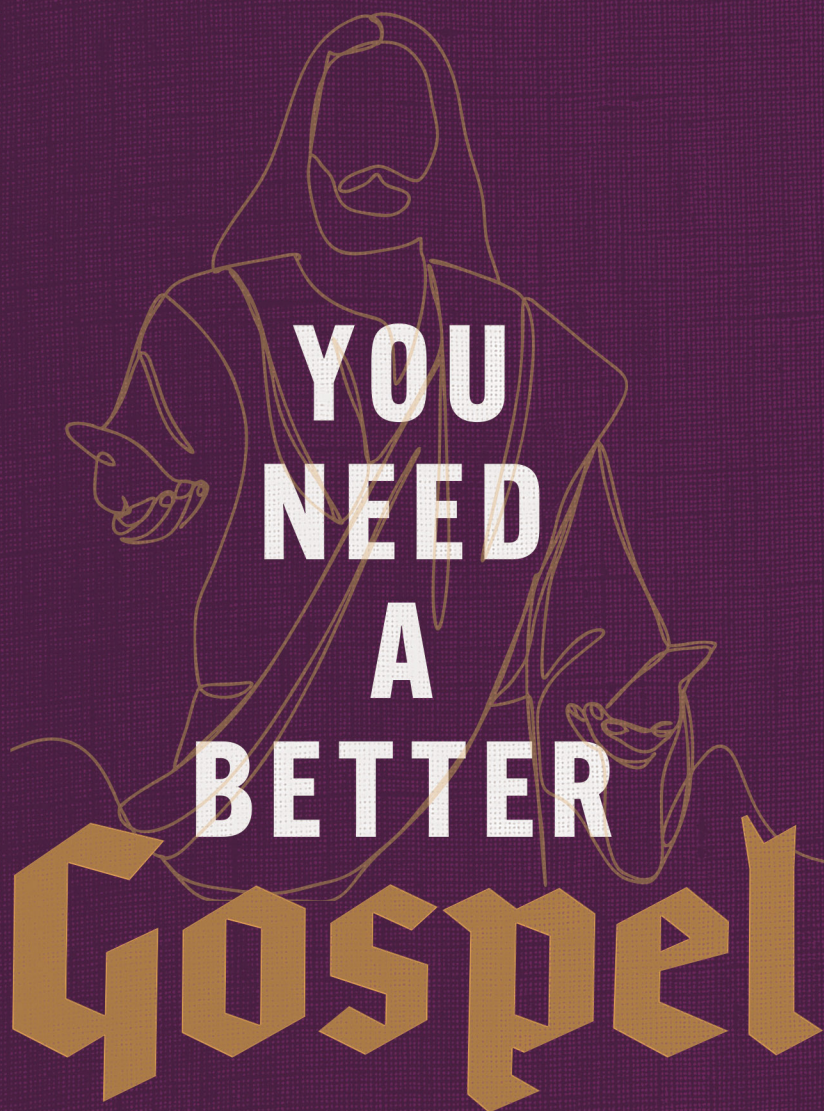


RECLAIMING THE GOOD NEWS OF
PARTICIPATION WITH CHRIST



KLYNE R. SNODGRASS

**YOU
NEED
A
BETTER
Gospel**

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PARTICIPATION WITH CHRIST**

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Introduction

Christianity (that is, the Christianity of the New Testament . . .) does not exist. . . . Christianity [in Denmark] is enjoyment of life, tranquilized . . . by the assurance that the thing about eternity is settled. . . . I will not take part in what is known as official Christianity.

Søren Kierkegaard¹

Nothing compares to riding a horse. I have been riding horses since I was ten, and I can assure you that thinking about riding or talking about riding, which even nonriders can do, is not the same as riding a horse. The same is true with faith. Thinking about faith and talking about faith may be enjoyable and stimulating, but they are nowhere close to living a faith, which is what Christianity is about.

Søren Kierkegaard's words above, addressed to nineteenth-century Danish Christians, are unsettling, even harsh, but they point to the cleavage between the New Testament message and modern perceptions of Christianity. The problem of such failure in our day is worse.

For several years I taught a course on the Christian gospel for graduating seminarians, soon to be pastors. It was intended to

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Attack upon "Christendom,"* 1854–1855, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 29, 35, 39.

help them synthesize their studies and leave school with a clear understanding of the gospel that would be the focus of their ministries and their efforts to lead people to Jesus Christ and make them followers of Christ. But the problems those students will face are enormous for two reasons: our society has little interest in a gospel, and the church has failed miserably to do justice to its own message.

Naming the Problems

Religious issues are not a major concern—or a concern at all—for most of society. People do not seek God in their lives, do not worry about going to heaven, and claim not to seek the meaning of life, and an increasing number, about 23 percent, classify themselves as “nones,” as not having a religion.² The hunger and need are still there, even if not acknowledged, and anxiety and depression have become major factors in our society. No wonder! For some, religion is personally customized—“What I want to believe.” Many claim to be spiritual but not religious, which renders the word “spiritual” vague and virtually meaningless,³ but in any case there is little sense of a revealed message from God that makes a demand on our lives. God is just not that important, especially if people have enough money and entertainment. To them the gospel is old hat, irrelevant, and they have other things to do.

