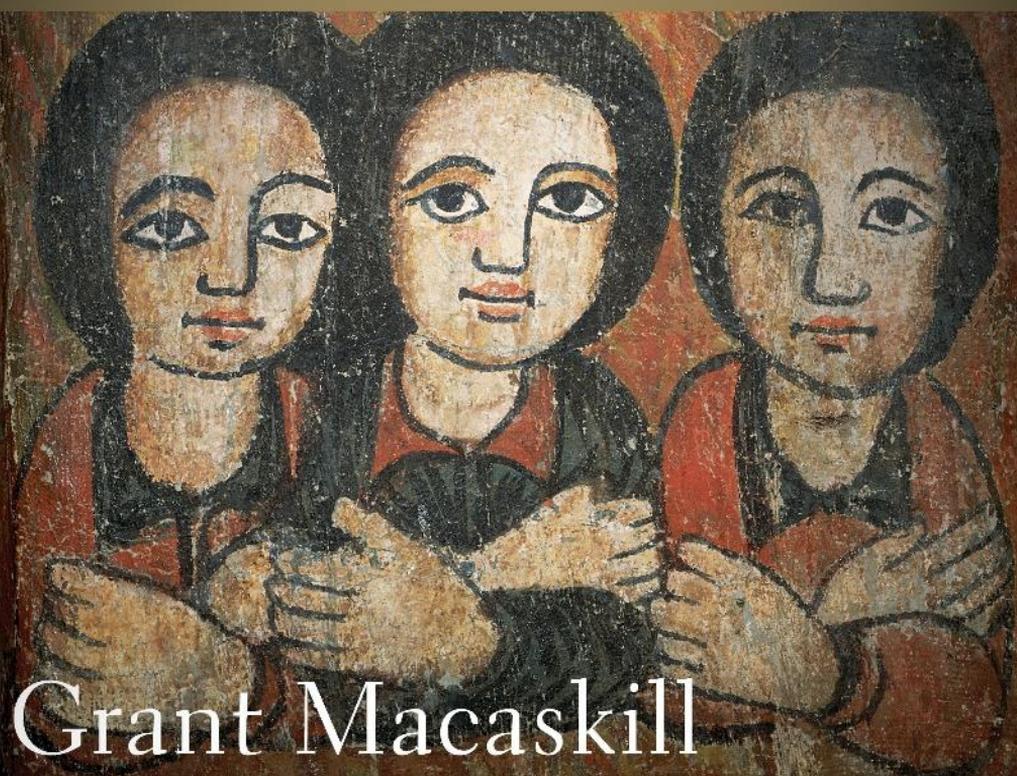


Living in
Union with
Christ *Paul's Gospel
and Christian Moral Identity*



Grant Macaskill

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2

Who Am I Really?

Paul's Moral Crisis

Let me begin with the assertion that I am going to defend in the rest of this book through a close reading of Paul's Epistles. This assertion is not a new one and has been an important part of Christian thought through the centuries, but its proper centrality to our thinking about Christian moral life has been compromised by decades of thinning or declining theology, especially at the popular level within evangelicalism. The assertion is this:

Paul represents the Great Exchange that lies at the heart of the gospel, whereby Jesus bears the affliction of our condition and we enjoy the glory of his, as involving at its most basic level an exchange not merely of *status* but of *identity*. It is not *simply* that our guilt is transferred to Jesus and his righteousness to us but that our status before God rests on a more fundamental exchange. What Jesus takes to the cross is *who we are*, our very selves with all their guilt, and what we enjoy in union with him is precisely *who he is*, his fullness with all its glory. The activity of the Spirit in sanctification, then, is intended not to bring about a better version of ourselves but to realize in us the personal moral identity of Jesus Christ. Any account of the Christian moral life, any program of discipleship, that does not begin and resolve with

Paul's words, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me," is deficient and will eventually turn into a form of idolatry.

That may be a rather dense opening statement, and if you are struggling to follow it, bear with me through the course of this chapter. It will begin to make better sense as we look at some of the details of Paul's writing. It is important, though, to highlight up front how this contrasts with popular accounts of the gospel, including those that characterize much contemporary evangelicalism.¹ These fall very far short of both Paul and the Reformed articulations of the gospel that Paul proclaimed, which center on the concept of union with Christ.

Evangelicalism popularly works with an account that runs along the following lines: The death of Jesus pays for our sins, takes the punishment that we deserve, and makes it possible for us to be right with God; once we are right with God, we receive the Holy Spirit, who (or perhaps "which") functions as a kind of Gatorade, an energy shot that gives an ability to live in obedience to God's commandments that we did not have previously, to raise our moral game, as it were. We still continue to need the cross, because even in this new life of obedience, we continue to fall into sins that need to be paid for, but the transformation of our lives—sanctification—is something that comes through our moral partnership with the Spirit.

