

## The Theology of St Paul as Predominantly a Christology

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**Abstract:** In this article, the author acknowledges that Pauline theology is primarily Christology. In fact, his theology is to be found in his encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. It is there, in that unique event, that Paul understood the plan of God for the salvation of humankind in the death and resurrection of Christ.

This “story of the cross” (1 Cor 1:18) thus puts Christ himself at the centre of soteriology (God’s new mode of salvation), and all else in Paul’s teaching has to be oriented to this Christocentric soteriology. Finally the author attempts to answer the disconcerting question: How would he proclaim Christ in the situation of religious pluralism in our country

**Keywords:** Pauline Theology, Pauline Christology, reconciliation, Indian context, Challenge of Paul to India, life in Christ.

Scholars generally agree that the key to Pauline theology is to be found in his encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. It is there, in that unique event, that Paul understood the plan of God for the salvation of humankind in the death and resurrection of Christ. Paul expresses this truth over and over again in various ways: “It pleased God to save those who would believe through the folly of the gospel message (*k-rygma*). For whereas Jews demand signs, and the Greeks look for philosophy, we proclaim a Christ who has been crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and an absurdity to Gentiles. But to those who have been called, whether Jews or Greeks, he is Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:21-25; cf. Rom 1:16; 2 Cor 4:4). *This “story of the cross” (1 Cor 1:18)*

*thus puts Christ himself at the centre of soteriology (God's new mode of salvation), and all else in Paul's teaching has to be oriented to this Christocentric soteriology.*<sup>1</sup>

Paul saw the gospel as part of a plan, gratuitously conceived by God, for a new form of human salvation, to be revealed and realized in his Son. The author of this plan was God (*ho theos*, 1 Cor 2:7), whom Paul had worshiped as a Phari-see, the God of "the covenants" (Rom 9:4) of old. What Paul teaches about God is not a theology (in the strict sense) independent of his *Christocentric soteriology*, for this God is the "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 1:3; Rom 15: 6), and what he says about God is usually asserted in contexts dealing with his salvific activity. "It pleased God to save those who believe through the folly of the gospel message" (1 Cor 1:21). Even when Paul speaks of the qualities or attributes of God, they almost always depict God as such and such for us.

If Paul's theology is predominantly a Christology, one must insist on its functional character. Paul was little concerned to explain the intrinsic constitution of Christ *in se*; he preached "Christ crucified," Christ as significant for humanity. "You are God's children through your union with Christ Jesus who became for us wisdom from God, our uprightness, our sanctification, our redemption" (1 Cor 1: 30). This "Christ crucified," though described in figures derived from contemporary Jewish or Hellenistic backgrounds and even embellished with myth, still has relevance for people of our times.<sup>2</sup>

**In the present paper, our main aim is to discuss Paul's understanding of Jesus Christ and his place and role in Paul's world-view.** In the end we shall discuss briefly some issues which emerge in the socio-economic, political, religious and cultural context of India, and see what relevance Paul's teaching has for us today.

## **Christ's Role in Salvation**

One invariable trait of the Messiah (Christ) in Jewish expectation was that he should be the agent of God's final victory over his enemies. On the popular level that meant, quite crudely, victory over the pagan empires which from time to time oppressed the chosen people.<sup>3</sup>

However, the believers in Jesus pro-claimed that the *crucified* Jesus, now raised and glorified by God, was the “LORD (*Kyrios*) and the Christ (*Messiah*)” (Acts 2:36).

For Paul, a devout Pharisee, a crucified man stood under God’s curse. For, according to Deut 21: 23, “a hanged man is accursed by God.” Thus the revealed word of God itself testified that Jesus was cursed by God, as he had been crucified and had died an ignominious death upon the tree. To accept a man cursed by God as the Messiah was impossible to any pious Jew. It amounted to blasphemy against God Himself. None of the expectations of the Jews concerning the Messiah and the messianic kingdom were fulfilled in Jesus. Surely, Jesus crucified was ‘a stumbling block to the Jews’. Hence Paul persecuted the Christians violently; not only in Jerusalem, but he proceeded also to other cities, e.g., to Damascus.

