

Christian Experience and Paul's Logic of Solidarity: the Spiral Structure of Romans 5–8

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ABSTRACT: This essay investigates key aspects of the rhetorical structure of Romans 5–8 in relationship to Paul's depictions of Christian experience. Taking Romans 5:1–5 as a blueprint for a trajectory of hope in chapters 5–8, I discuss three textual “detours” where Paul interrupts that trajectory: a rhetorical performance of life under sin (7:7–25), a depiction of union with all creation in suffering and hope (8:18–27), and a cry of lament (8:26). These rhetorical interruptions evoke Christian experience in solidarity with all creation—a solidarity that in turn displays Christ's redemptive participation in the depths of all human dereliction, and thereby evokes hope.

KEYWORDS: Christian experience, rhetoric, solidarity, lament, hope

The following essay investigates one aspect of Christian experience as depicted in Rom 5–8: its complex temporal structure.¹ In these chapters Paul sets his auditors on an assured trajectory of hope, yet he repeatedly circles back to describe and enact the experience of life in the realm of sin and death. This temporal complexity, I shall argue, is inseparable from the participatory anthropology and logic of solidarity that threads through these chapters. In support of this thesis, I shall advance three claims: first, the rhetorical *structure* of these

- 1 For fairly recent discussion of the category of “experience” as ingredient to Pauline interpretation, see T. Engberg-Pedersen, “The Construction of Religious Experience in Paul,” *Experientia. I. Inquiry into Religious Experience in Early Judaism and Early Christianity* (eds. F. Flannery – C. Shantz – R.A. Werline) (SymS 40; Atlanta, GA: SBL 2008) 147–157; T. Engberg-Pedersen, “Paul's Necessity: A Bourdieusque Reading of the Pauline Project,” *Beyond Reception. Mutual Influences between Antique Religion, Judaism, and Early Christianity* (eds. D. Brakke – A.C. Jacobsen – J. Ulrich) (Frankfurt: Lang 2006) 69–88; V. Rabens, “Power from In Between: The Relational Experience of the Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts in Paul's Churches,” *The Spirit and Christ in the New Testament and Christian Theology. Essays in Honor of Max Turner* (eds. I.H. Marshall – V. Rabens – C. Bennema) (Grand Rapids, MI – Cambridge: Eerdmans 2012) 138–155. The approaches and conclusions of Volker Rabens and Troels Engberg-Pedersen differ significantly, but they agree that all experience is interpreted and narrated, necessarily and unavoidably so, and that at the same time it involves “tangible” (Rabens, “Power,” 141) bodily events in “the real world, about certain things happening and then being interpreted” (Engberg-Pedersen, “Construction,” 156). That “experience” should be a consideration in thinking about Paul's anthropology may seem self-evident, but for a variety of reasons, the scholarly world has resisted taking it up as a topic. See Engberg-Pedersen's helpful review, in “Construction,” 147–150. As he notes, emphases on other aspects of Pauline interpretation, including theology, rhetoric, and social-historical considerations, have turned attention away from the topic of experience, yet they need not and ought not do so.

chapters, in which Paul's confident assertion of new life in Christ is interrupted repeatedly by the vicissitudes of life in the realm of the flesh, evokes and speaks to a parallel *pattern* of experience on the part of Paul's listeners. Second, this pattern depicts the moral transformation of believers as a spiral that arcs upward towards the future, but circles back down to the past, thereby involving continued vulnerability to the hostile powers of sin and death. Third, the downward movements of the spiral display believers' solidarity with all humanity in the domain of sin and death, a solidarity that follows in line with Christ's full redemptive participation in human dereliction. This solidarity is mediated through mortal bodies and enacted interpersonally, reflecting the participatory quality of human experience as embodied and socially embedded.²

This paper will proceed in three stages. I will begin by setting the context for reading chapters 5–8 through an overview of the structure of chapters 1–8. Second, closer analysis of key passages within chapters 5–8 will focus on the trajectory of hope and transformation limned in 5:1–5, and three apparent detours from that trajectory, in 7:7–25, 8:18–27, and 8:35–36. Finally, based on the patterns of experience discovered in the text, I will offer some theological reflections and brief pastoral and ethical implications for the life of church.

1. The Spiral Structure of Romans 1–8

In 1995 Leander Keck argued that Romans 1–8 has a repetitive structure related to its content:

What makes Romans 1–8 'tick' is the inner logic of having to show how the gospel deals with the human condition on three ever deeper levels ... the self's skewed relationship to God in which the norm (law) is the accuser, the self in sin's domain where death rules before Moses arrived only to exacerbate the situation by specifying transgression, the self victimized by sin as a resident power stronger than the law.³

Each amplification of this desperate situation of the self alternates with restatements of the gospel addressed to that condition; we might say simply that Paul keeps revisiting and restating the human need for redemption even while he re-preaches God's deliverance through Christ. In Keck's view, Paul's *logic* may move from solution to plight, to use E.P. Sanders' famous terms, but in Romans his *argument* moves from plight to

² In particular, see Rabens ("Power," 143–144, 150–155) on the relational aspects of the work and experience of the Spirit; Susan G. Eastman, *Paul and the Person. Reframing Paul's Anthropology* (Grand Rapids, MI – Cambridge: Eerdmans 2017); S. Zahl, "Beyond the Critique of Soteriological Individualism: Relationality and Social Cognition," *MT* 37/2 (2021) 336–361, who interacts critically and constructively with Rabens and Eastman, particularly in regard to the social construction of emotion.