We might not render it in quite such crude terms, but this is what our account of the gospel often boils down to. The problem with it is not so much that it is wrong, but that it isn't right enough (which is generally the issue with problematic theologies: they often affirm the right things, but not enough of the right things, so that what they affirm rightly is bent out of shape by its lack of context or its skewed emphases). The problem with this, which we will consider throughout this book, is twofold.

First, it has a wrong view of the Christian self: it assumes that "I" am the principal agent of obedience, even if I need to be helped or energized by the Spirit, and doesn't take seriously enough that

1. The way I am using the word "evangelical(ism)" here is intended simply to label the subculture and its popular forms, highlighting that it does not necessarily sustain the theological heritage that lies behind it.

there is no “I” left to speak of in the Christian life, at least not in self-subsistent terms. If we begin with Paul’s identification—“I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20, my trans.)—then a very different way of speaking about the Christian moral life must emerge, one recognizing that I am being changed not into a better version of myself but into a participant in the radically “other” goodness of Jesus Christ. This helps us to see the second problem: this account works with a deficient understanding of the Spirit, seen as a kind of independent force of transformation rather than as the one who very specifically realizes the moral presence of Jesus in our lives.

This twofold problem involves a functional neglect of the place of Jesus, not just in the realization of *forgiveness* but also in the realization of *sanctification*. Properly, the gospel of Jesus Christ is not just the entry point into the kingdom of God or the locus for recovery from daily sins but is the very constitution of the kingdom itself. To put it differently, it is not just *how* we get saved; it is *what* we are saved into and what we become within that reality. We are saved “in Christ,” and in Christ we do “good works” (Eph. 2:10); these are done not by independent centers of identity, by people who can say “with the help of the Spirit I can obey,” but by those who collectively say “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.”

One of the crucial themes that will emerge in our discussion is this: any other account of Christian obedience will, in some sense, commodify righteousness. It will make goodness something I do, on the basis of which I acquire some kind of capital with God or in the eyes of God’s people. That, we will see, is what legalism does, and its problem is not simply that it is naive concerning the scale of the sin that corrupts our lives and compromises our ability to obey—which is how legalism is often considered—but it does not understand the most basic category of Christian identity: who we are and why this *must* be determined by the phrase “in Christ.” And this is why, at a certain point, Paul considers legalism to constitute a different gospel, something that is fundamentally sub-Christian: it involves a way of thinking about moral activity that is functionally separate from the presence of Jesus.

This book will explore the theme of Christian moral identity, with particular reference to Paul. I focus on Paul because so much

of our theology is rightly drawn from the categories and imagery of his writings. Certainly, it is always vital that we set any given text or corpus of writings within the wider context of the NT so that our theologies are not skewed unwittingly by our commitment to a “canon within the canon.” But it is also vital that we seek to be attentive to the movements of thought in each biblical writer on his own terms. Paul’s Epistles have played a key role in the development of Christian theologies of discipleship over the centuries, and rightly so: they contain explicit and direct teaching on what it means to think and act rightly in the light of what has been revealed in Jesus Christ. However, they have also been badly misread, particularly at a popular level. I do not share the opinion that the great figures of the Reformation misread Paul, which is a claim that has been prominent in much NT scholarship in recent decades.² I do think, though, that the churches occupying part of the legacy of the Reformation today—the various families of evangelical churches—have widely failed to maintain what the Reformers saw so clearly: that every part of our hope is constituted by the same thing, by Jesus Christ.

In this chapter, I will trace some of the core movements in Paul’s theology of Christian identity, principally seeking to remind us of how shocking some of his language is, since it has been rather muted by familiarity. It has become the kind of language that we use without thinking of its real significance. I recall a conversation with the theologian Julie Canlis, who comes from an evangelical tradition similar to my own. She pointed out we could remove the expression “in Christ” from many of the sentences in which we use it, in conversation or in prayer, *because it is not essential to their meaning*; nothing would be lost from those sentences if we were to remove the expression, because it does not bear any real load in our thoughts. It is an empty idiom, one that we use casually and thoughtlessly, much like we use expressions such as “at the end of the day” or “to be honest.” Our use of these expressions does not deliberately position a thought against alternatives (i.e., something less final than “the

2. This claim lies at the heart of the New Perspective on Paul, as represented in the work of E. P. Sanders, N. T. Wright, and James D. G. Dunn. For details of their work and for some of the critiques of their representation of Luther, see under “The New Perspective on Paul” in chap. 1.

end of the day” or something less than “honest”); we use them as low-level turns of speech that could be discarded from the sentence without altering its meaning. But union with Christ is not reducible to a turn of speech, even if it should be the idiom of the Christian life. This chapter will, I hope, show this to be the case and bring to the surface the determinative significance that the expression “in Christ” has within Paul’s thought.