The church seems to have lost its voice and any ground from which to challenge such thinking. It has failed to understand and take seriously its own gospel and, worse, has often denied its gospel by its actions. Christian lives are often no different from

2. See “Trends: Religion & Spirituality,” GSS Data Explorer, accessed July 10, 2021, https://gssdataexplorer.norc.org/trends/Religion%20&%20Spirituality?measure=relig_rec.

3. The word “spiritual” has a Christian origin and concerns someone or something (such as a song) impacted by the Holy Spirit. If you are not a Christian, to what spirit are you referring? In modern usage the term is used broadly of a subjective, deep, and meaningful experience.

those of non-Christians. In the name of Christianity people have practiced racism and injustice and have thrown off all guidelines for Christian ethics. Those who are supposed to be models of the faith are too often abject failures at Christian living. We are weary of hearing about failed leaders. So much done in the name of Christ is an embarrassment to Christ. As Ernst Käsemann put it, the biggest obstacle to the mission of the church is the church,⁴ but the church will never be what it is supposed to be without a recovery of its own gospel. We do indeed need a better gospel.

I confess frustration with the church; I have been frustrated with the church all of my adult life. Often I have found myself bored to death in church or feeling the need to flee from the church, having grown weary of the machinations, of going through the motions, of putting on the show, of wondering why we are here, and of not doing justice to life with God. But there is nowhere to go. Life with God is not to be found apart from his Word, his work, and his people. If only they would wake up and stand up.

Many *claim* the Christian faith but do not come close to living as disciples of Christ. According to a recent report, 64 percent of millennials self-identify as Christians, but only 22 percent actually practice their faith—with this practice defined *minimally* as attending church every month and *saying* faith is important in their lives. Additionally, nearly two-thirds of people eighteen to twenty-nine years old in the US who grew up in church and were active as a child or teen have withdrawn from church involvement as an adult.⁵ The church has become increasingly irrelevant.

We have offered a deficient, inept, and inert gospel that in the end is not even a gospel, not good news. The church offers merely

4. Ernst Käsemann, “Some Thoughts on the Theme ‘The Doctrine of Reconciliation in the New Testament,’” in *The Future of Our Religious Past*, ed. James M. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 49–64, here 60.

5. See “A Snapshot of Faith Practice across Age Groups,” Barna Group, July 23, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/research/faithview-on-faith-practice/>; and “Year in Review: Barna’s Top 10 Releases of 2019,” Barna Group, December 18, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/research/top-10-releases-of-2019/>.

an anemic voice in the wind. What is said is neither compelling nor taken seriously. It is not attractive, and it hardly changes anything. The church has failed to address crucial issues like racism, poverty, arrogance, sexual misconduct—and sin. We hardly even mention sin. This is not to say all churches fail or that the church does not teach and do good things, but it surely does not do justice to its gospel.

What would it take to get pastors, church workers, theological students, and any other interested people to reconsider what they understand and present as the gospel? What would it take actually to produce disciples, people taught by and characterized by Christ?

If Christians have not understood their gospel well or lived it much, is it any surprise that non-Christians have not understood or have disparaged the faith? Society has lost respect for the church because the church's gospel has been minimalized, muted, distorted, and not practiced. The church of the simplified gospel has collapsed, and the only question is why it took so long.

Over the centuries, people have been told variously to genuflect before some icon, to purchase indulgences, to give money, or to make a decision, with the understanding that they could do it and then get on with their lives. Christianity does not offer an option of doing something and then getting on with your life. We have been handed a gospel of no responsibility, but Jesus's teaching never offered anything without responsibility. When the church has reacted against such errors, it has always become stronger.

It is time, especially given the distressing state of our society, for Christians to react, stand up, and take their faith seriously, actually to be changed by faith rather than merely use faith as a pretense.

But people often have no idea what the gospel really is. If the gospel is as overwhelmingly engaging, as overwhelmingly important as I think, if I am right in explaining the New Testament,

then the gospel is the most important and most demanding reality of human existence.

What is the problem the gospel is intended to solve? It is intended to take you past yourself, your lack of purpose, your foolishness, and your destructive acts and to give you life, a life worth living, something beyond the trivia, the self-centeredness, and the *loss of life* in entertainment and mere pleasure seeking. The gospel is intended to redirect you, to give you life even in the midst of suffering and death, to give you hope beyond death, and to hold out a vision of how wonderful life is and can be. It is intended to enable you to be *truly* human, a person empowered to be your real self, the kind of human God created you to be. This life worth everything is life engaged with and *participating* in the life and purposes of God, actually doing something productive and worthwhile. The gospel is intended to restore right relations with God and with other people for meaningful and productive living.