³ L. Keck, "What Makes Romans Tick?," *Pauline Theology. III. Romans* (eds. D.M. Hay – E.E. Johnson) (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 1995) 3–29 (26).

solution.⁴ Thus, according to Keck, the first “spiral” is to be found in Rom 1:18–4:25, with the human plight depicted in 1:18–3:20, and the good news in 3:21–4:25. The second spiral is comprised by 5:12–7:6, in which the “yoked tyranny of sin and death” (5:12–21) is overcome by deliverance through participation in Christ (6:1–7:6). The third movement of this gospel proclamation is in 7:7–8:39, wherein the indwelling and lethal power of sin (7:7–25) is displaced by the superior power of the indwelling Spirit of God (8:1–39). Through these three repetitive iterations of the human plight and divine redemption, Paul demonstrates that Christ is the “effective antidote to the Adamic situation” and therefore “there is one gospel for all people, and it becomes clear why Paul is obligated to go even to Spain.”⁵ Furthermore, the spiral pattern noted by Keck not only “deals with the human condition on ever *deeper* levels,” it also *broadens* the scope of redemption from a focus on Jews and Gentiles (Rom 1–4), to Adamic humanity (Rom 5), to all creation, including but not limited to human beings (Rom 8).⁶

Keck's model usefully highlights the pattern of repetition in these chapters, but on a closer reading the interplay between dereliction and deliverance is more complex. In the first place, it is not the case that Paul's argument begins with plight rather than solution. Rather, his argument begins with the announcement that the gospel is the power of God for salvation, through which God's righteousness is being revealed from faith to faith (1:16–17). This apocalypse of divine righteousness precedes and frames the apocalypse of divine wrath in 1:18–3:20. Right at the outset of the main body of the letter, therefore, the priority of divine revelation and power means that the repeated progression from dereliction to deliverance noted by Keck is not straightforward; rather Paul's letter progresses in a forward-moving spiral pattern first catalyzed by the inbreaking of God's righteousness through the good news of Jesus Christ, and culminating in the final victory of God's love (8:39). These affirmations of God's saving power encompass as well as punctuate the repeating spirals of dereliction and deliverance in the intervening chapters; in each case, negative descriptions of human culpability, bondage to sin, suffering, conflict, and lament, are embedded in larger frameworks of revelation, grace, hope, and love. Thus, the thematic announcement of the gospel as the apocalypse of divine righteousness in 1:16–17 precedes 1:18–3:20 and is repeated and amplified in 3:21–26. The exhortation to peace with God in 5:1–11, which Keck rather oddly omits from his schema, precedes Paul's exposition of sin and death in 5:12–21; indeed, in 5:15–21, the reign of sin and death brought about Adam's trespass acts as a foil to the surpassing grace of the one man, Jesus Christ. Again, the promise that believers are no longer held captive by the law but rather serve in newness of the Spirit (7:1–6) triggers the depiction of sin's lethal use of the law in 7:7–25 and anticipates the fulsome portrayal of life in the Spirit in 8:1–39. At the same time, that new life in the Spirit is shot through with present sufferings (8:18–25), conflict (8:35–36), and lament (8:36).

4 E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism. A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress 1977) 442–443. Keck, “Tick,” 24–25.

5 Keck, “Tick,” 26.

6 Keck, “Tick,” 26. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer for bringing this pattern to my attention.

Human dereliction and divine deliverance are more intertwined than a simple sequence of plight and solution implies.

These observations do not fully negate Keck's spiral structure, but they do complexify it, such that Paul's repeated depictions of the human plight appear as interruptions in an overwhelmingly hopeful account of Christian experience. They seem to be detours, dead ends that raise a question for the listener: what function do they serve as the letter unfolds, particularly considering my claim that the temporal complexity of Paul's rhetoric is related to Christian experience? I suggest that both the confident proclamation of the gospel and the depictions of human dereliction contribute to the letter itself as Paul's spiritual gift to his Roman audience, a gift intended to strengthen them in their faith through a charismatic mutual participation in Christ (1:11–12). He writes to the Roman house churches, "For I long to see you, so that I might give you some spiritual gift to strengthen you (ἐπιποθῶ γὰρ ἰδεῖν ὑμᾶς ἵνα τι μεταδῶ χάρισμα ὑμῖν πνευματικὸν εἰς τὸ στηριχθῆναι ὑμᾶς)."⁷ In temporal terms, the spiral structure of these chapters arcs towards the future yet circles back to the past; in spatial and relational terms, this structure evokes believers' experience as embedded in a lasting union with Christ, yet also remaining in solidarity with all humanity in the wake of Adam's fall. Such an empirical grasp of Christ's encompassing redemption across time and space will strengthen the Roman believers in their faith.

2. Deliverance, Detours, and Hope: Analysis of Key Passages in Romans 5–8

2.1. Deliverance

For the purposes of this essay, I begin with 5:1–5. In Ernst Käsemann's words, "Christian experience speaks here."⁸ But in what way, and to what end? This section of the letter draws together key terms and themes from the preceding chapters, and also functions as a kind of *précis* for the picture of Christian transformation in the following chapters, as Paul speaks of a causal linkage between suffering, perseverance, tested character, and hope "that does

⁷ For arguments that the "spiritual gift" that will strengthen the Roman believers is Paul's proclamation of the gospel, see G.D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence. The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson 1994) 486–489; J.A. Fitzmyer, *Romans. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; New York: Doubleday 1993) 248; R.N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2016) 115–116; S.G. Eastman, "Strengthening the Ego for Service: The Pastoral Purpose of Romans 7,7–25," *Dying with Christ – New Life in Hope. Romans 5,12–8,39* (ed. J.M.G. Barclay) (Louvain: Peeters 2021) 137–164 (137–138). The desire to impart a spiritual gift to the Romans funds Paul's eagerness to visit them; his letter is a down-payment, so to speak, on that gift. That early interpreters saw Paul's missive itself as intended to strengthen its recipients is evident from the text variant in 16:25, which provides an early hermeneutical guide to the letter. See L. Keck, *Romans* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon 2005) 380–385.

⁸ E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (trans. G.W. Bromiley) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1980) 134. Robert Jewett (*Romans. A Commentary* [Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 2007] 353) calls attention to the definite article modifying "afflictions," suggesting it indicates specific hardships suffered by the Romans and Paul, not a generic experience.

not put to shame.”⁹ The existential basis for this hope is the love of God, which has been poured (ἐκκέχυται) into believers’ hearts through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The perfect tense implies a specific past event, perhaps evoking the Roman believers’ holistic, bodily experience of baptism.¹⁰ The content of this hope is nothing less than the glory of God. Here Paul clearly sets his listeners on a dynamic trajectory of transformation that anticipates mutual growth into the likeness of Christ’s resurrection (6:5).