In his letter to the Galatians Paul himself gives an account of his sudden, unexpected encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus (Gal 1:11-17):

“...I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it... But when He who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me,<sup>4</sup> in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles,... I went away into Arabia; <sup>5</sup> and again I returned to Damascus.”

### *The Significance of the Event for Paul’s Christology*

The experience with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus radically changed the Jewish theology or rather the *messianic* theology of the Pharisaic rabbi, Paul. The whole plan of God for the salvation of humankind could be seen by him now in a new light, illumined by the fact of the risen and glorified Jesus.<sup>6</sup> A number of aspects of God’s plan of salvation, His *myst-ri-ou*, would become clearer and grow deeper in the mind of Paul in the course of time during his apostolic endeavours in proclaiming the good news of God in Jesus Christ. However, as scholars observe, *the Damascus encounter remains the key to Pauline theology or his Christology*.

The following theological motifs emerge implicitly, if not explicitly, from the accounts of the Damascus encounter:

## *The Crucified Jesus, now risen, is the LORD and the MESSIAH*

The Damascus experience brought home to Paul that Jesus, who had died on the cross, was now incontrovertibly alive — alive by the power of God. Paul saw the risen Christ resplendent with the 'glory of God'. According to the Bible, the 'glory of God' means God Himself, insofar as He is revealed or manifested in His majesty, His power, the glow of His holiness, the dynamism of His being (cf. e.g., Ex 33:20ff).<sup>7</sup> Thus Paul was convinced that he saw *the invisible God become visible in the person of the risen Jesus* (cf. 2 Cor 4:6).<sup>8</sup> He could, therefore, and he always would henceforth, call the risen Jesus the LORD (*Kyrios*).

He could assert that the risen Jesus was indeed the Messiah, who fulfilled the Jewish expectations of the Messiahship in a far superior and deeper way, since he was indeed the giver of the promised Spirit and the deliverer from the bondage of sin. His resurrection was the pledge of victory over all enemies of the human spirit, for it was victory over death, 'the last enemy' (1 Cor 15:26); and appropriately enough, since death is the final frustration of all human designs — if that were indeed the end. This experience of salvation Paul himself had when he surrendered himself to the risen Jesus in faith.

### *'The Eschatological Age has dawned'*

In the fact of the outpouring of the Spirit by the risen Jesus, Paul knew that the Eschatological Age (also called 'the Age to Come', or 'the *Eschaton*') had already begun. This brought Paul to view the salvation history in a new perspective. He saw that God had 'now' intervened through the coming of Jesus into the world, especially through his death and resurrection: the evil powers, sin, and death were conquered decisively, though in an initial, 'inaugurated' manner. The irrevocable process of victory over all evil had already begun. In other words, the *Eschaton* had already dawned on the believers. "Upon us the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor 10:11). The fullest realization or the culmination of this new age, was 'not yet'. That would surely come (hopefully not too far in the future), when the Lord would come in glory, at his parousia. "We are citizens of heaven, and from heaven we expect our deliverer to come, the Lord Jesus

Christ. He will transfigure the body belonging to our humble state, and give it a form, like that of his own resplendent body" (Phil 3:20-21).<sup>9</sup>

### *The Meaning of the Cross of Christ*

In the light of the reality of the risen and glorified Jesus a new meaning of Deut 21:23 dawned upon him. Jesus, who "knew no sin" (2 Cor 5:21), hung upon the tree not for his own sins but for the sins of all humankind. Both Jews as well as Gentiles were guilty because of their sins, and as such stood condemned before God; in that sense they all were cursed. Jesus completely identified himself with the sinful humankind as their *inclusive representative*, and by hanging on the cross took upon himself their curse. As Paul would say in Gal 3:13: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse *for us* (*hyper h-mMn*)."<sup>10</sup> Thus Jesus, hanging on the cross was an expression of God's uncompromising No to sin.

However, through his perfect obedience (Rom 5:19) and the 'expiation by his blood' on the cross, Jesus removed our curse and reconciled us to God (cf. Rom 3:25). The cross which was the place of God's curse for Paul the Pharisee, became now the place of God's revelation — revelation of His redeeming and atoning love. The cross which was an object of utter shame and a stumbling block to Paul the Jew, became for him now the 'power and wisdom of God'.