My course on the gospel for graduating seminarians addressed six questions:

1. Why does anyone need the gospel?
2. What is the gospel?
3. What, specifically, do the death and resurrection of Jesus have to do with the gospel?
4. To what degree is the gospel eschatological (that is, about the end times)?
5. How is the gospel appropriated?
6. How should the gospel be articulated?

I will not address all these explicitly, but with the fifth an explanation is needed. The question is really, Just how does the gospel work so that it is effective in one's life? How is the death of a Jew two thousand years ago of any benefit to us, and how does it have an impact on us? How is the benefit made ours?

The Good News

I do need to offer a short explanation of the gospel, even though the whole book will be explaining this. If we have to give a short explanation of the gospel, what would it be? My answer is this:

God is *for* us and loves us, and God intends to have a people, a “family.” Even when people ignore God, go their own way, and do what is wrong, God will still have a people. God grieves over the world, filled as it is with suffering, sin, and evil. That God is for us is demonstrated—revealed—powerfully through Jesus, the promised Deliverer. In Jesus, God identified with human suffering and evil, confronted sin, demonstrated how humans should live, in his own being took on our sin and dealt with it, and gave his life for us, demonstrating just how much God is for us. God is the God who creates life in the midst of death. Jesus’s resurrection *is* the good news. With Jesus’s death and resurrection God has defeated both death and evil, offers forgiveness, and engages us with meaningful action. God gives his transforming, life-creating Spirit to us to give life and purpose now, to create a community of Spirit-endowed people who reflect God’s character and purposes in the world, and to give hope of ongoing life with God in a new earth and a new heaven. In a real sense the gospel calls us into being and into life engaged with God. This is a *gospel of participation* and power, good news indeed.

Or, if you prefer a shorter version, God is for you, even if you are a worthless, amoral twit, and through Jesus he invites you to live with him to become who you should be.

The gospel is about God’s participation with us and our participation with God. The gospel offers and enables life with God, being “family” in community with God, and participation with God in the way you live. You are not a Christian because you said the sinner’s prayer, go to x church, hang out with people called Christians, or do “spiritual” things. You are a Christian only if you have a Christian identity, if you give up your life to take Christ’s and actually take on the responsibility of following

Christ. The gospel is a gospel of free grace but not a gospel of no responsibility. It is a gospel of participation with Christ because of being joined to Christ.

Most Christians have heard about union with Christ, but it is not a frequently discussed subject, is not well understood, and sounds like an optional add-on for the spiritual. There is, however, a renewed and heavy emphasis on participation among scholars, and Christians must not ignore what scholars take for granted. Nor should the church have to wait twenty years for the good parts of the gospel to trickle down. Even if you do not use the language of participation, you have to incorporate the ideas.

Some might say “participation” is not the right word. “Attachment” is easier to grasp, and I am all for attachment to Christ, but “attachment” does not insist on engagement. The same is true for “solidarity.” Attachment and solidarity are useful descriptions, but in the end, participation is much more engaging and profound. I use “participation” in the broadest sense so that it includes union, communion, attachment, and identification. It is about being *bound to God*. The word “religion” derives from the Latin word *religare*, which means “to bind.” We all bind ourselves to someone or something, and various forms of reverence and obligation naturally follow. Being bound to or grounding our identity in anything or anyone other than the God revealed in Christ is idolatry—sin—and idols demand sacrifices. They are burdens and destroy life. “Participation” is the word that best does justice to being bound to God.

No term is perfect, and any word may already have been misused or depreciated. As we will see, however, “participation” is biblical, has a long history in the church, and is everyday language, since we use it for all kinds of other things. Recently “participation” was used to describe marketing: “In the participation age, our job as marketers is to build engagement that compels action, inspires loyalty, and delivers powerful outcomes.”⁶ That is

6. Bryan Specht, “The 3 Cs of Participation Marketing,” *Adweek*, November 13, 2019, <https://www.adweek.com/sponsored/the-three-cs-of-participation-marketing/>.

precisely what an emphasis on the gospel of participation offers: engagement with Christ “that compels action, inspires loyalty, and delivers powerful outcomes.” *Christian faith is about participation with God*. As mind-bending as that sounds, that is the Christian gospel. The privilege of such participation is all from God’s grace and is all encompassing, all motivating, and all engaging.

Of course, you participate with all kinds of things already. To be alive is to participate. You are attaching yourself to all kinds of things and participating in all kinds of things. Are they worth it?

In the following pages I will show just how pervasively the gospel is a gospel of participation and will spell out the significance of such an understanding. I assert from the get-go: the gospel offers participation in the very life of God.

one

Participation in Christ

Nothing is more harmful than when one mistakes and deceives oneself that one believes and understands the gospel well.