I need to make two cautionary points before I continue. First, I am not trying to give a comprehensive theology of Christian identity or of sanctification. Both of these are larger topics, and what I am talking about here is just one thread of them. I do consider this thread to be the vital one, without which everything else unravels, and will offer some further reflections on this in the final chapter of this book. Even there, though, I will not seek to give a systematic account of either identity or sanctification. Second, as a NT scholar, I see my task as drawing attention to the details of the NT texts and considering these details afresh. However, this information must be set within a framework of classical trinitarian theology. Because of the constraints of this book, I will not have space to do this at every point, but I do want to state from the beginning that the neglect of such theology, both in academic biblical studies and in popular evangelicalism, has had a devastating effect on concepts of discipleship. At specific points in this book, I will draw attention to particular examples.

Philippians 3: Decommodified Righteousness

It may be useful to begin our reflections by listening to what Paul says about how he formerly viewed his own identity and his relationship to righteousness and the shift that occurred because of his encounter with Jesus.

For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the

church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. (Phil. 3:3–9)

A few things are noteworthy here. First, although it is not necessarily conspicuous in any translation, the passage is largely devoid of finite verbs. We generally encounter verbless or participial clauses, almost functioning like badges: “a Hebrew of Hebrews,” “of the tribe of Benjamin,” “a persecutor of the church.” This is the case until we reach verse 7, where we encounter two temporally specific verbs. What “was gain”³ to Paul he has “come to consider”⁴ a loss (my trans.). Something has changed. While at least some of the badges may remain true of Paul and may continue to be valid descriptions of his flesh (he cannot cease to be ethnically of the tribe of Benjamin), his evaluation of them has changed at the most basic level, and what led to this change was Jesus himself: Paul specifies that it is “because of Christ” (*dia ton Christon*) that he has come to think differently.

Second, the passage is dense with the language of possession or ownership, and it deploys this language in ways that change in correspondence to the change of attitude just noted. At the beginning of the passage, for example, Paul indicates that he is someone who “has” reasons to be confident in the flesh (3:4). The word he uses is a participle of the verb *echō* (to have). We might reasonably, if awkwardly, translate this as “haver” or “possessor of”: “I am a possessor of more.” Paul is an “owner” of reasons to be confident in the flesh, and his capital exceeds that of others: “I [*egō*] have more.”

But verse 7 involves a flip of attitudes toward these things. Whatever Paul previously considered to have capital value, albeit symbolic

3. The verb is *ēn*, a simple past tense from the verb “to be.”

4. The verb here, *hēgēmai*, is in the perfect tense, indicating that something has happened to bring about a new set of evaluative circumstances for Paul. He now thinks differently about the things in question.

capital value, he now considers a capital deficit: what had been to him gain is now loss. Strikingly, in verse 8, Paul asserts this further by reusing the root *echō* in the compound participle *hyperechōn* (from *hyperechō*)—the “surpassing worth” that he associates with Jesus. If we rather stiffly translate this word as “hyper-having,” we can see more of the contrast that he now makes: Paul used to consider himself to “have more” than others, but now he sees all of that perceived capital in relation to the “hyper-having” of Jesus.

The construction is interesting: this hyper-having is directed toward “the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord [*tēs gnōseōs Christou Iēsou tou kyriou mou*], because of whom [*dī’ hon*]” Paul has lost all things (3:8, my trans.). We have here a parallel construction to the one we saw in the previous verse. There it is because of Christ that Paul now considers his gains to be losses, but now a key place is occupied very specifically by the concept of the “knowledge of Christ.” This genitive is ambiguous: it could be objective (knowledge concerning Jesus, or Paul’s knowing of him) or subjective (Jesus’s own knowledge, or his knowledge of Paul). Certainly in 1 Cor. 13:12 Paul speaks of the priority of divine knowledge in the relationship of Christians to their Lord: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.” Here the context points in the direction of the objective reading: what Paul prioritizes is his own knowledge of Jesus. This is clearly articulated at the end of verse 8, where having reevaluated his gains as “rubbish”—actually, as the kind of rubbish that pollutes you, makes you unclean⁵—Paul now expresses his goal in terms of gaining Christ.