### *Salvation, a gratuitous Gift of God, received through Faith.*

Previously as a Pharisee, Paul was hoping to obtain salvation through his faithful observance of the Law.<sup>11</sup> He thought that salvation depended on his good works and efforts. In the Damascus experience, however, he came to realize that salvation is of the Lord; it is an act of divine grace man has done nothing to deserve.

This salvation (= 'justification', i.e., forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the divine sonship, etc.) Paul received from the Lord, not as a reward merited by works of the Law, but as a sheer gift, grace (*charis*), bestowed upon him by the Lord in response to his personal self-surrender to the Lord, i.e., his faith. He says

emphatically in Rom 3:28: "For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law." From then onwards, the grace of God, i.e., His favour done to undeserving humans, became almost a single-word expression for the gospel Paul preached.

### *The Gospel open to the Gentiles also*

In the 'revelation' on the road to Damascus, Paul realized that salvation was through faith and not through the works of the Law; thus it was open to the Gentiles also. Henceforth Paul would preach the gospel of God's grace in Christ to all, both Jews and Gentiles<sup>12</sup> alike.

### *The Church as the Body of Christ*

Paul's doctrine of the Church is to a great extent rooted in the Damascus encounter. The risen Lord asked him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (cf. Acts 9: 4; 22:7; 26:14.). Paul realized that in his persecution of Christians, he was persecuting Christ himself. In other words, the Lord identified with his disciples. This identification is fundamental for Paul's understanding of the Church as the body (= the *person*, in biblical language) of Christ.

### **God's Salvation in Christ**

The impact of the radical transformation, the profound **saving experience of God in the person of Christ**, was so great in Paul that he had to proclaim this good news of God's grace in Christ, the gospel, to every human being he met.

We shall deal with the central theme of Paul's gospel, viz., **God's salvation in Christ**, or his **Christocentric Soteriology**, culled mainly from his uncontested letters, in three sections:

(1) Salvation as a *past* event; (2) Salvation as a *present* experience; and (3) Salvation as a *future* hope.<sup>13</sup>

## (1) Salvation as a *Past* Event

### Man's Existence Without Christ

The starting-point of Paul's thought is the whole man as he is in reality, as he is seen by God. It is the reality of unredeemed man without Christ, before God's intervention in man's life through Christ.

Looking from the plenitude of Christ, Paul views with a sombre and distressing outlook the miserable situation of unredeemed man, man without Christ: a slave of sin, pulled down by the flesh, made worse by the imposing influence of the Law, and doomed to death. All men, both Jews and Gentiles, are under the power of sin (Rom 3:9). All have sinned, and they all come short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23).

Man as man is doomed and incapable of helping himself. No matter how impressive his accomplishments may be in the field of science or art, of technique or of the mystery of the natural forces, he remains hopelessly deficient in the essential human values of morality and religion. In anguish he cries: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom 7:24).

### God's Intervention to save Humanity

Immediately Paul gives the answer: "Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (7:25). Against the background of the dark reality and in the midst of the utter helplessness of unredeemed man trying to 'save' himself on his own, Paul sees the great act of the grace of God, His merciful love towards undeserving man, i.e., His righteousness (*dikaïosyn*-), in the work of redemption in Christ.<sup>14</sup> What no man could do, "what was impossible by the law, in that it was weak because of the flesh, God has made good. By sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, He has condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom 8:3). "While we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom 5:6). "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8).

In the famous passage, Rom 3:21-26, Paul deals with this eschatological act ("*now*") of God's righteousness in the person and

work of Christ Jesus. As scholars observe, this passage is considered as "the epitome and mother-idea of Paul's theology", <sup>15</sup> or "the essence of Paul's theology" (J.A. Fitzmyer). The passage brings out most beautifully how God's grace, His infinite love, is manifested in the cross of Christ, so that when we look at Christ on the cross sprinkled with his own blood, we can truly say: "God is love."