Martin Luther¹

Martin Luther's warning is a caution for all of us. Modern Christians have not come close to understanding the gospel well. For many people the gospel has been truncated into an insignificant add-on and is not grasped as the life-shattering, life-transforming, life-re-creating reality it is. How easy it is to pervert the gospel into something we like or can control! The gospel has been simplified into an irrelevant message about saying the right words so you can go to heaven, even though *the Bible has relatively little focus on going to heaven.*

If the gospel message is “God just wants you to be happy,” then the gospel has failed the huge portion of humanity who suffer immensely. If the message is about prosperity, if it is the “health and wealth gospel,” again the gospel has failed most of this troubled world. But the health and wealth gospel is a fraudulent gospel trading on not half-truths but minimal truths. That Christians can

1. *Tischreden [Table Talk]* 6680, in Weimarer Ausgabe 2/6:114.

be so unthinking in this and other ways is a huge embarrassment. Christians should be the most thoughtful and discerning of all. No scholar or serious Christian sounds like the media preachers and teachers. They know better. They know the gospel is much deeper and much more engaging.

Does the church have a word for this troubled world? Granted, the church is itself often troubled, neither living up to its message nor even explaining its message well. We all know that in the church, self-centeredness can be just as dominant, marriages can fail just as much, and people can bend justice to serve their own needs just as much. If the church is not going to be different, why should anyone bother?

It does not take a genius to know that the church has this wonderful message from and about Jesus but fails to live up to it. Especially in our day, even the word “evangelical,” a word that focuses on a commitment to the gospel, has been distorted beyond all recognition, not least in support of political agendas. People claim the word “evangelical” but have no sense of what it really means, which is a tragedy. Neither of our major political parties deserves a great deal of respect, but why did many evangelicals—so-called at least—rush to support someone who with words and actions violated nearly everything they say they stand for and, in the process, desecrate the name of Jesus?

We have a problem. The Christian gospel has been hijacked, subverted, and rendered simplistic for all kinds of self-serving purposes. What is offered in many churches is an embarrassment. If we do not recover the real gospel, we are in danger of rendering the church absolutely irrelevant, a process that is already underway.

However, I am not attacking the church, for in spite of its foibles, with the church there is always a chance, always a hope, for something different. I am calling the church to take back its own gospel and to do justice to its own message. If Paul’s Letters, such as Galatians, mightily resist any perversion of the gospel, should we do less?

In many churches the customary language for becoming a Christian is “to ask Jesus into your heart,” but where did we get this language? It does not occur in the New Testament, and the one text that sounds like it (Rev. 3:20) is actually addressed to *Christians*.² This language is not entirely wrong, even if it is not explicitly very biblical, and if people really understand the significance, it can be useful. On the other hand, it has been so trivialized and truncated that it borders on being useless. For years I have been telling Christians to stop telling people to invite Jesus into their hearts. It is marginally biblical, and it is not working.

The emphasis on making a decision so one can go to heaven assumes the gospel is more about going to heaven in a security blanket than about life with God now. This has led to gross distortions of the gospel. God is moved to the margins of life, since the “big issue” is settled, and we can pretty much go on as before. But the nagging question “Did we do enough?” and the lack of anything truly significant lead to the heavy emphasis on eternal security in some traditions. “Once saved, always saved” is supposed to be a comfort, but it is more an attempt to prop up a weak view of the gospel. I have no doubt about God’s being faithful in saving, but there can be no comfort in believing an illegitimate gospel that does not produce transformation in one’s life. Decisions are important, but response to the gospel is more than a decision. It is a life. Conversion is an *ongoing process of life with God*, as the New Testament emphasizes repeatedly. Proclamation of the gospel has often neglected this and has been too abstract, too simplistic, too individualistic, and just wrong.

The root of the problem is the erroneous, anemic, and weak-kneed understandings people have of the word “faith.” “Faith” is viewed as a mental activity, and a passive and inactive one at that—“Just believe; you do not have to do anything.” Faith is not

2. Rev. 3:20—“I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and that person with me”—is addressed to the church of Laodicea.

mental activity; it is life activity. It is not about checking a box for a ticket to heaven. How did anyone ever conclude from the New Testament that you do not have to do anything?

What will place us back on track? We need better, more helpful, and more powerful language—specifically the language of *participation with, solidary with, and attachment to Christ*. I want to argue for a gospel of participation, a gospel that leads to an involvement with Christ that does not allow passivity and that makes sense of Christ’s death and resurrection and their importance for us. “Participation” is the language the church should be using when it speaks of the gospel, for the biblical message, especially in the New Testament, is about a relation with Christ that *binds* us to him, *involves* us with him and his purposes, *engages* us in his work, and *delivers* wonderful outcomes.

Do people really want that? Each person will have to answer for himself or herself, but that is what Christianity is about. *Faith is participation with Christ, not merely thinking about him*. Having an opinion about Christ or holding some doctrine about Christ is not faith in Christ. Believing certain ideas does not make you a Christian. Being joined to Christ and taking on his character does.

What Faith Really Means

Even a glance at the facts of the Bible jolts one away from imagining the word “faith” is merely about mental activity. In both the Old and New Testaments believing is *not* thinking about or assenting to certain ideas. For a long time I have been saying “Faith is not what you think,” which intentionally has a double meaning. Faith is not what most people think it is, and it is not merely what you do with your brain. It is what you do with your life.

