the human “person”, and yet is more sharply defined than talk of God as “personal”.’

³⁷ E.g. famously Bultmann 1951-55, 1,238-39; Bultmann 1985, 155-56.

and in the experience of the eschatological Spirit, who (as we will see) is for Dunn more or less identified with the spirit *of Jesus*.

Is Paul's experience of Christ or of his Spirit really largely depersonalized? The language of believers' being 'in Christ' is less directly pertinent to this question than that of 'Christ in the believer'. However, the comparable distinction between being 'in the Spirit' (e.g. Rom 8.9; cf. 1 Cor 12.3; 14.2) versus the Spirit 'being in the believer' (1 Cor 3.16; 6.19) demonstrates that neither expression self-evidently answers our question of the presence of Jesus *qua* Jesus.

Like many other interpreters Dunn seems untroubled by this issue, and happily *equates* the risen Lord with the life-giving Spirit in Paul, explicitly ruling out any other mode of encountering Jesus.³⁸ Interestingly, Dunn tends in these discussions to use the term 'Christ' rather than 'Jesus', primarily to accentuate the theme of the Spirit. (Conversely, Dunn feels that with his resurrection, 'Jesus became the personality of the Spirit' and 'one cannot experience Christ except as Spirit').³⁹

Such a close identification of Jesus with the Spirit may indeed seem to find encouragement in texts like Romans 8 or 2 Corinthians 3. And in that sense the contrast I wish to stress is in part heuristic, allowing us to explore one side of a 'perichoretic' relationship of both identity and distinction, as of course pertains for the Trinity more generally.

On the other hand, notions of a Pauline 'Spirit christology' have been quite decidedly taken to task by scholars like Gordon Fee, Mehrdad Fatehi and most recently Wesley Hill, who have all instead argued strongly for a relationship between God, Jesus and the Spirit characterized by dynamic identification without any one of them being reducible to any other.⁴⁰

³⁸ Dunn 1998, 322.

³⁹ Dunn 1998, 325; cf. 410.

⁴⁰ E.g. Fee 1994, 837-38 and *passim*; further Hurtado 2010, 92; Hill 2015, 147-48 and *passim*; Rowe 2011. Fatehi 2000 argues that iconic statements like 'the Lord is the Spirit' actually represent the complex

Dunn and his critics alike allow only limited space for the question of whether and how Paul envisages a personal presence of Jesus *qua* Jesus. It is this theme that may be underplayed by simply sublimating and indeed equating the presence of Jesus to the experience of the Spirit.

To be sure, there is a well-known terminological puzzle here. Despite Paul's frequent use of the term 'Christ' (over 280 times), his meaning remains greatly debated. Scholars have paid particular attention to ways in which Paul's use of 'Christ' may differ from his notoriously limited reference to Jesus of Nazareth.⁴¹ Here it may be that by attending to certain texts that highlight the activities of the *earthly Jesus* or his teaching and example (Rom 12-15; 1 Cor 11.1; or Phil 2) we do in fact discern in Paul's thought a substantive continuity, however modest in extent, between Jesus of Nazareth and the personal presence of the Lord. More of this in a moment.

The Apostle's view of Jesus clearly has a profound bearing on his view of God, and apparently of God as in some crucial sense Triune, as recent scholarship has rightly foregrounded.⁴² In his argument for a Pauline 'divine-Christology', Chris Tilling draws particular attention to Paul's articulation of his relationship with Christ in terms used elsewhere of the relationship between Israel and YHWH⁴³ – a relationship he relates at least in passing to the Apostle's experience of the presence and absence of Christ as the risen Lord.⁴⁴

The Importance of 'Seeing Jesus'

In certain significant respects, the experience of 'seeing the Lord' belongs for Paul either specifically and constitutively to the apostolic past (1 Cor 9.1; cf. Acts 9.27; John 20.18, 20, 25) or else to the future in which all believers may rightly look forward to seeing face to face (1 Cor 13.13).

relationship between two clearly distinguishable agents, neither of whom is reducible to the other (e.g. pp. 304-06).

⁴¹ Matthew Novenson makes the useful point that the semantic content of 'Christ' as an honorific cannot simply be equated with the human person Jesus (Novenson 2012, 117-119).

⁴² Cf. e.g. Hill 2015; Rowe 2011.

⁴³ Tilling 2012, 255 and *passim*.

⁴⁴ Tilling 2012, 137-165. Cf. further Rehfeld 2012 on Christ-relationality.