### Man's Justification by the Faith of Christ (Rom 3:22)

It is interesting to note that in all the most important passages about justification, Paul characteristically says that we have been justified by the faith of Christ: "But now the righteousness of God is revealed...which is through faith of Jesus Christ (*dia pisteMs Iesou Christou*) for all who believe (*pisteuontas*)" (Rom 3:21-22). "A man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith of Jesus Christ (*dia pisteMs tou Christou*), ...we have believed in Christ Jesus (*eis Christon Iesoun episteusamen*), that we might be justified by faith of Christ (*ek pisteMs Christou*) and not by the works of the law" (Gal 2:16; cf. also Gal 2: 20; 3: 22; Phil 3:9).

Many commentators<sup>16</sup> and translators take the expression "faith of Christ" in the Greek as objective genitive (i.e., faith in Christ, <sup>17</sup> Christ being the object of man's faith), rather than as subjective genitive (i.e., faith of Christ, Christ being the subject or agent of the act of faith). Actually, both these genitives are in keeping with Pauline thought. However, in the passages mentioned above it seems more appropriate to take them referring to the faith of Jesus.

We know that in Pauline thought Jesus is considered as the second Adam, an inclusive representative of the whole humankind (cf. Rom 5:12-19; 2 Cor 5:14-15; etc.). As such he took upon himself *our* curse. "God made him who knew no sin, to be sin for us (*hyper h-mMn*), so that we might become the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor 5:21). In the first Adam the whole humankind died (1 Cor 15:22), that is, all were estranged or alienated from God. *In Christ*, the second Adam, the whole humankind was reconciled to God. "As through one man's offence judgement came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one man's righteous act the free gift has come to all men, resulting in justification of life" (Rom 5:18).



This act of Jesus by which he surrendered himself completely to God the Father in filial trust and in perfect obedience to His plan of salvation of humankind, was his act of faith. In fact, the whole earthly life of Jesus was a life of faith, i.e., of total self surrender to the will of the Father in perfect obedience, reaching its climax in his death on the cross (Phil 2:8; Jn 4:34; 5:30; 6:38; Heb 10:5-7).

Through this act of faith Jesus died to the power of Sin and all that held humankind in bondage and alienation from God. As we have seen before, humankind was bound in the servitude of Sin, established in the 'flesh'. Thus the natural, flesh-and-blood life of human beings was the territory, so to speak, of Sin, and all dwellers on that territory Sin claimed as its own.

Christ, by his Incarnation, became a denizen of the 'flesh'. Sin put in its claim. In other words, Jesus was tempted to sin as we are all tempted, in such forms as sin might take for one in Jesus' situation. But instead of yielding, and acknowledging Sin's dominion, as we all do, Jesus rendered a perfect obedience to God — in opposition to Adam's disobedience (Rom 5:19) — becoming obedient even unto death on the cross (Phil 2:8). Jesus, in plain terms, died rather than sin; and so his death, instead of being a sign of the victory of Sin over man's 'fallen' nature, was a sign of the complete rout of Sin in a decisive engagement.<sup>18</sup> That Jesus' death on the cross, the supreme expression of his faith, was salvific and liberating from all sin for the whole humankind, was effectively shown by God by His raising Jesus from the dead: "He was delivered up for our trespasses and raised up for our justification" (Rom 4:25).

Now there is only question of the individual human being entering through faith and baptism '**into Christ**' (*eis Christon*), the movement of incorporation into Christ, i.e. his death and resurrection, and thus becoming a partaker of a new life '**in Christ**' (*en ChristM*).

## **Man's Sharing in the Christ event: Faith-Baptism**

### **Life into Christ**

As Paul says repeatedly, the gift of redemption or justification which God offers to sinful man through the Christ-event, is

appropriated by man through faith. "We hold that a man is justified by faith apart from the work of the law" (Rom 3:28).

## Faith

For Paul faith is that attitude in which, acknowledging our complete insufficiency for any of the high ends of life, we rely utterly on the sufficiency of God. It is to cease from all assertion of self, even by way of effort after righteousness, and to make room for the divine initiative. "It is to trust God fully and let Him have His way with us"(C.H. Dodd).<sup>19</sup> By such faith we enter into life in every sense in which that phrase can be used.