I will treat “faith” in the Old Testament later, but with regard to the New Testament language for “faith/belief” the Greek word usually translated by “faith” is *pistis*, and the verb form, which English usually translates with “believe,” is *pisteuein*. The range

of meanings for this word group is extremely broad. Anthony Thiselton, a leading New Testament scholar, identifies thirteen different nuances for *pistis*, but even that does not do justice to the breadth of the word.³ *Pistis* can sometimes be used for belief in the facts of a matter, but usually it points to much more. It was not particularly a religious word in the Hellenistic Greek world and most often had to do with *relations* in business and political contexts. It is most of all a *relational word having to do with trust* and pledges of trust and is not about what we do with our minds. It is about how one *acts* in a relation. Consequently, it often carries connotations of faithfulness, loyalty, fidelity, allegiance, reliability, trustworthiness, commitment, confidence, proof, and pledge.

For example, in the NRSV translation of Titus 2:10, slaves are asked “to show complete and perfect fidelity [*pistis*].” In 1 Maccabees 10:27 *pistis* refers to keeping faith with someone: “Now continue still to keep faith with us.”⁴ This is not about thinking; it is about staying faithful in a relation. Such examples could be multiplied easily. The first-century Jewish philosopher Philo calls *pistis* the most perfect of the virtues.⁵ A virtue is not something you think, but something you live. Faith has a durative quality; it is a way of being over time. That may not be what many people expect or want, but it is a fact. Not surprisingly, then, and for good reason, some scholars urge translating New Testament occurrences of *pistis* with “loyalty” or “allegiance.”⁶

3. Anthony C. Thiselton, *Doubt, Faith, and Certainty* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 10–11. His discussion on pp. 61–65 gives more focus to ideas of faithfulness and trust.

4. *Emmeinate eti tou syntērēsai pros hēmas pistin*.

5. Philo, *Who Is the Heir?* 91; see Philo, *On the Life of Abraham* 270, where *pistis* is called the queen of the virtues.

6. Regarding “loyalty,” see, e.g., Nijay K. Gupta, *Paul and the Language of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), esp. 68–70, 78–83, 91–92, 178; and Douglas Oakes, “*Pistis* as Relational Way of Life in Galatians,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 40, no. 3 (2018): 255–75. Regarding “allegiance,” see Matthew W. Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

I am not suggesting that thinking is unimportant; it is crucial. No one enters a relation of trust without being convinced of a basis for trust, but faith goes way beyond thinking. Scholars and others have for centuries been emphasizing that faith is a relational term,⁷ but the truth has been evaded. Now, happily, numerous studies are bringing attention to the multifaceted and relational nature of faith.⁸ An obvious question arises: can one have faith without faithfulness? No way! The word is as much about faithfulness as it is about faith, with context determining the nuance. You cannot say you have faith in Christ if you are not determined by relation to him, if you are not faithful to him. Much of this, of course, fits with the idea of covenant in both Testaments. “Faith” is a covenant word.

If faith language often has to do with faithfulness, we—and Bible translations especially—need to be more reflective about what is intended in texts using *pistis*, texts about faith. People glide over the word “faith” in English translations, even when it appears odd, but they need to ask if the focus is really more on faithfulness. As one example, in Ephesians 3:12 the NRSV reads, “in whom [Christ] we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.”⁹ A more straightforward translation would be “in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through his faithfulness” (*pisteōs autou*, literally “faith/faithfulness of him”). The Greek phrase in parentheses could mean “faith in him,” but would Paul say our boldness and access to God are through our faith, or Christ’s faithfulness? Surely it is through Christ’s faithfulness.

7. Relations are the focus, esp. during and after the Reformation. See pp. 29–31.

8. To mention only three, see Teresa Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Jeanette Hagen Pifer, *Faith as Participation: An Exegetical Study of Some Key Pauline Texts*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/486 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019); and Gupta, *Paul and the Language of Faith*.

9. The NIV is no better: “In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.”

Numerous texts with the word *pistis* require us to slow down and think about what is intended. For example, the phrase *pistis Christou* in Galatians 2:16 and other texts,¹⁰ if translated literally, could be either “the faith of Christ” or “the faithfulness of Christ,” and this phrase has been a cause for heated debate among scholars. Some argue it means “faith in Christ,” which is legitimate, and others argue it means “the faithfulness of Christ” and refers to his obedience on the cross or to his faithfulness as resurrected Lord.¹¹ Most of the texts in question have both the noun, *pistis*, and the verb, *pisteuein*, the latter referring to human faith. Many people are not even aware of the debate, for most English translations just assume “faith in Christ” and use “faith” for the noun and “believe” for the verb, which hides the redundancy if both refer to human faith. I favor the “faithfulness of Christ” option, but in the end, the debate needs reshaping. Faith presupposes the conviction that someone or something is faithful, meriting trust in the relation. Both faith and faithfulness are needed. Some scholars now argue convincingly that *pistis* refers to the complex and reciprocal relation of trust in which Christ binds God and humanity together, is faithful to both God and humanity as he does this binding, and people bind themselves to Christ by their faith.¹²