Acts, Paul and Revelation offer the strongest indication that an important aspect of the experienced presence of the risen Jesus in early Christianity was *visionary*. Christopher Rowland and others have rightly stressed the extent to which early Christianity was a visionary movement.⁴⁵ Paul appears to regard at least the shared baptismal and corporate dimensions of his own Christ-mysticism as somehow constitutive for the faith of *all* believers.⁴⁶

Visions of Christ are perhaps uniquely central to Paul's own religious experience.⁴⁷ And it is surely significant that the gospels locate the origin of Christian visions within their accounts of Jesus' life and ministry.⁴⁸ These experiences are thus part of the foundational religious encounter with the risen Jesus, which Luke Timothy Johnson rightly identified as a chronically underestimated key to understanding early Christian faith.⁴⁹

Vision and Transformation

What present function might such visionary experience have? In his volume on *Messiah and Exaltation* Andrew Chester, following scholars like Segal, Rowland and Morray-Jones,⁵⁰ argues that the shape of Paul's Christology is profoundly determined by such ecstatic experiences of the exalted and transformed Christ.⁵¹ As others have done before him, Chester sees this experience anchored not only in the Christophanic conversion experience (Gal 1.12, 16; 2 Cor 3.18-4.6), but also in a range of other texts – including the vision of 2 Corinthians 12. 'Paul knows and can make known Christ as embodying the divine glory... and divine image... because they are precisely what he has *seen* in his vision'.⁵² By linking the language of 2

⁴⁵ See e.g. Chester 2007b, 100, citing Rowland 1982, 351-441 et al.

⁴⁶ Chester 2007b, 101, citing Luz 2004 on the significance of shared experiences of baptism, fellowship and suffering.

⁴⁷ So also Karrer 1998, 36.

⁴⁸ Chester 2007b argues that Paul's visionary experiences belong in the larger context of Jesus traditions, especially 'the vision of him as transformed into angelic, heavenly mode in the "Transfiguration"' (p. 102).

⁴⁹ Johnson 1998; more recent treatments have begun to address the perceived lacuna – e.g. Dunn 2008; Flannery *et al.* 2008-12; Foskett and Allen 2008; Mount 2010.

⁵⁰ See e.g. Segal 1977; cf. Rowland and Morray-Jones 2009.

⁵¹ Chester 2007b, 81-91. Cf. Chester 2007a.

⁵² Chester 2007b, 86, also referencing n. 183.

Corinthians 3-4 (especially 4.1-6) to Paul's conversion experience, Chester argues explicitly against NT Wright and others who would identify the experience of that text as in principle available to all Christians.⁵³ For Chester, Paul's constitutive vision of the transformed Christ maps onto his conviction that all those who are 'in Christ' will in the eschaton be transformed – and indeed are *already* being proleptically transformed – into his image, to be like him and in a body like his.⁵⁴

Christology and Experience

These are clearly interesting and important observations. Yet Paul is remarkably coy about the *substance* of his own mystical experiences of Jesus. For example, even though Romans 5-8 delivers a powerful sense of baptismal participation in Christ, in his address to the non-Pauline communities of Rome the Apostle does *not* capitalize on this theology by appealing to the experienced presence of Jesus. Similarly, it is striking that while the surpassing greatness or abundance (ὑπερβολή 2 Cor 12.7) of Paul's visionary experiences affords him a clear sense of his own vocation and apostolate, he evidently derives from them surprisingly few dogmatic affirmations, even about Christology.

Most importantly, perhaps, in the end neither Paul nor any other New Testament writers simply inferred the *resurrection* of Jesus from visionary experiences. It is not that Jesus appeared and must therefore have risen, as 20th-century scholarship sometimes liked to claim: quite *au contraire*, the earliest texts all affirm that Jesus was first buried, then rose, and only *then* appeared, by no means always in visionary circumstances.⁵⁵

It is therefore significant that key christological texts like those in Philippians 2.6-11 or Romans 1.3-4 are couched in markedly traditional language. What little Paul does say about the content of his visions certainly suggests that they were both overwhelming and irresistible in their christological identity and intensity. But in

⁵³ Chester 2007b, 86, with reference to Wright 2003, 384-86.

⁵⁴ 2 Cor 3.18; cf. Phil 3.21; also Rom 8.29; 1 Cor 15.49; see Chester 2007b, 88-90.