### **Justification (= Redemption, Expiation, Reconciliation)**

Right at the start it is good to note that the above expressions are *metaphors* or *picture phrases* used by Paul to express the reality of God's salvation in Christ.<sup>20</sup> What he is saying all the time is that in Christ God has done for us what we could never do for ourselves. The criminal could not effect his own acquittal, nor the slave set himself free, and God alone could 'expiate' the defilement we have brought upon ourselves. Only God could rectify the estrangement or alienation we had caused and bring us back to Himself.<sup>21</sup>

### **Baptism into Christ (*eis Christon*)**

We saw that for Paul man is justified by faith, i.e., through an act of personal self surrender to God in Christ. Now Baptism is the *seal* of the reality of this faith. It is 'the sacramental complement of faith, the rite whereby man achieves union with Christ and publicly manifests his commitment to him'. The two notions 'faith' and 'baptism' are essentially and intimately connected for Paul as for all early Christian preachers. "In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through *faith*. For as many of you as were baptized *into Christ* have put on Christ" (Gal 3:26f.).

For Paul, as for his Christian predecessors, baptism was the rite of initiation into the community of believers, i.e., the Church, the Body of Christ, the 'new humanity' of which he is the head. The faith which committed the Christian to Christ committed him also

to the community of Christians as a member of the body. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:12f.)

In Rom 6:3ff. Paul describes baptism as the believer’s ‘*co-dying*’ with Christ to the old life of sin, and ‘*co-rising*’ with him unto newness of life. To understand the ‘realism’ of his language here, we must remember that behind Christian baptism stands the great ‘baptism’ of Christ himself (Mk 10:38; Lk 12:50), unique and all-inclusive, undertaken by Christ himself for the sins of the whole world.<sup>22</sup> What has been done *for us* all, is now represented and effected in us who commit ourselves to Christ in faith-baptism. That is why Paul uses verbs compounded with *syn* (= with), to express the identification of the Christian with the preeminently redemptive acts of Christ’s life, viz., his passion, crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection and glorification. Thus he uses the expressions ‘co-suffer with Christ’, ‘co-crucified with Christ’, ‘co-die with Christ’, ‘co-buried with Christ’, ‘co-raised with Christ’, ‘co-glorified with Christ’, etc.

## (2) Salvation as *Present Experience*

### Life in Christ

We saw in the previous paragraphs that a believer, through his faith-baptism commitment, is torn from his original condition of sin (“in Adam”, 1 Cor 15:22), from his self-centred, earth-oriented inclinations (“in the flesh”, Rom 7:5), and from his religio-cultural background (“under the law”, 1 Cor 9:20; “idolaters”, etc., 1 Cor 6:10-11), and is solemnly introduced into Christ (*eis Christon*), he is incorporated into Christ, he begins to participate in that Spirit and that Life, which Paul often calls life in Christ (*en ChristM*), or life according to the Spirit (*kata pneuma*).

### “In Christ”

The expression “in Christ”, counting by-forms like ‘in him’, etc. occurs some 200 times in Paul’s letters. The most common use of this phrase ‘in Christ’ is to express the close union of the risen Christ

and the Christian, an inclusion or incorporation that connotes a symbiosis of the two. This vital, personal union can also be expressed as 'Christ in me': "It is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). A Christian, so to say, has no longer a separate existence. He is merged into Christ.

There are also at times ecclesial or communitarian dimensions to the phrase (Gal 1:22). The Christian so incorporated in Christ is actually a member of the Body of Christ, he is part of the whole Christ.

### **Life in Christ: Personal Dimension**

A Christian is one who by the act of God's grace in Christ becomes in all truth an adopted son of God in the Son. God shares His very life with a Christian, communicating the Holy Spirit, i.e., His own self-gift to him. Paul says: "God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Gal 4:6). "You have received the Spirit of sonship. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom 8:15-16).