Right from the beginning, this trajectory involves a typical Pauline conjunction of indicatives and imperatives. Summing up what he has dictated thus far, Paul begins, “Therefore, having been rectified on the basis of faith” (δικαιωθέντες οὖν ἐκ πίστεως). This rectification is the outworking of the gospel as God’s saving *power* (δύναμις θεοῦ εἰς σωτηρίαν) through which God’s righteousness is breaking into the world, “from faith to faith” (1:16–17). Lest his listeners forget the power of God’s rectification through Christ, Paul reiterates the point in terms of shame—he is not ashamed of the gospel (1:16), and the hope of glory will not be shamed either (5:5). But now he introduces a new aspect to this saving action of God, the love of God poured into the hearts of believers through the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is experiential language; Paul can speak in this way because he is confident that the Roman believers share in the knowledge of affliction and also of divine love. Robert Jewett comments perceptively, “The reason for Paul’s confidence that the deficit of shame is being filled in the current experience of believers is stated in v. 5b, which opens with the explanatory ὅτι (‘because’). ... Divine love addresses shame at its deepest level and reveals the motivation behind ‘peace’ and ‘reconciliation.’”¹¹

All of this is the indicative assurance of God’s gracious action, which grounds the exhortation of 5:1b: “Let us have (ἐχωμεν) peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Despite the strong textual evidence for the hortatory subjunctive that I have adopted here, most commentators opt for the variant indicative reading, ἔχομεν (“we have peace with God”).¹² The primary reason for this preference for the indicative seems to be theological; as C.E.B. Cranfield puts it, “Paul regards the believer’s peace with God as a fact. It would therefore be inconsistent for him to say here ‘let us have peace,’ meaning thereby ‘let us obtain peace.’”¹³ In addition to the textual evidence, however, the problem with such an argument is that it assumes an implicitly competitive account of divine and human agency. To

⁹ So Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 393; Longenecker, *Romans*, 553–556.

¹⁰ Paul’s language may reflect early Christian appropriations of Joel 3:1–2 (LXX): “I will pour out (ἐκχέω) my Spirit on all flesh,” with reference to Pentecost (Acts 2:17) and conversion (Acts 10:45). See Jewett, *Romans*, 356. Paul simply assumes that the gift of the Spirit generates experiential effects in and among believers (Gal 3:2–5).

¹¹ Jewett, *Romans*, 356.

¹² So, e.g., Käsemann, *Romans*, 132–133; J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (WBC 38A; Dallas, TX: Word 1988) 245, based on “intrinsic probability”; C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; London: Clark 1975) 257, also based on “intrinsic probability”; C.S. Keener, *Romans* (NCCS; Eugene, OR: Cascade 2009) 70; Keck, *Romans*, 135. Jewett, *Romans*, 348–349, however, defends the subjunctive reading (noting the “hortatory character” of 5:1–11), as does Richard N. Longenecker (*Romans*, 554–556), who provides a brief survey of patristic sources who understood the verb as a hortatory subjunctive.

¹³ Cranfield, *Romans*, 257.

the contrary, throughout Romans 6 Paul unites indicatives stating God's action with imperatives calling for a corresponding human action.¹⁴ Thus divine action catalyzes human action, such that an imperatival reading of 5:1b in no way means that believers are to obtain peace with God by their own efforts. Rather, as Richard N. Longenecker puts it, Paul is exhorting his listeners to embrace and experience the validity of his gospel proclamation, which has to do with "personal, relational, and participatory ways of appreciating the new 'life' that has come about 'through our Lord Jesus Christ' and is experienced 'in Christ' and 'in the Spirit,'"¹⁵ Along the same lines, Jewett rightly notes the link between "peace" in 5:1 and the theme of reconciliation in 5:10–11, which clearly has been accomplished by the death of Christ (5:6–10), yet nonetheless requires enactment in the Roman house churches.¹⁶ Paul is setting the stage for his teaching in 6:1–23, where he will encourage believers to claim and live out the new life that has been given to them.

Setting forth his picture of Christian transformation, Paul continues in verses 2–5:

Let us boast (*καυχώμεθα*) in hope of the glory of God (*ἐπ' ἐλπίδι τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ*).¹⁷ Not only that, let us boast in the afflictions (*καυχώμεθα ἐν ταῖς θλίψεσιν*), knowing that the affliction produces perseverance (*ὑπομονή*), perseverance leads to tested character (*δοκιμή*), tested character leads to hope (*ἐλπίς*), and hope does not put to shame (*οὐ καταισχύνει*), because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Numerous terms from this dense passage amplify or reverse earlier themes in the letter. On the one hand, Paul uses terms that *repeat and confirm* believers' distinctive new life "in this grace in which we have come to stand (*ἐστήκαμεν*)."¹⁸ Δικαιωθέντες (5:1) echoes and affirms the themes of the gospel as the means by which God's righteousness is breaking into the world (1:17), and of justification on the basis of faith (3:21). Πίστις (faith, in 5:1–2) is thematic in 1:16–17 and 3:21–4:25, as the hallmark of a life lived by trust in God. Χάρις (grace, in 5:2) picks up on the grace / gift language in 1:5, 7; 3:24; 4:4, 16. Δόξα (glory, in 5:2) echoes the promise of glory and honor and peace for those who do the good (2:10), as well as the example of Abraham, who was empowered in faith as he gave glory to God (4:20).¹⁸ Shortly Paul will amplify this link between divine glory and God's life-giving power, when he claims: "We were buried therefore with Christ by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so also we too might walk in newness of life" (6:4). Paul's repeated emphasis on hope (*ἐλπίς*) in 5:2, 4–5 also aligns Paul's audience with Abraham, the quintessential model of hope and trust in God (4:18).

14 On "imperatival grace" in Rom 6, see J.M.G. Barclay, "Under Grace: The Christ-Gift and the Construction of a Christian *Habitus*," *Apocalyptic Paul. Cosmos and Anthropos in Romans 5–8* (ed. B.R. Gaventa) (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press 2013) 59–76.

15 Longenecker, *Romans*, 556.

16 Jewett, *Romans*, 348–349.

17 The subjunctive sense of *καυχώμεθα* correlates with *ἔχωμεν* in 5:1. So Jewett, *Romans*, 352.

18 This link between Abraham's faithfulness and his glorification of God contrasts starkly with human falsehood and sin, which in no way diminish God's glory, but which also fall far short of it (3:7; 3:23).

The perseverance (ὑπομονή) learned through affliction links believers with those who, through perseverance in doing good work (τοῖς μὲν καθ' ὑπομονὴν ἔργου ἀγαθοῦ δόξαν) seek glory (δόξα) and honor and immortality (2:7).¹⁹ In his use of all these terms, Paul aligns the Roman believers with those who do the good and with Abraham as an exemplar of faith.