I want to highlight the play of language in verse 8 around the idea of ownership. The core verb is the aorist subjunctive *kerdēsō* (set in a purposive construction that is flagged by the conjunctive *hina*); this is the verbal cognate to the noun that Paul has already used for “gain” (*kerdē*). The play is important: where previously Paul had been concerned to amass achievements that could be associated with himself, with his physically particular self, his flesh—symbolic things,

5. Paul labels them as *skybala*, a word that suggests the uncleanness of garbage or even feces.

undoubtedly, that would function as moral or social capital—now he considers his hope to lie in acquiring a person, Jesus. He elaborates on this with another interesting play of language: when he acquires Christ, it is not that Jesus will be his newest and best possession, the latest trophy in his collection, but that he will be found in Christ, his self-subsistence surrendered to Jesus. I trust that this is clear: the normal expectation of the verb *kerdainō* is that it will point to the acquisition of something that is now owned by the subject, but here the subject gains something that actually takes ownership of him. Paul’s shift can be stated like this: I used to wish that people and God would look at me, with all my physical particularity, and see how much I had that would speak of my status within God’s kingdom; now I want them to look at me and see that my particular self is in Christ’s self, that what I have is, in truth, what he has.

This leads in to one of the famous *pistis Christou* verses, 3:9, where scholars have debated whether they are dealing with a subjective genitive, in which Paul speaks of the faith (or fidelity) exercised by Jesus, or an objective genitive, in which Jesus is the object of our faith.⁶ Despite some prominent advocates of the subjective interpretation (which does have some validity within the context), the balance of NT scholarship still favors the classic objective view, that this is about faith *in* Jesus. That the parallel genitive construction of *gnōseōs Christou* (3:8) appears to be objective supports the same interpretation here (3:9): it makes sense contextually that Jesus is represented as the object of Paul’s attention, and this need not be considered to wrongly prioritize a human act, because it is affirmed as part of a language play in which Paul subordinates his activity of reaching for Jesus to Christ’s ultimate acquisition of him.

The key is the contrast that Paul establishes in verse 9 between his old way of thinking—that he could have a righteousness of his own that is “from the law”⁷—and his new way of thinking, where his

6. For an overview of this debate, see Bird and Sprinkle, *Faith of Jesus Christ*. See also the discussion under “The Apocalyptic Paul, the Perfection of Grace, and the Faith of Jesus Christ” in chap. 1.

7. The expression he uses in 3:9 is *mē echōn emēn dikaiosynēn tēn ek nomou* (not having a righteousness that is mine from the law). The use of the possessive is vital to the flow of thought. What he disavows is any sense of ownership of this righteousness.

righteousness is not his own but someone else's. It has come to him through his relationship to that other person; it is *dia pisteōs Christou*. Now Paul's righteousness—his moral capital—is not of himself but of God⁸ and comes to him by the mediation of Jesus. The place of faith is affirmed in this, for the word occurs twice in close succession and in different cases: God's righteousness comes "through the faith of Christ" and is "upon faith" (*epi tē pistei*). However we might relate these expressions to the fidelity of Jesus—and I want to reiterate that our continuing affirmation of the doctrine of justification by faith should not obscure the importance of Jesus's fidelity in God's work of salvation—the language resonates with the emphasis found more widely in Paul's writings that we are, characteristically, "believers."

From this expressed purpose, most modern translations represent verse 10 as if it starts a new sentence that effectively restates this: "I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection" (3:10 NIV). Actually, though, the verse starts with an articular infinitive that is in the genitive case; that is, it appears to be part of the same chain of genitives that links righteousness to God through Christ: righteousness is "of God" and "of the knowledge of Christ." These are not two discrete sources of righteousness or even complementary parts of it. Rather, they co-inhere: to know Christ is to have the righteousness of God.

Paul's inversion of his old way of thinking about righteousness as a commodity he can possess continues in verse 12, after he has spoken about being conformed to Christ in his death and resurrection. The language he uses here is highly suggestive of these inversions: "Not that I have already laid hold [of it], or have already been made perfect, but I pursue [*diōkō*] and overtake/lay hold of [it], because Christ Jesus has laid hold of me" (my trans.). Here is the inversion: Paul now recognizes that he can "lay hold of" this righteousness only because the Righteous One, Christ, has "laid hold" of him. The same verb, *katalambanō*, is used of both. Only because he is owned by Christ can he now possess righteousness. The problem before was not that righteousness was beyond his grasp but that he was simply not constitutionally eligible to possess it. To experience it, he had to

8. It is *tēn ek theou dikaiosynēn*.

be incorporated into Christ. Interestingly, the word that Paul uses for his new pursuit of this righteousness is the same word that he previously used of his persecution of the church: *diōkō*. Paul is not inert in his union with Christ. His righteousness is passive in the sense that he is the objective recipient of another person's goodness, but that passivity is not the same as inertia: he pursues righteousness with a renewed zeal now that he knows it is something he can enjoy only through his fellowship with another.

At the risk of belaboring something that may already be sufficiently evident, let me note that Paul has shifted both from seeing righteousness as a kind of moral or social capital that he can acquire and possess and from seeing himself as an entity autonomously capable of acquiring such capital. He now sees righteousness as something that he can possess only if he allows himself to be "re-identified" with someone else, with Jesus. He now sees that it can be amassed not by doing things or being a particular kind of person but only by knowing someone and by being known by that one.