Though remaining still human, 'in the flesh' (*en sarki*), he is divinized at the same time through the immanence of Christ ('Christ in me', Gal 2:20; Rom 8:10).<sup>23</sup> This transformation into the image of the risen Jesus, which began at the moment of the faith-baptism event, is an on-going process in the life of a Christian (2 Cor 3:18). He is destined to be conformed to the image of the Son of God (Rom 8:29).

### **Life in Christ: Christian Ethics**

According to Paul, while *faith* expresses the Christian's relation to God (Christ), *love* expresses most often his/her relation to the fellow humans. This horizontal dimension, that of the Christian's way of living in relationship with others, or in other words, *the Christian ethic is but a natural, spontaneous expression or consequence of the vertical dimension, that of the life of faith-union with Christ*. In fact, the whole Christian ethical life can be summed up, in Paul's own words', as "faith expressing itself through love" (Gal 5:6). These works of love in the life of the Christian who is led

by or walks according to the Spirit, *kata pneuma*, are called by him “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal 5:22f.). According to Paul, the Spirit is to be recognized as the mode in which Christ himself is personally present in his church, inspiring and directing his members and shaping the whole body to his own pattern.

Paul’s whole Christian ethic is grounded in the ‘imperative’ flowing from the ‘indicative’, our response in Christian living (the ‘imperative’) to the wonderful kindness of God to us sinners in Christ (the ‘indicative’).

For example, Paul indicates in Gal 3:27: “You have put on Christ.” In Rom 13: 14 he exhorts: “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” While in Rom 6:2 he says, “We died to sin”, in Rom 6: 11-12 he reminds them: “So you must consider yourselves dead to sin. . . Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies.”

These imperatives or hortatives in Paul are for driving home the need for working out ethically all that is involved in being in Christ. The maxim all through is: ‘Werde das was Du bist’ (*Become what you are*). Paul’s language varies. In Phil 1:27 it is: “Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ”; in 1 Thess 5:8: “Since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.”<sup>24</sup>

## Life in Christ: Ecclesial Dimension

The baptism ‘into Christ’ is no mere individualistic experience for Christians, but a corporate one. They all put on the same risen Christ. In this oneness of Christians with Christ and in Christ all barriers of caste and creed, colour and sex are superseded. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one person in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).<sup>25</sup>

The Christian vocation is a call by God to belong to the *New Covenant*<sup>26</sup> in the Spirit foretold by the prophets in the OT (Jer 31:31ff.; Ez 36:26f.), the covenant sealed in the blood of His beloved Son Jesus Christ. It is a call to belong to the new ‘Israel of God’ (Gal 6:16), to be His people in Christ, the *qahal Yahweh* or the *ekkl-sia tou theou*, i.e., the Church of God in Christ.

Paul refers to this communion of the Christians, the Church, as the Body of Christ (cf. Rom 12:4ff; 1 Cor 12:12ff.). Baptism introduces the Christian into the 'Body of Christ': "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so also (is) Christ; that is to say, we all have been baptized through one Spirit into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and all have been made to drink of one Spirit. .... You are the body of Christ and each on his part a member of it (1 Cor 12:12-13, 27).<sup>27</sup>

### **(3). Salvation as *Future Hope***

#### **Life with Christ**

#### **Being 'with Christ'**

Being with Christ is the heart of the Christian hope. Christ, the first-born among many brethren, is already risen and reigning. He is the 'firstfruits'. What happened to him will happen to those who are his; for we are joint-heirs with Christ', and 'if we have died with him, we believe that we shall also live with him' (Rom 6:8). 'So shall we be always with the Lord' (1 Thess 4:17). We have already observed before that according to Paul, the Christian has been given the Holy Spirit as a guarantee, pledge (*arrabMn*, 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5), as firstfruits (Rom 8:23) of his final glorification. This is often referred to as the "resurrection of the body." This would take place at the parousia of the *Lord*:

Christ the first fruits, then at his parousia those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power...The last enemy to be destroyed is death... When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the One who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all (1 Cor 15:23-28).

## The Relevance of Paul's Teaching in the Socio-economic, Religious and Cultural

### Context of India

In the foregoing pages we dealt with the Christology of St Paul according to his Jewish-Hellenistic world-view. If Paul were to come to India today, what would be the content of his preaching?