On the other hand, the dense description of believers' experiential journey in the life of faith *diverges* significantly from the depiction of human culpability in 1:18–3:20. First and obviously, in 2:17–23 Paul calls out a duplicitous and self-deceived “boasting in God” that is really boasting in one's own sense of having a superior moral status through knowledge of the law. By way of contrast, in 5:2–3 the paradoxical conjunction of boasting in hope of the glory of God and boasting in afflictions signals human weakness relying on divine power as the sole source of hope. The difference between these two kinds of boasting is both temporal and substantial. In the first instance, the interlocutor is boasting in his or her *present* standing before God. In 5:2–3, Paul enjoins boasting in hope of *future* glory and *present* afflictions, with the connection between these apparently contrasting states threading through the experience of endurance and growth into tested character. Further, whereas the basis for the hypocritical boasting in 2:17 is possession of the law, the basis for believers' boasting is the love of God poured into their hearts through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, the hypocrite in 2:18 “boasts” that he “approves” (δοκιμάζω) what is excellent. In 5:4 Paul says the believer who stands in grace, boasts in afflictions, and grows through perseverance, comes to have a tested or approved character (δοκιμή), which in turn leads to hope. The implicit contrast between the interlocutor in 2:18 and the believer in 5:4 is two-fold. Through elitist boasting about approving the right things, the hypocrite in 2:18 implicitly passes approval on himself, yet in fact he fails the test; his actions do not match his words. Conversely, the believer who perseveres through afflictions “passes the test” and gains a character approved by God. Because *God* has tested and approved the character of the believer, that experience of testing and approval in turn leads on to an assured hope grounded in the experience of divine love.²⁰ Indeed, the δοκιμή thus demonstrated by the believer is the opposite of the attitude and situation of rebellious humanity, who did not “see fit to acknowledge God” (οὐκ ἔδοκίμασαν τὸν θεὸν ἔχειν ἐν ἐπιγνώσει) and whom God therefore handed over to an “unfitting” or “disqualified mind” (ἁδόκιμον νοῦν) that is incapable of moral discernment.²¹ The reversal of this abysmal state of affairs is enacted

19 Jewett (*Romans*, 204–205) gives cogent reasons for translating ὑπομονή as “perseverance” in order to get at the sense of “a vigorous form of moral endeavor” here in the text.

20 See the close parallel in 2 Cor 8:2, where Paul speaks of overflowing joy in the midst of a “test of affliction” (ἐν πολλῇ δοκιμῇ θλίψεως ἢ περισσείᾳ τῆς χαρᾶς). Elsewhere he speaks of Timothy's “tested character” (Phil 2:22), and of generous giving as a “test of service” through which the Corinthians will glorify God (2 Cor 9:13). See discussion in Jewett, *Romans*, 354–355.

21 See the discussion in Cranfield, *Romans*, 127–128. One may compare 1 Cor 9:27, where Paul speaks of pummeling his body lest he be disqualified (ἁδόκιμος). Paul seems to use the rare word δοκιμή also to denote “tested, approved, qualified,” so it is difficult to ascertain a distinction in practice between δοκιμή and δοκιμός, both of which are cognate with δοκιμάζειν.

in Rom 12:2, where the renewal of the mind leads to “proving what is the will of God (εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν ὑμᾶς τί τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ).”

Third, we have already noted Paul’s repeated emphasis on divine glory as the object of believers’ hope. Such anticipated glory not only links believers with Abraham, but it distinguishes them from Adamic humanity’s refusal to glorify God (1:21) and contrary exchange of the glory of the immortal God for facsimiles of mortal creatures (1:23). Now, in their journey from hope, through afflictions, perseverance, tested character, and back to hope, the believers are firmly fixed on God’s glory as their lodestar.

There is, however, one surprising point of *shared experience* between Paul’s addressees and those who will face judgment for their wrong-doing—θλίψις. On the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed, there will be “affliction and distress” (θλίψις καὶ στενοχωρία) for everyone who does evil (2:9). The difference between the affliction of believers and that of those who do evil appears to be temporal, a contrast between *future* judgment for wrong-doers, and *present* suffering for believers. Indeed, in 8:35 Paul names θλίψις καὶ στενοχωρία among the present hardships suffered by believers. As we shall see, however, such a temporal distinction is difficult to maintain; in 8:19–22 Paul conceives of suffering as encompassing all creation, not just believers. What does seem to distinguish affliction in 2:9 from its appearance in 5:3–4 is its function and valence, whether it will be experienced as divine judgment, or as deepened union with Christ. This topic will come up in more depth in the discussion of Rom 8; here in we simply note the appearance of affliction in both explicitly Christian experience, and more broadly.

To sum up, in 5:1–5 Paul is not speaking hypothetically when he draws a picture of Christian transformation. He is appealing to what both he and his listeners know empirically (εἰδότες), giving them a way to narrate that experience in terms of growth in hope and the knowledge of God’s love. His use of the hortatory subjunctive, “let us have peace with God,” implies that this description of Christian life is meant to have practical effects in the life of the community of faith, setting the stage for the imperatives of 6:1–7:6. With the possible exception of “afflictions,” the characteristics of this future-oriented life in Christ distinguish it sharply from the markers of life in rebellion against God.

This distinction in turn accords with the antithesis Paul sets up in 5:12–21 between Adam’s legacy—the reign of sin and death—and Christ as the one man whose grace abounded for the many, a contrast wherein “primal time and end time confront one another in mounting antithesis.”²² With the possibly significant exception of the experience of θλίψις, it seems that Paul locates his listeners firmly and almost exclusively on the forward moving arc of the spiral of dereliction and deliverance. Empowered by union with Christ, corporately indwelt by the Spirit of the God who raised Jesus from the dead, they are firmly ensconced in the text’s trajectory of hope (5:4–5; 8:24–25, 38). Alternating between first and second person plural verbs, Paul encourages and exhorts his listeners: Let us boast in hope of the glory of God, let us rejoice in sufferings (5:2–3); we have died with Christ and

22 Käsemann, *Romans*, 142.

believe we shall also live with him (6:8). You (plural) must “reckon yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (6:11); “sin will not reign over you for you are not under law but under grace” (6:14). Therefore, “present your bodily members as slaves to righteousness, for sanctification” (6:19).²³ Indeed, walking by the Spirit, Paul’s auditors share the mindset of the Spirit (τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος), which is life and peace (8:6). Here is an affective, volitional, and embodied account of moral transformation that appears to proceed in a straightforward linear fashion.