Most important for the life of the church is that we realize the depth and the profound focus on *relations and practices* that the word *pistis* carries. We need to change how we talk about faith. The real gospel demands it. With the focus on faith as participation, there can be no passivity, no being content with merely

10. See also Rom. 3:22; Gal. 3:22; and Phil. 3:9–10.

11. See the classic debate between Richard Hays (“ΠΙΣΤΙΣ [PISTIS] and Pauline Christology: What Is at Stake”) and James D. G. Dunn (“Once More: ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ [PISTIS CHRISTOU]”), in *Society of Biblical Literature 1991 Seminar Papers*, ed. E. H. Lovering Jr. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 714–29 and 730–44, respectively. See also Morna D. Hooker, “ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ [PISTIS CHRISTOU],” *New Testament Studies* 35 (1989): 321–42.

12. Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*, 272–73, 290–91; and David J. Downs and Benjamin J. Lappenga, *The Faithfulness of the Risen Christ: Pistis and the Exalted Lord in the Pauline Letters* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), 3, 21.

thinking right doctrines, and no acting in ways that are an embarrassment to the name of Christ. People need to look in the mirror and be honest about the gospel and its impact. Christ cannot be a mere add-on to our lives.

Is Faith Really about Participation?

Without question, faith is about participation, and the real question is why we, in the contemporary church, have so much focus on Jesus being in our hearts. I provide here an initial look at Paul's thought, but later I will provide a more detailed treatment of participation in various parts of Scripture.

In Paul the emphasis is *much* more on our being in Christ than on his being in us. Paul has 164 occurrences of the Greek equivalents of "in Christ" and related expressions such as "in the Lord," "in him," or "in whom" (referring to Christ). Not all those occurrences should be translated "in," for the Greek preposition *en* can be translated in other ways. Prepositions are notoriously flexible. Still, many of those 164 occurrences mean "*in* Christ." They are "local" in significance, as if Christ were a place! This is the language Paul frequently uses to emphasize how closely faith binds one to Christ. On the other hand, Paul has only five occurrences of Christ in us,¹³ or six, depending on how one understands Colossians 1:27.¹⁴ Other texts also point to God's presence in us, such as with temple imagery. For example, 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 6:19 speak of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us; the temple in 3:16 is corporate, and in 6:19 it is individual. Still, the heavy preponderance in Paul's thinking is by far on our being *in Christ*.

Paul understands Christian existence and all the benefits Christ gives as *residing in Christ*. All the good things like grace, love, life,

13. Romans 8:10; 2 Cor. 13:5; Gal. 2:20; 4:19; Eph. 3:17.

14. Does this verse mean "Christ in you the hope of glory" or "Christ among you [gentiles] the hope of glory"? Many scholars argue for the latter because of the context in the letter.

peace—and even election—are found in Christ and are available *only* there. For example, note the following verses:

Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life *in Christ Jesus our Lord*.”

1 Corinthians 1:30: “And from him [God] you are *in Christ Jesus*.”

2 Corinthians 5:17: “So then, if anyone is *in Christ*, new creation has occurred! Old things have passed away; new things have come into being.”

Philippians 3:9–10: “. . . that I might be found *in him*, not having my own righteousness from the law but one through the faithfulness of Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith,¹⁵ so that I might know him and the power of his resurrection and *participation* [*koinōnia*] with his sufferings, being conformed to his death.”

Colossians 1:2: “To the ones set apart [literally “the holy ones”] and the faithful brothers and sisters *in Christ* in Colossae”—a powerful and profound double geography.

Colossians 2:6–10: “As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, live *in him*, rooted and built up *in him*. . . . And you have been made full *in him*.”

Colossians 3:1, 3: “If then you were *raised with Christ*, seek the things above. . . . For you died, and *your life is hidden with Christ in God*.”

Dozens of such texts could be listed. In the six chapters of Ephesians, Paul has thirty-six occurrences of *en Christō* (“in Christ”)

15. The translation reflects the breadth of the Greek word *pistis*, which can convey both “faithfulness” and “faith,” and also the debate about the meaning of *pistis Christou* (see p. 15). Does the first occurrence in v. 9 mean “the faithfulness of Christ” in his death and resurrection, as I have translated, or does it refer to human faith, as the second occurrence of *pistis* in v. 9 does and as the NIV and NRSV have it?

and related expressions, twenty-three of them in the first two chapters. In English translations not all the occurrences are rendered as “in,” but beyond question, Paul views Christian existence as being *in Christ*.

When Paul refers to himself or to other Christians or to their work, he often uses “in Christ” or “in the Lord” as a description. In Romans 16:3 he refers to Prisca and Aquila as his “co-workers *in Christ Jesus*.” In 16:7 Andronicus and Junia are described as having been “*in Christ*” before Paul was, in 16:8 Ampliatus is Paul’s “beloved *in the Lord*,” in 16:9 Urbanus is “our co-worker *in Christ*,” and in 16:12 Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis are all said to have “labored *in the Lord*.” Among other things, Paul tells people their labor is not useless *in the Lord* (1 Cor. 15:58), and he urges people to be strong *in the Lord* (Eph. 6:10) and to rejoice *in the Lord* (Phil. 3:1). Strikingly, in 2 Corinthians 12:2, Paul refers to his visionary experience by saying, “I know a man *in Christ* who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether *in the body* I do not know or out of the body I do not know; God knows.” For Paul, being in Christ is just as much a reality as being in the body.