Now, this articulation of Paul's old "legalistic" way of thinking about righteousness in relation to his new one is not quite the same as our standard ways of thinking about the problem of legalism. We have typically described the problem of legalism or of "works righteousness" in terms of a balance sheet: the legalist thinks in terms of a performed obedience to the commandments that will keep them in credit with God, not recognizing how profound their inability to enact such obedience really is. There is, I think, a real question about whether any Jew of the Second Temple period was ever a card-carrying legalist in quite these terms. Aside from anything else, it works with an economic model of a bank account that was entirely alien to most people of the time, for whom money was a limited part of their wealth (if they had any) and their economic interactions. The mental image that we use today is really a modern, post-Adam Smith way of thinking about individual wealth and credit within an economy. The language of capital or commodity that I am using allows for something that is just as real but less limited to a particular set of modern economic practices. It recognizes that there is such a thing as symbolic or social capital, which is associated with the perception of our status not just with God but also with the various

communities in which we live and operate. It is not as straightforward as a credit sheet, since some of the elements cannot be easily quantified, but within a given community, it will say whether you are an insider or an outsider and where you might rank within the group. It will affect how others treat you and how you benefit from these interactions. Someone who has high levels of social capital will enjoy the favor (and perhaps the favors)⁹ of others, as these people look to benefit from that capital by association. It is this perception of social capital that governs the dynamics of high school groups and cliques; it is the same perception that makes some people influential. In some cultures and economies it is explicit; in others it is tacit. There is, moreover, a blurring of the audiences who are held to evaluate our performative capital: we might hold it to be something we have done to please and honor God and might be absolutely convinced in ourselves that it has been rendered to him as service, but in reality the audience that scores us may be a human one. The gallery to which we play may be filled with other people.

The Pharisaical preoccupation with “badging” (or “boundary-maintaining”) practices like ritual washing, circumcision, or table purity is easily explicable within such an approach: in the context of a highly variegated Judaism, these very public practices allow us to identify the insider, the real Jew, from the outsider, the Jew whose conduct is questionable with respect to the law. Paul’s zeal to persecute the church, meanwhile, might be particularly noteworthy, marking him out as someone who deserves a level of deference within the Pharisaical community.

9. This notion of honor and its association with symbolic capital has been a prominent element in the social-scientific study of the NT, which draws heavily on the discipline of social anthropology. See Malina, *New Testament World*, chap. 1. Recently John Barclay (*Paul and the Gift*) has drawn on the anthropological study of gift-giving in his examination of Paul’s distinctive account of the divine gift of salvation. Contrary to our modern assumptions about what gifts are and represent, Barclay and the historians/anthropologists on whom he draws highlight that gifts were (and are!) given as part of an economy of favor to people who could be expected to return a favor in some way at a later stage. This can be as significant to social functioning as a monetary economy and actually more significant on a day-to-day basis in economies outside the modern, developed world. Crucially, such economies of gift-giving involve constant, but often tacit, decisions about the worth or value of the person to whom a gift is given. Their social capital or symbolic capital is always being evaluated.

But for these dynamics to work, there must be some perception that the self in question can acquire status or capital against its own name. If that assumption is disrupted and the person recognizes that they are now identified by the name of someone else—the name of the person into whom they have been baptized—then the whole endeavor is altered. If we take seriously that all we accomplish truly belongs to the name of another and that all we enjoy is a function of *his* wealth and not ours, then the dynamics of our social identity will change accordingly.

Galatians 2:20 and Context: Incorporated Identity

From our discussion of Phil. 3, we can now turn to Gal. 2:20 and its wider context. The letter is, of course, preoccupied with a movement in the Galatian church that is pressing for a particular form of adherence to the law and its customs. While there may be debates about what precisely this entailed, there is no doubt about the basic problem. Paul’s condemnation of the movement excludes any sense that we are dealing with mere differences of opinion on this or that issue: this is “a different gospel” (Gal. 1:6). Paul is quick to qualify this comment by saying that there is really only one thing that can *truly* be labeled as the *euangelion*, but he then continues by warning about the preaching of an account of salvation that is different from this: “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:8). Paul calls this a different gospel because it is premised upon something different, and I want to highlight how Paul represents this basic difference of premise as a matter of identity: it is not just about what we do or how we do it but about who we are and how we conceive of ourselves.

The key verse here will be Gal. 2:20, but there are few things that are helpful to note in the buildup to it. First, as Paul introduces the autobiographical account that will dominate the first two chapters of the letter, he makes explicit that he is seeking to please not people but God and that his message does not originate within human contexts but has been disclosed to him in the revelation of Jesus Christ.