Thus, although the spiral structure of Romans 1–8 may indeed display the desperate situation of Adamic humanity on ever deeper levels, the contrasting affirmations of chapters 6 and 8 strongly imply that those in Christ no longer share that human experience. Through his vivid appeals to bodily practices, including baptism and the deployment of bodily members in the service of righteousness, Paul gives his audience powerful, future oriented ways to narrate their shared life in Christ. When he turns later in the letter to practical matters regarding food and fellowship, he further describes their common life in terms of a shared mindset and diverse practices that display the countercultural effects of the Christ-gift in their midst (12:1–13; 14:1–23). Clearly Paul envisions a distinctive ethos, even *habitus*, for the moral formation of believers, with personal and interpersonal dimensions that demonstrate a definite break with the situation of Adamic humanity.²⁴

2.2. Detours

Nonetheless, in the “downward” movements of the spiral, Paul repeatedly disrupts his confident affirmations of new life in Christ, with vivid portrayals of human bondage and affliction in the wake of Adam’s transgression. Careful attention to these interruptions calls into question a clear binary between those “in Christ” and those in the grip of sin and death, and indeed between the realm of grace and the realm of sin, particularly regarding experience. I will focus on three such interruptions: 7:7–25, 8:18–27, and 8:35–36.

First, in 7:7–25 Paul abruptly introduces a lengthy performance of the experience of the self as indwelt by sin and co-opted by sin’s lethal use of the law.²⁵ The immediate catalyst for this apparent excursus is a need to distinguish between the law and sin (7:7), in light of his negative portrayal of the law in 6:1–7:6. But the following verses go far beyond such

23 In addition to Barclay, “Under Grace,” see also J.M.G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2015) 493–519.

24 Both Barclay and Engberg-Pedersen find helpful the notion of *habitus*, as explicated in Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (trans. R. Nice) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1977), and *The Logic of Practice* (trans. R. Nice) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1990). For Bourdieu, *habitus* denotes the embodied and socially embedded habits of thought and practice that permeate a culture in such deeply ingrained ways that they can be summarized as “what goes without saying because it comes without saying.” See Barclay, *Gift*, 506–508; Barclay, “Under Grace” 69–73; Engberg-Pedersen, *Cosmology and Self in the Apostle Paul. The Material Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010) 182–194.

25 For the purposes of this paper, I set aside the many disputes regarding the interpretation of Rom 7:7–25 and focus primarily on the text’s performative rhetoric and its potential effects on the audience. For exegetical defense of the following reading of Rom 7:7–25, see Eastman, “Strengthening the Ego,” 137–164.

an agenda, as Paul deploys first person singular speech, first in past and then in present tense, to perform the anguish of the speaker whose desire for the good is sabotaged by indwelling sin. The experience of the ἐγὼ in these verses differs significantly from the experience of life in Christ that Paul limns in 5:1–7:6, and to which he will return in 8:1–39. As noted earlier, the baptized have died to sin (6:2); therefore they must reckon themselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (6:11). The imperative is grounded in a strong indicative: “Sin will not rule over you, for you are not under law but under grace” (6:14). Indeed, not only have believers died to sin through union with Christ, they also have died to the law through the body of Christ (7:4). All of these affirmations contrast in the strongest possible terms with the complaint of the speaker: “I am carnal, sold under sin (ἐγὼ δὲ σάρκινός εἰμι πεπραμένος ὑπὸ τὴν ἁμαρτίαν).”²⁶ Again, if the “I” acts against its own wishes, “I am no longer the one accomplishing it, but sin dwelling in me” (7:17, 20), a description which contrasts sharply with that of the Christian community as “indwelt” by the Holy Spirit (8:9, 11). Finally, at the confusing end of the lament of the ἐγὼ, despair and hope take turns on the stage (7:24–25), confounding any clear identification of the speaker as one “in Christ”: “wretched person that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with the flesh I serve the law of sin.” Käsemann expresses a dominant view among commentators when he comments, “What is being said here is over for the Christian according to ch. 6 and ch. 8.”²⁷ Paul has a much more hopeful view of the agency of Christian believers as it is reconstituted in union with Christ; that hopeful view undergirds his admonitions to the Roman Christians to present their members to God as weapons of righteousness (6:13, 19). How then could the experience enacted in 7:24–25, which is one of vacillation, alternating between despair and hope, plight and solution, have any place in Paul’s robust confidence about Christians’ victory over sin (6:14)?²⁸

On the other hand, the fact that Paul repeatedly exhorts his listeners to enact the freedom they have been given in Christ, in the conjunction of indicative and imperative that reaches back to the programmatic affirmation and injunction of 5:1, implies that believers

26 Noting a similar contrast between σάρκινός and πνευματικός in 1 Cor 3:1, where Paul clearly is describing immature Christians, Will N. Timmins (*Romans 7 and Christian Identity. A Study of the 'I' in its Literary Context* [SNTSMS; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017] 139–142) argues that in Rom 7:14 σάρκινός denotes being “made of flesh” in the sense of having a mortal physical body, rather than “belonging to the realm of the flesh” in an eschatological sense.

27 Käsemann, *Romans*, 200. Käsemann recognizes the problem 7:25b poses for his reading of the text, and falls back on an interpolation theory: “Here if anywhere we have the gloss of a later reader” (*ibidem*, 212).

28 Throughout the history of interpretation, many commentators who defend 7:14–25 as exclusively depicting Christian experience tend to see 7:25 as portraying an inner division between the body’s vulnerability to sin, and the mind as devoted to God. See, e.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans* (trans. F.R. Larcher) (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine 2012) 200; J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (trans. J. Owen) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1955) 263, 267, 274. More recent commentators who interpret 7:7–25 as explicitly describing Christian experience include Cranfield, *Romans*, 344–370; C.K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (BNTC; London: Hendrickson 1991) 140–143; Dunn, *Romans*, 396–399; Timmins, *Romans* 7, 205–210.

remain vulnerable to the deceptive power of sin, precisely through their embodied and socially networked existence in a world where sin and death still reign. There is an experiential and behavioral gap between the realities of new life in Christ, and their expression in the lives of believers.²⁹ Thus the theme of hope that runs from 5:1–8:39 “confronts what has aptly been called the ‘overlap’ situation of present Christian life.”³⁰ Within this overlap situation, the time between the ages, the full identity and reality of those in Christ remains at least partially hidden, awaiting full revelation (8:19–25). Given this eschatological reservation, in Michael Wolter’s words, “for Paul the ‘new creation’ of the reality in Christ here and now is not present in the same way as ‘this aeon’ or the reality in Adam of the cosmos.”³¹ We will return to this theme of hiddenness in discussing Romans 8, but here I simply note that both the presence of imperatives indicating a lag between believers’ union with Christ and their behavior, and the present elusiveness of God’s reign displayed in human lives, puts a question mark over attempts to nail down the identity of the speaker in Rom 7:7–25. Rather, perhaps it is time to propose an alternate approach to this text by considering the potential effects of Paul’s rhetoric is on his audience, precisely at this point in the letter.³²