⁵⁵ This is a point rightly stressed by Martin Karrer 1998, 34.

other respects they also clearly moved within the parameters of Jewish apocalyptic commonplace, perhaps in some respects reminiscent of elements encountered in the traditions of *chariot* mysticism based on Ezekiel 1. Put differently we may say: what Paul encounters in his vision is emphatically the *person of Christ* rather than a conception of *christology*. This is perhaps a useful corollary of work like that of Colleen Shantz.⁵⁶

Pauline doctrine on this matter, therefore, is indeed to some extent reciprocally related to Pauline vision and experience. Importantly, however, this experience of the presence of Jesus only achieves its doctrinal formation and articulation in dialogue with scripture, with ecclesial tradition and perhaps with Paul's partners and opponents.⁵⁷ Significantly, the key christological texts (Phil 2; Col 1; Rom 1.3-4 and so on) all demonstrate that Pauline doctrine as such did not *derive* from visions – indeed none of them refer to any experience or vision.

The Present and the Absent Body

We cannot here undertake a full treatment of one obvious elephant in the room. Paul ostensibly celebrates participation through the Spirit and the church in the powerful presence of the exalted Christ who is also the Jesus of Nazareth who died and was raised. And yet the same Lord is also in important ways absent rather than present – not here but elsewhere.

I mean by this not only what some have seen as a decreasing emphasis on Christ's presence in the Deutero-Pauline epistles, whether in person or by the Spirit.⁵⁸ But Paul in fact identifies the absence of Jesus quite articulately in a number of places. Second Corinthians and Philippians address the dialectic of the present and the absent Jesus most clearly, not least in relation to Paul's view of his own mortality.

⁵⁶ Shantz 2009, see discussion above.

⁵⁷ Cf. Karrer 1998, 37 (cf. p. 39).

⁵⁸ The evidence seems mixed and not ultimately persuasive. On the contrary, passages from Ephesians and Colossians cited earlier suggest that believers enjoy already a heavenly existence with Christ (cf. also Eph 2.5, 12), Christ is present both as the head to the body (Col 1.18; 2.19; Eph 1.22; 4.15-16) and as its composite entirety (Eph 5.30; cf. Col 1.24 and already 1 Cor 12.12-27). There is no significant slippage between Christ and the Church as the Temple of God's presence in either Colossians (1.19; 2.9) or Ephesians (2.12, 19-20).

A recent monograph by Peter Orr highlights the surprisingly slender engagement with the question of Christ's bodily *absence* in virtually all Pauline scholarship, despite the heightened interest in both christology and pneumatology in recent decades.⁵⁹ One of his key observations is that, despite major differences between them, Schweitzer and Käsemann in fact agree that the presence of Jesus is predicated in the New Testament (and in Paul in particular), yet neither of them acknowledges any reality of his *absence*.

As Orr notes, the presence and absence of Christ are in fact 'simultaneously experienced'.⁶⁰ The same Christ in whom all Philippian Christians exist (1.1) is the one for whom Paul in the same chapter longs to set sail and be with (1.23) – and yet who in 4.5 is also ἐγγύς, 'near at hand' perhaps spatially as well as temporally. In Paul's second letter to them, the Corinthians are established 'in Christ' (1.21) who in turn is 'in you' (13. 5), and yet Paul knows that while he is in the body he is absent from his home with the Lord (5.6-7), and that only at the resurrection will God raise us with Jesus and 'bring us' into his presence (4.14, implying the need for movement). Other Pauline examples point in the same direction – so even in Romans 8 the same Christ who is 'in you' is seated at the right hand of God (8.10, 34).

In a curious sense, therefore, Christ is at once present in his body and bodily absent, a tension that goes to the heart of Peter Orr's project. Orr acknowledges that Paul identifies different modes of the presence of Christ (he calls them epiphanic, dynamic and somatic), but also that these assertions are not contradicted by affirmations of Christ's *absence*. 'The exalted Christ does, in fact, possess a body that is human, discrete and located and cannot simply be collapsed with the bodies of believers but remains distinguishable from them', whether they are seen as individuals or as the church.⁶¹ It is for that reason possible, and perhaps necessary, to

⁵⁹ Orr 2014 (I am indebted to Prof. Edward Adams of King's College London for first alerting me to this Durham dissertation). Cf. further Rehfeld 2012; Tilling 2012; and discussion below.

⁶⁰ Orr 2014, 1.