This is just the way Paul thinks about Christian existence. He has a “spheres of influence” theology,¹⁶ or, if you will, a force-field theology, which involves the notion of an arena constantly controlled by a strong power. A person either lives in and is determined by sin, the flesh, and the world, or one lives in Christ, the Spirit, and even God. The expressions “in the Spirit” or “in God” are less frequent in Paul’s writing, with the former occurring only nineteen times and the latter only seven.¹⁷ Being in Christ and being in the Spirit are closely associated, especially as they relate to Christian living, but they are not the same. “In the Spirit” is

16. See Klyne Snodgrass, “Spheres of Influence: A Possible Solution to the Problem of Paul and the Law,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32 (1988): 93–113.

17. “In God” occurs in Rom. 2:17 (of Jews boasting in God); 5:11; Eph. 3:9; Col. 3:3; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2:2; and 2 Thess. 1:1. Note that Jude 1 calls believers people who are loved in God, but the expression is more in keeping with John than Paul.

not used in association with the cross, and Paul could not direct people to be filled with Christ the way he urges them to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). Both “in Christ” and “in the Lord” are used in descriptions of people, but while there are exceptions, “in Christ” is used more in statements about salvation and “in the Lord” is used more of Christian actions. “In the Lord” is not used as “in Christ” is to designate the corporate existence of Christians. Still, all of Christian existence is conceived of as in Christ Jesus. Christ is the relation that determines everything.

Clearly, for Paul, *where* one lives determines one’s life, actions, and identity. *Geography* is identity, and a Christian’s true geography is *in Christ Jesus*.¹⁸ Christ is the believer’s new environment. Christianity is a religion that focuses on *participation* in Christ’s suffering, death, resurrection life, and glory. Life with Christ cannot be reduced to doctrine about Christ. To be joined to Christ is to be identified with and reproduce in our own lives the two overwhelming events of Christ’s death and resurrection. Dying and rising with Christ is at the heart of “in Christ” thinking.

In 1 Corinthians 1:9 Paul writes, “God is faithful, through whom you were called into *participation* [*koinōnia*] with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” Often, translations use “fellowship” here instead of “participation,” but that seems to trivialize the idea into something more like a church potluck. Paul means being joined to Christ and drawing life from him.¹⁹ Later, in 1 Corinthians 10:16, Paul uses the same word, *koinōnia*, to refer to the partaking of “the cup of blessing” (the wine) and the bread in

18. See Klyne Snodgrass, *Who God Says You Are* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 14–15, 25, 38, 100, 145–47.

19. See John Calvin in a letter to Peter Martyr Vermigli (August 8, 1555) concerning 1 Cor. 1:9: “The word ‘Fellowship’ or ‘Society’ does not sufficiently express his [Paul’s] mind. In my judgment, he designates that sacred unity by which the Son of God engrafs us into His body.” *Joannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. Guilielmus Baum, Eduardüs Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss (Brunswick: O. A. Schwetsohke et Filium, 1876), 15:723, quoted in Julie Canlis, “The Geography of Participation: *In Christ* Is Location, Location, Location,” *Ex Auditu* 33 (2017): 130–46, here 137n40.

the Lord's Supper and says the partaking is a participation in his blood (death) and his body. This is no mere happy feeling of getting together but a deep involvement and engagement with all that Christ is. It is union and solidarity with Christ and all he has done and is doing. Faith in Christ, then, is a "Christ intimacy," as an earlier scholar put it,²⁰ a relation that rearranges and redirects life.

I have focused initially on Paul, but obviously the Johannine writings focus on participation just as much, even if a bit differently. Here there is the reciprocal idea of our *remaining* in Christ (or God) and his remaining in us, especially in John 15 and 1 John 2–4. This language of remaining in Christ is an emphatic focus on participation with Christ. Even here the focus is more on our remaining in Christ than on Christ being in us. We will return to the Johannine material below.

Without question, the gospel is a gospel of participation. It is first of all about God's participation with us and secondly about our participation with God. God's participation is seen in the love of God, the incarnation, the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the giving of the Spirit. Our participation means being *joined* to Christ in faith. That does not mean merely participating in doing things; it means participating in the life in Christ or in God, or, better, *participating in the life of Christ and of God through the Spirit and being transformed by the participation*. It is about drawing our identity from our close participation with the triune God.

Is this outrageous? As we will see, it was not for the early church or for the church down through the ages. Although Paul does not use language of participating in the triune God, he lays the foundation for it with his use of "in Christ," "in the Spirit," and "in God." And John Calvin found the idea of participation with God already included in the Genesis account of creation in the

20. Adolph Deissmann, *Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History*, trans. William E. Wilson, 2nd ed. (New York: Doran, n.d.), 152.

image of God.²¹ Rather than being outrageous, such participation is the driving concern of all Scripture.