The rhetorical turn to first person singular speech in 7:7 signals not a shift in subject matter per se; after all, Paul is at least initially addressing a question about the law, raised by his harsh description of the law in 7:1–6. Rather, the grammatical shift signals a change in genre, from exhortation and description to a performative rhetoric of pathos.³³ Like the psalms, Paul’s first-person speech draws the hearer into the experience of the speaker. As Beverly Gaventa puts it, the *ego* “is shaped by the ‘I’ of the Psalter as it is reinterpreted by the gospel. This new ‘I’ in turn may shape the audience to identify with Paul’s analysis of the enslaving power of Sin and its capacity to take even God’s holy Law as its captive.”³⁴ Gaventa’s observation rightly shifts the focus of interpretation from questions about

29 This gap, as indicated by the presence of imperatives in Rom 6, receives particular attention in Timmins, *Romans* 7, 66–91. Timmins (*ibidem*, 74–91) in particular notes the importance of 6:12, 19, highlighting the “mortal body” as the site of the struggle with sin. Eastman (*Paul and the Person*, 85–108) argues extensively for a Pauline understanding of embodiment as participatory mode of existence entailing vulnerability to the larger environment.

30 B. Byrne, *Romans* (SP 6; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 2007) 163.

31 M. Wolter, *Paul. An Outline of His Theology* (trans. R. Brawley) (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press 2015) 186. For thorough discussion of the gap in terms of what is “hidden” and what is “revealed” in relationship to Christian moral identity, see M.A. Mininger, *Uncovering the Theme of Revelation in Romans 1:16–3:26* (WUNT 2/445; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2017).

32 For exegetical defense of the following reading of Rom 7:7–25, see Eastman, “Strengthening the Ego.”

33 Stanley K. Stowers’ argument (*A Rereading of Romans. Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1994] 273) for reading 7:7–25 as “speech-in-character” focuses attention on the question of genre, but nonetheless also proposes a specific referent for the speaker, as a Gentile attempting to live by the law. For a cogent critique of Stowers, see Timmins, *Romans* 7, 12–34.

34 B.R. Gaventa, “The Shape of the ‘I’: The Psalmist, the Gospel, and the Speaker in Romans 7,” *Apocalyptic Paul. Cosmos and Anthropos in Romans 5–8* (ed. B.R. Gaventa) (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press 2013) 81, n. 12.

the identity of the speaker, which Paul has left elusive, to questions about the identities of the listeners as they are brought to identify with the ἐγώ.³⁵

These questions press in upon readers of Romans. Whose experience is this? I rather doubt the question will ever be settled to the satisfaction of all Pauline scholars! But perhaps the question is the wrong one. Perhaps this highly charged performance shines the spotlight on the listeners, by inviting them to locate themselves within the drama. To take a seat among the Roman Christians and hear this invitation is to turn away from endlessly disputed questions about the identity of the *speaker*, and instead to attend to one's identity as a listener: who am I and where am I in this scenario? When the listener finds herself caught up into the pathos of the ἐγώ, she also finds herself directly addressed by the promise of 8:1–2: "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you (σε) free from the law of sin and death."³⁶

In other words, here Paul's rhetoric not only persuades and informs; it elicits identification and response from his listeners, and it does this precisely when depicting the experience of the self in sin's realm. If Paul's goal is simply to exonerate the law by distinguishing it from sin, why use such audience-involving rhetoric, *precisely at this point*? After all, he has just reminded his listeners of their union with Christ and death to sin in baptism (6:1–4), and indeed this is the very reason most scholars deny any possibility that the "I" could represent believers. I agree, *insofar* as on a logical and ontological level, the speaker's experience of captivity to sin (7:14) cannot depict the ultimate reality of believers' status in Christ. Yet we still have to ask: what is the *effect* of this speech on Paul's listeners, not only cognitively but affectively? Is it not possible that the speech of the ἐγώ is in one sense a *retrospective* account of life under the law and the power of sin, but that it also functions to acknowledge and address the *present* struggles of believers whose experiences and behavior have not "caught up" with the reality of their new situation in Christ?³⁷ If so, this apparent "detour" has a positive function in Paul's depiction of Christian existence in chapters 5–8, by preparing the way for a fresh hearing of the gospel in chapter 8.³⁸

35 So, for example, although Engberg-Pedersen and I may disagree as to the constitution and identity of the "I," we can agree that, as he puts it, "the whole point of Paul's account seems to lie in making his readers themselves experience the experiences of the self that he is recounting" (Engberg-Pedersen, *Cosmology and Self*, 168).

36 As Stowers (*Rereading*, 282) puts it, "The character's speech ends when Paul addresses him in words of encouragement". See also the discussion in S.G. Eastman, "Double Participation and the Responsible Self in Romans 5–8," *Apocalyptic Paul. Cosmos and Anthropos in Romans 5–8* (ed. B.G. Gaventa) (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press 2013) 98–99.

37 Timmins (*Romans 7*) arrives at a similar reading, but he identifies the speaker as Paul speaking personally, representatively, and explicitly as a Christian believer.

38 Centuries of interpretation have affirmed such an understanding of Rom 7; does readers' experience have any role to play in the interpretation of a text? The question is complicated when we consider the hermeneutical circle operative in Paul's interpretation of texts; it seems clear that he interprets Israel's scriptures in the light of his experiences of Christ and the Gentile mission, even as he narrates those experiences through a scriptural lens. The question arises whether and how such a hermeneutical circle continues to affect interpretation today. For a judicious discussion of the relationship between experience and historical-critical method in biblical

The second “interruption” is in 8:18–27, where Paul punctuates his account of living “according to the Spirit” with the statement, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning and suffering labor pains until now, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our body” (8:22–23). Although Paul speaks here of *παθήματα* rather than *θλίψεις*, there are close thematic as well as textual links between these verses and 5:1–5. In the overlap of the ages affliction and suffering seem to be shared by believers and the rest of the created order. In 8:23–25 Paul continues with a probing exploration of hope that amplifies his earlier description of a progression from affliction to perseverance (*ὑπομονή*) to character to hope (5:4–5). Now he qualifies hope as waiting with perseverance (*ὑπομονή*) for what is *not yet seen* (8:25), and through and in such long-suffering waiting in the dark, so to speak, joining with the shared groaning and labor of all creation (8:22–23).

