XII. THE CONCEPT OF THE CHRISTIANS’ UNITY WITH CHRIST

An often recurrent theme in Paul’s letters is that Jesus’ followers, although separated from Christ, live in unity with him. This theme plays a role in many of the apostle’s ideas and comes to expression in various turns of phrase. The notion of the Christians’ unity with Christ is perhaps most characteristically expressed in such phrases as ‘in Christ’, ‘through Christ’, and ‘with Christ’; expressions which Paul uses frequently in his argumentation. The concept of the Christians’ unity with Christ in all its variations cannot be studied exhaustively here. Only two aspects of this concept will be analysed presently. This analysis, however, will offer an insight into the traditional background of the concept. First, Paul’s use of the traditional Jewish view of Abraham and Adam as representative figures through whom God causes his will to be accomplished will be examined. Just as all nations are united with Abraham and all humans with Adam, so all Christians are united with Christ. These ideas of unity are ramifications of the widespread ancient concept of unity and solidarity between a group of people and their leader or representative (section a). Second, the idea that Jesus brought about reconciliation between God and his people through his vicarious death will be investigated (section b). This idea stems from Jewish tradition and is also based on the ancient theme of unity and solidarity between a group of people and their leader or representative.

a. Abraham, Adam, and Jesus as representative figures

(1) One of the most characteristic features of Paul’s reflection on the Christians’ unity with Christ is his use of the expressions ‘in Christ’, ‘through Christ’, and ‘with Christ’ (insofar as this phrase does not refer to the eschatological association with Christ).1 The demand for a fresh study of Paul’s use of these phrases has not yet been fulfilled.2

1 For an examination of the idea of the eschatological association with Christ, see chapter XIV, pp. 198-202.
Some work, however, has been done with regard to the ideas connected with the expressions mentioned, especially by A.J.M. Wedderburn.1 He argues that Paul uses these phrases to express the idea that a Christian lives in unity with Christ and receives God’s grace as a consequence of this unity. The phrases ‘in Christ’, ‘through Christ’, and ‘with Christ’ have a local and an instrumental flavour.2 Wedderburn claims that the idea of unity expressed in these phrases goes back to the ancient Near-Eastern concept of solidarity and unity between a group of people and their representative, leader, or patriarch.3 He sustains his thesis by showing that Paul compares the unity between Christ and his followers with that between the nations and Abraham, based on God’s promise to Abraham (Gal. 3:8-9), and with the unity of all humans with Adam, reposing on the fact that the latter brought death to all his descendants (1 Cor. 15:21-22; Rom. 5:12-21). The idea of the nations’ participation in God’s promise to Abraham as well as the idea that all humans share in the death of Adam reflect Jewish traditions based on the current ancient concept of unity and solidarity between a group of people and their representative; in this case, a patriarch representing his descendants. Wedderburn comes to the convincing conclusion that this ancient concept of unity also underlies the Christian concept of the believers’ unity with Christ.

(2) In Gal. 3:8-9 Paul compares Jesus and Abraham as representative figures. Citing Gen. 18:18, he sets out that the nations are blessed in (έν) Abraham. This means, according to the apostle, that the nations are blessed with (σῶν, v. 9) Abraham insofar as they unite with Abraham in his faith, for it was because of his faith that Abraham was justified (Gal. 3:6). In receiving God’s blessing, Abraham represents all the nations and the nations share in the blessing of Abraham if they join him in his faith. Christ, according to Paul, has brought about the realization of this blessing which God bestowed on the nations in Abraham. Christ is Abraham’s successor in mediating the blessing to the nations. It is ‘in Christ Jesus’ (έν Χριστῶν Ἰησοῦ) that the blessing

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3 Wedderburn rejects the term ‘corporate personality’ which became standard for this idea of unity or solidarity in earlier literature. The term appears to be too vague and therefore misleading; A.J.M. Wedderburn, Baptism, pp. 351-356. Cf. the section on the history of earlier research, p. 22.