How would he proclaim Christ in the situation of religious pluralism in our country?

I think Paul would proclaim the same message of the gospel of God's grace in Christ to the people in search of salvation, adapting himself to the religious and social culture of the people, becoming "all things to all" for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor 9:22). He would say that the same God whom they worship has revealed himself in the history of humankind fully in the person of Jesus Christ. He himself has had the "experience of Christ" on the road to Damascus (Gal 1:16); he says: "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the *knowledge* (= personal, intimate communion) of *the glory of God* (i.e. God himself in his external manifestation) in *the face* (i.e. the person) of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6).

Thus Paul would say to one and all, "The Jesus whom I proclaim, is the visible image of the one and only invisible God. The one and the same God, who is the creator and saviour of us all, is inviting you to surrender yourself to him in the person of Jesus Christ. Through this act of faith you will experience the gift of his salvation. Look at me! I have received the same gift when I believed in Jesus Christ with utter trust in his loving kindness. I have 'experienced God' (*anubhava*) in the person of this living Christ."

If some people (e.g. Like Hindu holy men, Tukrm, Dnyaneshwar, etc.) come forward and say that they too have the experience of God (through private revelation) in their own religion, Paul would certainly listen to their experience with interest and respect, dialoguing with them, maintaining, however, the historical and public nature of his Christian revelation. After thus *witnessing* to Christ he

would leave the matter to God. His personal life lived among them will show whether his "God-experience in Christ" is authentic or not. The person's 'conversion' is a personal matter between him/her and Christ (God). "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel" (1 Cor 1:17).

Incidentally, Paul never preaches to the Jews to be 'better Jews' in their own Judaistic religion. No, he preaches "Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:23).

How would Paul find his dictum, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one person in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28), being lived among the Christian communities in India?

In all humility we shall have to confess that we have failed miserably in this regard. In a number of Catholic communities in various parts of our country there is rampant casteism; there are, for example, dalit Christian groups fighting openly with the high caste Christians. This is seen not only among the laity, but also among the clergy in particular. Women are given a secondary place in social or even in religious matters, where "one person in Christ" should be evident. This "caste system" is a great scandal to the growth of the gospel among the non-Christians. They don't see anything of our being "one person in Christ" or our "faith working through love (*agap-*)" being lived in practice.

Why is it so? Perhaps, in spite of having been baptized in Christ, we Christians have never really met Christ; we really don't *know* Christ, though we may know a lot about him and discuss or preach about him. In that sense, we are Christians only in name, not different from the Hindus with their caste system. Our priests are mainly busy with the external sacramental ministry and social work. Perhaps they have no time to 'know' their Lord in personal communion. The result is that *Christ*, who is the source and dynamism of all their ministry and social work, is not *witnessed to*.



What about 'the resurrection of the dead' in Christ, and the Hindu belief of the cycle of re-birth?

In his dialogue with Hindus, Paul would stress this aspect of Christian experience. The Christian has received the gift of the Holy Spirit as a pledge or guarantee of his/her final resurrection. We are already sharing in the life of God here and now as Christians, and we are looking forward with certain hope of our total glorification after our death. This could be a great source of joy and relief for our Hindu brethren who are caught up in the cycle of re-birth.

### The Christ-experience of a Christian and the Hindu mysticism

According to the *advaita* form of Hindu mysticism, the person is ultimately 'absorbed' into the divine or ultimately 'realizes' his own identity with *brahma*. Paul would tell the Hindu philosopher that a Christian, though merged in Christ so that he/she can truly say that 'his/her life is Christ', or 'it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me', yet in this so-called Christian mysticism a Christian never loses his/her identity. It is the 'experience' of 'participation' or 'sharing' in divine life in Christ. This truth of Christian faith should be appealing to our non-Christian brethren. No one likes to lose one's identity at any cost!

### Notes

1. J.A. Fitzmyer, "Pauline Theology", in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Bangalore: TPI, 1990, art. 82:28.
2. *Ibid.* art. 82:29.
3. C.H. Dodd, "The Thought of Paul", in *A Source Book of the Bible Teachers*, Walton R.C. (ed.), SCM Press, 1970, p.317.
4. "in me" (*en emoi*) fits in better than "to me" (RSV) in the context. Paul proclaims "Jesus" whom he has "experienced" in him. Cf. J.B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians*, Macmillan and Co., 1921, p. 83: St. Paul bore in his person the strongest testimony to the power of the Gospel.