Whereas a majority of scholars interpret creation (*κτίσις*) in 8:19–23 as limited to the non-human natural order, there are several reasons to see it as including Adamic humanity as well.³⁹ In Paul's uses of *κτίσις* elsewhere he surely has human beings in mind (Gal 5:17; 2 Cor 5:17). Here in Rom 8:20, the unwilling subjection of creation to futility picks up on Paul's depiction of divine judgment for humanity's primal refusal to honor God: they “were made futile (*ἐματαιώθησαν*) in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened (*ἐσκοτίσθη*)” (1:21). The verbs are divine passives, indicating that futility is not a chosen or “willed” condition, but an unanticipated consequence of idolatry. Similarly, in 8:20, God is implied as the one who subjected creation to futility, “not willingly” because such subjection was not chosen by those thus subjected.⁴⁰ Furthermore, this creation suffers birth pangs (8:22), a descriptor often applied to Israel when suffering under divine judgment (Mic 4:10; Isa 26:17; 66:8–9; Jer 4:31; 6:24). Indeed, God's judgment means the natural order suffers together with Israel (Jer 4:23–31), so that the sufferings of the created order are inseparable from those of God's people. These observations strongly suggest that the suffering and groaning of creation in 8:19–23 include the suffering of fallen humanity under the judgment of God.

Astonishingly, those in Christ share in this suffering and yearning for redemption, precisely through the intercession of the Spirit of God (vv. 26–27). Apparently, groaning, yearning, waiting, and enduring, in union with the whole created order, including fallen humanity, is also “living according to the Spirit.”⁴¹ Furthermore, this experience of suffering, hope, and intercession is shot through both with what “we know”—the groaning of

interpretation, with particular reference to Rom 7:7–25, see M. Carson, “Deep Heat and Bandages? Historical Criticism, Bounded Indeterminacy, and Pastoral Care,” *EQ* 82/4 (2010) 340–352.

39 S.G. Eastman, “Whose Apocalypse? The Identity of the Sons of God in Romans 8:19,” *JBL* 121/2 (2002) 273–277.

40 So Käsemann, *Romans*, 235: “The verb, which has the specific sense of ‘to be subject,’ according to apocalyptic tradition refers to the consequences of the fall . . . We have here a backward glance at the *παρέδωκεν* of 1:24.”

41 Dorothea Bertschmann (“‘The Silence of the Lambs’: Suffering, Meaning-Making, and Lament in Romans 8,18–39,” *Dying with Christ—New Life in Hope. Romans 5,12–8,39* [ed. J.M.G. Barclay] [Leuven: Peeters 2021] 231) speaks here of “an oscillating agency between the Spirit-bearers and the Spirit itself: though

creation (8:22) and the promise that God works for good (8:28)—and with what “we do not know” (8:26), which is what and how to pray. Here is an account of believers’ experience that has cognitive, affective, and bodily aspects, conjoined with the longing of Adamic humanity for release from enslavement to decay (8:21).⁴² Dorothea Bertschmann perceptively sees here Paul’s description of

the experience of an open-ended life, which is vulnerable to the powers of death and destruction. ... The experience of ongoing suffering under the signature of assured salvation moves the believers into a liminal territory, where they do not know what (τι) to pray. ... [T]here is a crisis of knowing, a crisis of language, even prayer language, driven by the liminal experience where the most assured hopes and the most disheartening suffering face each other.⁴³

Paul’s description of believers in a situation of liminal unknowing highlights the logic of solidarity that permeates his language and the constraints such solidarity places on any linear account of transformation. Drawn by the Spirit into fellowship with creation’s powerless suffering in subjection to futility and bondage, including the futility to which Adamic humanity has been subjected by God, believers must share with all others in eagerly awaiting the final redemption (8:19, 23), which includes not only “the apocalypse of the sons of God”, but the liberation of creation from its bondage to decay. “The unity of suffering points to the unity of redemption.”⁴⁴

Thus, if the interruption of 7:7–25 gives voice to believers’ lingering struggles with sin and despair, only to announce the good news that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (8:9), the incursion of 8:18–27 reminds believers that they still wait, together with all creation, for the full liberation promised in Christ. Finally, in 8:35–36 a psalm of lament suddenly intrudes into Paul’s confidence that nothing can separate believers from divine love. This lament follows immediately after a catalogue of conditions that threaten to do just that (8:35). The list begins with “affliction or distress” (θλίψις ἢ στενοχωρία), which Paul earlier threatened as precisely the future awaiting those who “do not obey the truth” (2:8), but which believers experience now. It is worth noting that just as Christ was “handed over” to death (4:25; 8:32), sharing the judgment pronounced on human suppression of the truth (1:24, 26, 28), so here those in Christ share in the situation

the Spirit has been sent into the hearts of believers and has become part of their innermost person (Rom 5:5; Gal 4:6), it has an agency, which does not annul but expands and perhaps transcends human agency.”

42 Drawing on 1 Cor 14:15, Gordon D. Fee (*God’s Empowering Presence*, 575–586) argues that στεναγμοῖς ἀλαλήτοις in 8:26 refers to inarticulate, Spirit-inspired private prayer. Käsemann (“The Cry for Liberty in the Worship of the Church,” E. Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul* [trans. M. Kohl] [Philadelphia, PA: Fortress 1971] 122–137 [135]) famously argued that Paul is speaking of *glossolalia* in public worship, expressing solidarity with unredeemed creation: “Paul certainly does not say, *simul justus, simul peccator*. But he allows the sons of liberty to be those who die and, as those who cry for redemption, to be at one with unredeemed creation.” In either case, Paul assumes his listeners will know whereof he speaks.

43 Bertschmann, “Silence,” 230.

44 Eastman, “Apocalypse,” 274.

of disobedient humanity, under the shadow of affliction associated with judgment.⁴⁵ They are not exempt from suffering that Paul elsewhere associates with divine judgment; rather their affliction is part and parcel of their union with Christ in solidarity with their fellow human beings who still await redemption. For this very reason, this fellowship of sufferings is named in the context of rock-solid assurance that such afflictions cannot separate them from their Lord; indeed, the end result of this litany of threats, and the conflict it evokes, is to magnify the victory of God's redeeming power and love. Such certainty about the victory of divine love gives Paul's account of Christian experience its forward moving thrust.