This acknowledges the human and social dimension of the problem that we discussed when looking at Philippians: Paul sets his message over against that of his opponents precisely on the basis of its origin outside the circles of pious community. This invites us to think about the problem that he addresses not as something that is exclusively or even principally oriented toward God, which are the terms in which we often describe legalism, but as something governed more by social conventions, by how those around us think about us and think about what it means to be an insider or an outsider of the holy community. Second, what Paul sets against the false gospel is precisely an autobiography, a narrative of his experience and its contribution to his identity. Galatians 1:13–14 recounts something of what he saw to be his social capital within his earlier life in the Jewish community, a brief description that we can fill out from our discussion of Philippians. In fact, it is interesting that his description of his advancement is specified to be “in Judaism” (*en tō Ioudaismō*). This is one of the few points in ancient literature where this word appears, and its use here points to the social or human dimension of his advancement. It is rather like someone saying, “I advanced in Christianity,” or (perhaps better) “in evangelicalism”: it points to the culture and society of the religion rather than to its content. But this narrative of progress and social advancement that Paul told himself in his former life is disrupted by the revelation of the Son: Paul sees not *something* but *someone* who changes him, and nothing can be the same afterward.

Given what we have just noted, Paul describes himself as effectively shunning the advice of other people of flesh and blood; he absents himself from the input of a religious community. What follows is a narrative that continues to affirm the danger of seeking to please people: even Peter (Cephas, Gal. 2:11) is challenged for his hypocrisy (2:13) of “not walking with the truth of the gospel” (2:14, my trans.) as he acts out of fear of the circumcision party (2:12). It is noteworthy that here Paul is concerned with a “functional” legalism: these are actions and practices that contradict the gospel, not necessarily theological articulations of the view that we will be saved by works. This takes us back to a point that I have now made several times: legalism is not necessarily a card-carrying, principled commitment

to the idea that one will be saved by one's works. Rather, it is a way of thinking and acting that pursues religious capital.

One of the easily overlooked features of this autobiography is the frequency with which the first-person singular is used: the narrative is full of references to "I" and "me" (even if these are found in the endings of verbs, rather than in pronouns—there are, in fact, very few of these). This is not self-importance on Paul's part, I think, and neither is it just a feature of the autobiographical character of the text. Instead, I think it is building deliberately toward what Paul says in 2:20: "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (my trans.). Having used the first person throughout the narrative, he now in effect says, "But there is no 'me' to speak of, at least not in simple terms." Read in this way, verse 20 is something of a punch line to the autobiography that has been recounted through the letter.

Before we get to that punch line, however, Paul adds a key piece of discussion, which may (or may not) reproduce part of his conversation with Peter. He asserts what appears to be a belief held in common by both:

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. (Gal. 2:15–16)

The next verse (17) makes clear that there will continue to be sin, even in those who are justified in Christ, and that this in no way makes Christ a servant of sin. The persistence of sin, though, appears to be a factor prompting the emergence of a group who advocates a certain mode of obedience to the law. At least, it is the context for Paul's next statement, which really takes us into the heart of things: "For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God" (Gal. 2:18–19). Now we are getting near to the point: a death has taken place through the processes built into the law that has resulted in a new relationship to the law. Remarkably, this death is Paul's own: "I died." This is what is then unpacked in our key verse: "I have been

crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but 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). So Paul has died, but this death has happened through his union with Jesus and the corresponding participation in Christ's own death. Within his understanding of the gospel, the death of Christ is not just representative as he bears the sinner's guilt and takes the sinner's place, but it is incorporative, and what is incorporated is Paul himself. Insofar as he participates also in the resurrection, it is because the same Christ with whom he died now lives in him as a new reality that inhabits his flesh. His own flesh, then, no longer defines the limits of his existence or constitutes the true outline of his self; he is in Christ and Christ is in him.

In the Scottish Highlands where I grew up, there is a colloquial expression that is often used in response to the question "How are you?" The common reply to this is "You're seeing it." This expression indicates that what you see before you, this flesh, is me, and you can see with your eyes how I am. Paul's point is that what you see with your eyes when looking at his physical self is not "it"; there is more, and the possibilities and goals of his life are now defined by *that* reality and not by the limits of the lump of matter that he once considered to be the entirety of Paul and to be worth all of his investments. It is not that there is no such person as "Paul" anymore; he still uses the first-person singular throughout this autobiographical account, he still draws upon all the abilities that he acquired through his life within Judaism, and he still writes to the Galatians as "Paul, an apostle." But Paul is now Paul-in-Christ; Paul-in-himself is a thing of the past. We might even translate Gal. 2:20 as "I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me."¹⁰