5. Paul went to Arabia, a gentile country, presumably to preach there. Arabia probably refers to the Nabatean kingdom of Aretas IV Philopatris, in Transjordan, E and S of Damascus.
6. J.A. Fitzmyer, *Ibid.* art. 82:14.
7. F. Pereira, *Gripped by God in Christ – The Mind and Heart of St Paul*, Bombay: St Pauls, 1990, p.33. In Ex 33:20ff. : 1 = My face = My glory.
8. *Ibid.* pp. 33-34; 2 Cor 4:6: "For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge (i.e. personal, intimate communion) of the glory of God (i.e. God himself in his experiential manifestation) in the face (i.e. the person) of Christ.
9. Paul's doctrine thus goes contrary to the tenet of "re-birth" of Hinduism.
10. *hyper h-mMn* is fundamental to Pauline soteriology. Jesus is the second Adam, an inclusive representative of all humankind. The biblical principle of solidarity is evident here. Cf. F. Pereira, *ibid.* p.98.
11. This was one of the most fundamental tenets of Judaism. Cf. F. Pereira, *ibid.* pp. 51-54.
12. Paul takes pride in calling himself 'an apostle to the gentiles' (Rom 11:13).
13. This scheme is followed by A.M. Hunter, *The Gospel According to St Paul*, London, 1966, chapters 2-4.
14. F. Pereira, *ibid.*, pp.81-98.
15. F. Prat, *Theology of St Paul*, Vol.I, London, 1959, p. 205.
16. J.A. Fitzmyer, *ROMANS*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 33, 1993, p.345.
17. This is seen in most of the English translations, e.g., RSV, NRSV, NIV, etc. The NRSV text of Gal. 2:16 reads: "we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through *faith in Jesus Christ*. And we have come to *believe in Christ Jesus*, so that we might be justified by *faith in Christ*, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law."
18. C.H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, Collins: Fontana Books, 1959, pp. 109-110.
19. *Idem*, "The Thought of Paul", p. 315.
20. By taking the literal meaning of the words *justification*, *redemption*, *expiation*, and *atonement*, many authors have misunderstood Paul's doctrine. His gospel is what was foretold in the OT scriptures; hence

the meaning of these expressions should be found from their usage in the Greek Septuagint bible. Cf. F. Pereira, *op. cit.* pp. 83-96.

21. C.H. Dodd, "The Thought of Paul", p. 316.
22. Cf. O. Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament*, London, 1950, p. 23. 'According to the New Testament, all men have in principle received baptism long ago, namely on Golgotha, at Good Friday and Easter.'
23. This is Christian mysticism. It is a sharing or participation in the life of the risen Christ. The Christian is merged in Christ; however, he retains his identity. It is not, as in some forms of Hinduism, an absorption in or identity with the divine: *tat tvam asi; aham brahmāsmi*.
24. These 'reminders' are not some sort of external laws *imposed* on the Christians. They are 'signals' to show them where they really stand as Christians. Paul, as a pastor and a realist, knows that they are still in the 'flesh', which tends to act in conflict with the 'spirit' (Gal 5:17). Their Christian vision may become blurred at times; hence they need these 'signals'. Basically they are the life and teaching of Jesus. Primarily, however, they should be led by the Spirit of the risen Lord immanent in them. Cf. F. Pereira, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-120.
25. It goes without saying that if this reality of the Christian vocation is loved seriously, Christians should be able to revolutionize and transform the whole world making it a better and happier place to live in, where the 'kingdom of God' has really come.
26. The Old Covenant made by God with Israel was: "*I am your God, you are My people.*" The New Covenant made by God in Christ is: "*I am your God (=Abba), you are My people (= sons / daughters in the Son).*"
27. The image of Christ as the head of the body, the church, is developed more specifically in the Deutero-Pauline letters, Colossians and Ephesians.