Participation Is Foundational for Theology and Ethics

Participation thinking enables theological understanding, especially in a Christology emphasizing the incarnation—God with us and participating with us. Early Christians knew that in Jesus Christ they encountered an unparalleled revelation of God. This conviction was primarily a result of the resurrection. If Jesus Christ is the resurrected Lord, if God created life in the midst of death, if Jesus’s death was viewed as God’s identification with humanity, and if, as risen Lord, Jesus was understood to be the giver of life through God’s Spirit, then it is not difficult to transition to the thought of people being in some way bonded to him, which broadened their understanding even more of who he is. Obviously early Christians had taken an enormous step in their thinking about Jesus the Christ. How did they so quickly revamp their thinking so that they could say regarding a man, whom some of them knew and with whom they recently had been walking around, whose brothers and sisters they knew, that the lives of all believers and indeed all things were *in him*? To them he was no mere mortal human. The relevance of participation for Christology must not be neglected.

Participation is equally important with reference to salvation/atonement and ethics. In fact, the failure of people to deal with participation language has caused numerous problems, including sterile and abstract views of faith that treat it as if it were about mere thinking, suggestions that justification is legal fiction (God knows you are guilty but says you are innocent anyway), an insufficient basis for ethics (why be ethical if you are already declared

21. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.1.5 and 2.2.1.

righteous?), and difficulty in explaining atonement ideas. Just why and what does the death of a Jew long ago have anything to do with us? It does not unless there is some *solidarity* with Christ and some participation in his very being, which is what faith is about. Apart from participation, faith starts to look like a human work. Have I believed enough and accurately enough? And then there is the really life-changing part: participation compels ethics, for ethics flow directly from participation with Christ. We will revisit atonement ideas and ethics when treating specific texts in Paul's Letters.

Clearly, any thought of salvation as less than complete association with Christ cannot be true faith in Christ. Therefore, any proclamation of the gospel that does not result in *participation with Christ and God by the Spirit* cannot be an adequate explanation of the gospel. This solidarity extends to *thought, word, and actions*. The result of the gospel and the essence of Christianity are about being attached to Jesus so that you draw life from him, are shaped by his character, and are engaged in his concerns. That is the real gospel we all need.

Participation thinking is the assumption of so much else in the New Testament. For example, we are told to pray all the time, continually (1 Thess. 5:17; Eph. 6:18). How can anyone do that and live? The instruction to pray without ceasing does not mean being on your knees and always praying. It calls for an awareness of participation with God, awareness that one's life is always engaged with God and is always in communication with God. Life is lived before and with God.

Don't Let It Go to Your Head

A warning is in order, for any emphasis can be wrongly grasped. With participation there are dangers, such as the spiritual arrogance evident at Corinth and delusions of perfectionism, but such perversions only show that people did not or do not understand

participation at all. Paul's solution to the problems is to keep reminding people of the gospel's emphasis on who they are in Christ. There is no solution to the church's problems other than the continual application of the gospel of participation. Also, for all the language about participating with God, or, as 2 Peter 1:4 has it, partaking of the divine nature, we do not become God or the same as God.²² This is not like apotheosis in Roman thought, in which the Caesars became gods at their death.²³ It is not some type of mysticism. It is not about ontology, taking on God's being, his essence. It is not being parallel to God or being God; it is *ongoing engagement with God* as people created in God's image for relation to God. It involves no loss of individuality, for true individuality is enhanced where life is engaged and experienced, not merely observed. Union with God is a "differentiated union, one that does not annihilate the clear distinction between Creator and creature."²⁴

Participation is about sharing in God's *moral* character because of a close relation to God and drawing life from God. It is *not* true that *everything* about the person changes because of participation with Christ. Many individual and cultural characteristics may remain the same,²⁵ but everything about our identity as individuals is subjected to and filtered by Christ. Despite the dangers of misunderstanding, the benefits of participation far outweigh the liabilities. No other gospel exists apart from the

22. There is evidence, however, that some had this in mind. See, e.g., Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 124, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:262: "The Holy Ghost reproaches men because they were made like God; . . . yet thereby it is demonstrated that all men are deemed worthy of becoming 'gods,' and of having power to become sons of the Highest."

23. Vespasian reportedly said on his deathbed, "I think I am becoming a god." Suetonius, *Vespasian* 23, in *Lives of the Caesars*, 2 vols., trans. J. C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 2:319.

24. J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 64.

25. See William S. Campbell, *Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), esp. 54–66.

gospel of participation with and in Christ, and this is the gospel we all need.

The following chapters will discuss the gospel of participation in more detail. As far as I know, scholars have not treated participation much outside the Pauline and Johannine writings. I will show participation is part of nearly all of Scripture, even if it is presented in a variety of ways. First, however, I need to show that salvation as participation has always been the teaching of the church.