Immediately afterward Paul starts to speak about the Spirit and in a way that singles out the Spirit as a particular marker of salvation: "This alone I wish to ask you: Did you receive the Spirit from the works of the law or from the hearing of faith?" (Gal. 3:2, my trans.). This is a dense and important verse. Paul focuses on the reality of the Spirit (and again, note that he is speaking to people who have

10. The underlying Greek of 2:20 is *zō de ouketi egō, zē de en emoi Christos*.

received the Spirit, not to those outside the community of salvation) and asks whether the Spirit has come from the “works of the law” or from the “hearing of faith.” I translate that last expression clumsily but literally because I want to bring out its force: it is sometimes translated as “believing what you heard” or as “hearing with faith,” but I think these renderings mask the nature of the contrast. The word that I have translated as “hearing” is *akoē*; we get our word “acoustics” from this root. It is a noun designating something that has been heard; we would normally use it not for a message that has been written and read but for one that we have listened to. We might even translate it “the acoustics of faith,” since it is linked to the genitive of the noun *pistis*.

The crucial element is that there exist two different ways of relating to the thing mentioned in the two contrastive parts of this question: Do you get the Spirit as a performer of the works of the law or as a listener to the acoustics of faith? Here is the subtle point: the first makes you the principal agent (the performer of the works of the law), and the other makes you into someone who appropriates the performance of someone else (the one who listens to the acoustics of faith). One makes you the owner of what is achieved, the proprietor of righteous acts; the other makes you a beneficiary of the virtuosity of another person.

Paul, then, is effectively asking: Did you earn the Spirit, or did you receive the Spirit by listening to what someone else has done or is doing? This leads to a further contrast: “If you started with the Spirit [whom you received by the hearing of faith], are you now finishing with the flesh?” (3:3, my trans.). You “got in” by believing and receiving the Spirit; “are you so foolish” (3:3a) that you think you are supposed to “stay in” and to finish in a different way,¹¹ by going back to the old way of thinking that *you* are the principal agent, that it is about your performance, done by your flesh?

11. My language here deliberately echoes the famous terminology of Sanders and the New Perspective and does so in order to highlight the ironic similarities between this way of describing Jewish attitudes toward grace and those of much contemporary Christianity, where we are happy to speak of getting into the kingdom through Christ, but staying in the kingdom is then something we do by rigorous obedience. See the discussion in chap. 1, “Scholarly Contexts for the Present Study.”

Pause for a moment and reflect on Paul's audience and his claims about them. He is not writing to unconverted Jews or to someone who might say, "From start to finish we are saved by obeying the law." He is writing to people who have entered salvation by believing and have received the Spirit, and he is saying to them, "Your theology about how one 'gets in' is fine, but your theology about how one then proceeds stinks, precisely because it does not recognize that the gospel defines life in the kingdom in the same way that it defines entry into it. You 'get in' and you 'stay in' by participating in the same reality: Jesus Christ, known through the hearing of faith, present by the work of the Spirit." All of the above Paul directs to "born again" Christians, evangelicals who have initially received the gospel by faith. It has the capacity, therefore, to cut to the core of evangelicalism today.

Paul goes on to recount where the law is properly located within the sweep of God's work of redemption and where the death of Jesus is located with respect to the law. For the sake of space, I will pass over this material, simply noting its emphasis that the law had (and has) a particular function to discipline and condemn and that prior to the coming of Christ, God's people lived under it while also enslaved to the elemental principles of the world. We will consider this language in more depth in chapter 3. Here I simply want to note that Paul represents the gospel as involving two inseparable sendings. When the fullness of time came (4:4), God sent his Son, born into the same conditions as others—born of a woman, born under the law—to redeem them from those conditions (4:5): the minors become heirs, adopted as children of God. This sending is causally connected (by the conjunction *hoti*) to the paired sending of the Spirit into our hearts (4:6): it is "because you are sons" that God sent the Spirit.¹² Note also, though, something that we might skim over too quickly: the Spirit is specified to be "the Spirit of his Son" (*to pneuma tou hiou autou*), and he generates a correspondence between our selves and the self of the Son—by him we cry "Abba, Father." We are not here imitating Jesus but participating in him and in his unique relationship

12. The gendered term "sons" has to be retained in translation, rather than using the gender-neutral "children" (though Paul does shift to using the latter word at points in Rom. 8, as we will see in chap. 6) because our filial relationship to God is a participation in the relationship of the Son to his Father.

to the Father. We are, to use the language that Paul employs in 3:26–27 (alt.), “sons of God through faith” who have “put on Christ” in our baptism. This statement leads into a description of the community of faith that is often robbed of its real significance: “There is no longer a Jew or a Greek, there is no longer a slave or a free person, there is no longer a male and a female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28, my trans.). I have added indefinite articles to the normal translation of the verse. This is a valid translation of the Greek, and it helps to bring out the sense that these particularities are all still present but that they are enclosed within a larger reality that constitutes a more basic identity, shared by all participants: you are all one in Christ. One can imagine Paul saying this in a room filled with a mixture of people (some of whom may be tacitly evaluating and judging others) and pointing at each person: a Jew, a Greek, a slave, a free person. The differences are not obliterated, but they are no longer considered to be the most basic elements of identity.