⁶¹ Orr 2014, 62. Cf. e.g. Rom 8.29; Phil 3.21.

affirm that he may at times be absent. Eschatologically, this bodily absence also functions importantly to enable the Parousia or indeed the transformation of believers' bodies into his likeness.⁶² In Orr's view, the presence of Jesus is for Paul invariably accessible through the mediation of the Spirit, whose earthly presence uniquely sublimates or indeed 'substitutes' for Christ's bodily absence in heaven.⁶³

On that front, I would suggest, it is for Paul in an important sense quite specifically the risen Jesus *qua* Jesus who is bodily absent and somatically enthroned in heaven, with whom Paul longs to be at home and from where he nevertheless awaits his return. And it is that Jesus whom Paul repeatedly encounters in visions of heaven and whose voice assures him of his sufficient grace or – in Acts, of the divine charge of his mission all the way to Rome (23.11; cf. 19.21).

Sacramental Presence?

But may we say more than this? In addition to his own episodic visionary encounters, does Paul assume foci of worship in which Jesus is regularly *present* to his earthly followers specifically *qua* Jesus, rather than merely as represented through the power and experience of the Holy Spirit? One gets a glimpse of this likelihood in various passing comments. Worship involves the crucial affirmation that 'Jesus is Lord' (Rom 10.9; 1 Cor 12.3), the fervent Aramaic prayer for him to come (Maranatha) and the invocation of 'the grace of the Lord Jesus' (1 Cor 16.22-23). Then there is the appeal 'in the name' and 'by the power of the Lord Jesus' in disciplinary decisions applied even in the apostle's absence – intriguingly associating Paul's own spirit with the presence of the power of Jesus.⁶⁴

First there are the tantalizing remarks about the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians, which remain without parallel in the other letters. Here we need to consider the idea that Christ is the Passover lamb that believers must prepare to eat with the unleavened bread of truth and sincerity (5.7-8); that the bread and wine are

⁶² Orr 2014, 113-114.

⁶³ Orr 2014, 207, 221.

⁶⁴ 1 Cor 5.4; see also below. Cf. more positive ecclesial instructions and plans in Phil 2.19; 1 Thess 3.11; 4.1-2.

participation in the body and blood of Christ (10.16); that to eat them means eating the body and drinking the blood of 'the Lord Jesus' (11.27) in the same way as when as he said 'this is my body' (11.23-27); and finally that a crucial requirement is to discern and respect that body (11.29). Taken individually, none of these passages are self-interpreting as sacramental accounts. But it seems to me difficult to resist a cumulative interpretation resembling what was later called 'real presence' in the Eucharist.

Protestant interpreters including Peter Orr are sometimes remarkably cagey on this subject of the Eucharist, even if one might retort that Paul's other letters are of course also strikingly less eloquent on this point.

But in addition there is also Paul's consistent language of baptismal identification with Christ's death and resurrection: to be baptized 'into' him, and thereby to 'put on' Christ Jesus is to be adopted into the divine sonship that is his.⁶⁵ The Corinthians are challenged not only to discern that they are the Temple of God and God's Spirit dwells in them (1 Cor 3.16-17; 6.19; 2 Cor 6.16), but more specifically to recognize 'Christ in you' (2 Cor 13.5) just as Paul elsewhere identifies with 'Christ in me' (Gal 2.20). Together with passages describing or urging his readers to 'put on Christ' or 'become like Christ' (e.g. Rom 13.12, 14; Gal 3.27; Phil 3.21), this further highlights the important Pauline theme of transformation, on which we commented earlier.

All this translates for Paul into the increasingly sacramental language he uses of *his own* representation of Jesus to the world. He repeatedly calls on his churches to imitate him as he imitates Christ (e.g. 1 Cor 11.1). But more than this: he is now so convinced of his death with Christ in baptism that the life he now lives is entirely consumed with the Christ who lives in him – and whose suffering, death and resurrection life he identifies in his own ministry for the gospel (Gal 2.19-20; 2 Cor 4.10-11; 5.14-21; cf. Col 1.24). Indeed Paul affirms in striking physicality that he

⁶⁵ Rom 6.3-4; Gal 3.26-27; cf. 1 Cor 12.13; Col 2.12.

always carries in his own frail mortality (ἐν τῷ σώματι) the death (νέκρωσις!) of Jesus in order that he may become the equally material place (ἐν τῷ σώματι...ἐν τῇ θνητῇ σαρκί) where the resurrection life of Jesus will also be made concrete and visible (2 Cor 4.10-11; cf. Gal 6.17; Col 1.24).

Such language seems at least in some respects universally applicable to Christian believers' experience, and Paul does indeed envelop the suffering of Macedonian Christians with his own (e.g. Phil 1.29-30; 2.14). But in his intensely specific appeal to his apostolic sufferings for the gospel it is almost as if the absent particularities of the story of Jesus are visibly reanimated for the Gentile churches in the sufferings of his apostle (cf. esp. 2 Cor 11.22-29), through whose weakness Christ's power is perfected (2 Cor 12.9), while Jesus is publicly portrayed as crucified before their very eyes (Gal 3.1).⁶⁶

One other point is worth noting in this connection. That human specificity of Jesus' presence at the same time underscores the element of character and personality that was explicitly denied by Rudolf Bultmann. Although the evidence does leave ambiguities, even Paul's centrally dogmatic christological passages do indeed seem to hint at a personal continuity between the personality of the one who 'loved me and gave himself for me' and the one who now 'lives in me' (Gal 2.20). Thus in Philippians, the one who humbled himself and became obedient to death on the cross is the same one who now bears the name above every name (Phil 2.6-11), the same for whom Paul now both longs to depart and whom he expects from heaven (Phil 1.23, 2.19). Similarly, in 2 Corinthians the one who, 'though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor' (2 Cor 8.9), is precisely the one who in a visionary encounter empowers Paul with the assurance, 'My grace is sufficient for you' (12.9). While Paul is famously taciturn about specifics of Jesus' biographical narrative, these

⁶⁶ I am grateful to Christopher Rowland for underscoring this important point in correspondence, also with reference to Funk 1967. Cf. further Savage 1996.

few passages do speak eloquently about his experience of a Jesus whose character and personality is marked above all by self-giving in the crucifixion-resurrection event.

Most pointedly, each of these modes of the personal presence of Jesus to Paul, whether earthly or heavenly, is required to make sense of the other. All necessary qualifications notwithstanding, Jesus is Christ the Lord – but also, and just as importantly, Christ the Lord is Jesus.

Conclusion

We have seen that the widely discussed theme of Paul's Christ-mysticism provides an important clue to his understanding of the continued personal presence of Jesus. At the same time, there is an important eschatological dialectic of presence and absence, both of which are part of the dynamic of Pauline 'faith in Jesus'.

The personal presence of Jesus *qua* Jesus is to some extent a matter of his incarnate past and resurrection appearances on the one hand, and his future eschatological return on the other.⁶⁷ This is indeed what necessitates the possibility of Jesus's absence in the present, and what makes it possible for Paul to long to depart and be with him.⁶⁸ It is also clear, as scholarship generally takes for granted, that the continuing presence of Jesus until that time clearly is for Paul, as for John and for Luke, mediated through the Holy Spirit as God's empowering presence.

And yet, importantly, this in no way exhausts the register of Jesus' personal presence for Paul. Some charismatically graced believers may from time to time encounter him in visionary experiences, as Paul certainly claimed for himself. More fundamentally and properly, however, Paul locates the personal encounter with Jesus not in individual experience but in the life of his people as his body gathered for worship. Here is where believers are transformed into his death and resurrection

⁶⁷ 1 Cor 9.1; 15.50-51; 1 Thess 1.10; 2.19; 3.13; 4.13-14; 2 Thess 1.7.

⁶⁸ Similar categories of presence are proposed for John's gospel by Dietzfelbinger 1989, 34-37, 42-47 (cf. Dietzfelbinger 1997 and 1995).

through baptism, here is where in sharing the cup and the bread they share the very body and blood of Jesus and here their worship is energised and empowered by the experienced presence of the one whom they greet with the acclamations 'Lord Jesus Christ' or 'Our Lord, Come!' It is here that the church experiences 'the grace of the Lord Jesus', but here too where the Apostle offers church instruction and discipline, even while absent, 'in the name' and 'by the power of our Lord Jesus'.

And one final note. This subtlety and diversity of sacramental, corporate and visionary evidence may have psychological, temperamental and cultural dimensions, as we have noted. But it also finds an intriguing and appropriate echo in the occasional second-century idea that one's encounter with Jesus is attuned to the perception of the beholder. Both Clement of Alexandria and *Acts of Peter* 21 suggest that some see Jesus as an old man, others as a boy or a growing lad. (In the *Acts of Paul* 21, Thecla sees the Lord himself looking like Paul – a motif not wholly alien to the Apostle's own letters, as we saw!). This personalized encounter with Jesus arguably develops further the assurance of Paul's Jesus that 'My grace is sufficient for you' (2 Cor 12.7). Paul experienced the challenge of Christ's presence and absence as mediated in that same eschatologically dialectical promise that the Lord is indeed 'near at hand' (Phil 4.5).

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