What I am seeking to highlight is this: the shift that takes place in the gospel is represented by Paul in terms of identity, of who we are. We are redefined, re-identified, by our incorporation into Christ. This is the basis for his righteousness being imputed to us; it is not a transaction that occurs between external parties, Jesus and the Father, but an incorporation into a person whose relationship with God is perfect. And the Spirit who inhabits us is not an energizing infusion of power; he is very specifically Christ’s Spirit, who makes his goodness a reality in our limbs. Entry into the kingdom and moral identity *within* the kingdom are both defined and constituted by the identity of Jesus. The same gospel rules both.

We cannot, then, think about the Christian moral life as something “I” do, assisted in some sense by the Spirit. It is something that Christ-in-me does; he is as much the acting subject of my verbs of obedience as I am. As soon as we lose sight of this, we move toward a way of thinking about righteousness that commodifies obedience, makes it into something I achieve and accrue, rather than something I inhabit as I inhabit Jesus. And yet, this is exactly what happens widely in evangelical thought today, exacerbated in some circles by a tendency to isolate the kingship (or kingdom) of Jesus from its wider context of union with Christ. Jesus is represented as the one to whom we

are to render our obedience, whose reign we are to proclaim to the world and to reflect in our own lives. That is good, but it is only one side of the account, for we cannot render obedience to Jesus the king unless we clothe ourselves with Jesus the servant.

Conclusion

This chapter has laid some foundations for the rest of the book by drawing attention to the way Paul represents Christian moral identity as “in Christ.” We have sketched some elements that we will fill out in later chapters and have made some points whose significance remains to be explored. Let me draw a few initial conclusions.

First, it should be obvious that any efforts to “sort” or “fix” moral problems within the church that are based on *our* performance of certain activities have overlooked the basic question of identity that needs to contextualize who “we” are in Christ. By this I am saying not that there is no room for Christian moral effort or the formation of good Christian habits but that these need to be done with proper awareness that “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” For example, the routine of having a daily quiet time is a good thing, but not if it is considered a thing in itself.

Second, and following from this, fostering Christian moral identity is not principally about instilling good habits or establishing norms that mark our community but about fostering a person’s sense of who Christ is in them and who they are in Christ. This, I think, is one of the reasons why the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are so important within the NT and are frequently appealed to by Paul for moral purposes. Our next two chapters will consider this in more depth, but here we can simply say that the task of forming Christian moral identity is not about saying “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (Col. 2:21) but about helping believers to know the significance of being baptized into the death of Jesus and united to him in his resurrection. Christian moral identity is formed when we routinely enact a celebratory memory of an appalling death.

Third, these elements are not additional to salvation or justification but belong to the same act of identification by which justification

is accomplished. The account of righteousness that Paul comes to hold as a follower of Christ involves a classically conceived notion of justification by faith. But it is vital to recognize that at stake is not just a level of righteousness we cannot reach by ourselves but our whole mode of relationship to what we label “righteousness.” Righteousness is no longer to be conceived as something that any believer will own as a form of capital that they have acquired through lineage or labor; rather, it is now seen as something they enjoy through their identification with someone else.

Our theological language of “imputation” is actually a way of speaking about a mode of acquisition that originates outside ourselves. The point for us is that Paul links this acquisition to the concept of selfhood: because we are “in Christ,” his righteousness becomes ours. Imputation is, if you like, a corollary of implantation. What this means for the righteousness that is manifest in the transformation of our Christian lives is that it proceeds not from an infusion of new spiritual energy but from our new identities constituted in union with Jesus Christ. It may, perhaps, be helpful to consider some of the clichés that we often use of the Christian life. We rightly warn against the danger of seeking to do something “in our own strength,” directing people to “rely on God.” But if these admonitions are not carefully considered, they can sound like we just need some assistance, a shot of energy from outside that will enhance our deficit of strength. This is why I suggested that our popular ways of thinking about the Spirit often understand him as functioning as an energy supplement. That, coincidentally, was broadly how the Spirit was represented in some of the medieval theologies of virtue that subscribed to the concept of “infused grace”; ironically, much contemporary Protestant theology has a notion of the Spirit that is rather similar. The antidote is a right emphasis on the language of union with Christ: it is the presence of Christ, by his Spirit, that brings a change to our lives.