But not without the cry of the oppressed! "For your sake we are being killed all the day long. We are reckoned as sheep for the slaughter!" (8:36 / Ps 43:23 LXX). The psalmist protests loudly, vociferously, "Do not forget our suffering! Do not sweep it under the rug!" In Paul's citation of the psalm, the tone of the complaint stands in jarring contrast to the confident hope that precedes and follows it in 8:31–35, 37–39. Without being harmonized, without being assimilated, the lingering present experience of severe suffering punctuates even the confident affirmation of a secure future. Apparently, this too is a part of Christian experience.

3. The Spiral Structure of Experience and the Logic of Solidarity

We have seen that Paul establishes his audience firmly in the new realm of life in Christ, a realm where union with Christ's death through baptism, and the promise of resurrection, fund the apostle's exhortations to transformed behavior. We have also seen that this union with Christ does not create immunity to either sin or suffering, nor does it separate believers from the present depredations of a world still in bondage to sin and death. Rather, to be in solidarity with Christ is to be drawn into solidarity with an as yet unredeemed world. Vulnerability to sin, the reality of affliction, the longing for a redemption that remains unseen, the cry of the oppressed, all subvert a clear-cut antithesis between the experience of the old age and the new, between the realm of sin and death, and the realm of life in Christ. Their interpenetration at the present time is a sign of the overlap between the ages, even as Paul anticipates the final and complete victory of Christ. As Käsemann puts it:

⁴⁵ This is not simply a rhetorical ploy on Paul's part; the last threat in this short list is "the sword," which at the least implies the danger of physical violence and death. While it is impossible to ascertain the actual circumstances of which Paul speaks, the list makes clear the reality of conflict in which Paul sees himself, his co-workers, and possibly his listeners in Rome living out their life in Christ. These enemy forces, which Paul depicts in cosmic terms in 8:38–39, would indeed have power to separate Paul and his listeners from their life in Christ, were it not for the power of the surpassing divine love in Christ (8:35; 8:39) that brackets the lament. In this context, Beverly R. Gaventa ("Interpreting the Death of Jesus Apocalyptically: Reconsidering Romans 8:32," *Jesus and Paul Re-connected. Fresh Pathways into an Old Debate* [ed. T. Still] [Grand Rapids, MI – Cambridge: Eerdmans 2007] 125–145) persuasively explores the military connotations of "handing over" (παράδιδωμι) in 8:32 and 4:25, in relation to God's three-fold "handing over" of disobedient humanity in 1:24, 26, 28.

The old aeon has not simply vanished with the inauguration of the new. It still radiates temptation and mortal peril. But precisely this is the sphere which the new aeon invades. In the time ushered in with Christ the two aeons are no longer separated chronologically and spatially as in Jewish apocalyptic. The earth has become their battleground.⁴⁶

This interweaving of the two ages, both temporally and in terms of competing realms of power, is the arena in which Christian experience and transformation take place. This is why Paul uses the imperatives to exhort his listeners, even though they already are “in Christ.” And this is why, in my view, the entirety of Rom 5–8 depicts the Christian journey, while also repeatedly blurring the boundaries between the experiences of life in Christ and apart from Christ. Christ’s movement into the old age where sin and death penultimately reign generates a logic of solidarity that runs through these chapters—solidarity in union with Christ and fellow believers, corporately indwelt by the Spirit, but also a degree of solidarity with suffering, including suffering under judgment for sin, in the whole created order.

Thus, I suggest that the repeated disruptions in the progression of the letter, narrated in richly experiential language, subvert a strictly linear understanding of transformation through union with Christ. Rather, the spiral structure of these chapters draws the reader into a pattern of *life in Christ* that oscillates between plight and solution even as it is propelled forward by the sure victory over all that threatens separate humanity from God. Ultimately, the telos of this pattern of life is profound confidence in the love of God, precisely because it reveals the scope of divine love encompassing all creation through all time.

4. Theological Reflections and Pastoral Implications

4.1. Theological Reflections

In closing, I will comment briefly on some theological and pastoral implications of this oscillating yet forwardly dynamic structure of Christian experience. In the first place, despite the sharp contrast between believers’ past life under the power of sin and death, and new life “under grace,” God is on both sides of that divide.⁴⁷ Similarly, as the intercession of the Spirit demonstrates, God is on both sides of the disparity between believers’ assurance of salvation and creation’s hunger for redemption. There can be no time or place apart from God, as is evident above all in Paul’s radical language about Christ’s participation in

⁴⁶ Käsemann, *Romans*, 134.

⁴⁷ For the way in which Paul narrates the action of God encompassing his whole life, including his life prior to the “apocalypse” of Christ in him (Gal 1:15–16), see J.M.G. Barclay, “Paul’s Story: Theology as Testimony,” *Narrative Dynamics in Paul. A Critical Assessment* (ed. B.W. Longenecker) (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 2002); S.G. Eastman, *Recovering Paul’s Mother Tongue. Language and Theology in Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI – Cambridge: Eerdmans 2007) 33–37.

human dereliction to the point of execution as a criminal.⁴⁸ Christ's decisive and continued movement into the world pulls believers into that movement as well. As the intercession of the Spirit demonstrates, God laments from the depths of *all* afflictions, including both Christian experience and all human and non-human suffering.⁴⁹

The Christology that undergirds this spiral depiction of Christian experience is deeply incarnational. It is Christ's participatory union with humanity, to the depth of being "made to be sin, although he knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21), that enacts God's love and empowers growth in Christ. In Rom 5:12–21, the christological center of his picture of Christian experience, Paul establishes this divine solidarity through antithetical parallelism linking Christ and Adam. The antithesis between Adam and Christ dominates the pericope: Adam is the one whose primal transgression provided the opportunity for sin and death to enter the world (5:12). His trespass led to death for "the many" (5:15), bringing the judgment that results in condemnation (5:16, 18). Through his disobedience the many were made to be sinners (5:19). In every respect, Christ is the opposite of Adam, bringing super-abounding grace and the free gift of righteousness, such that those who receive his grace and gift "reign in life" (5:17–21). Both Adam and Christ carry humanity's destiny as representative figures, but Christ's legacy of acquittal, surpassing gift, and life, far surpasses Adam's legacy of condemnation and death.

Yet the saving effect of this antithesis between the reigns of Adam and Christ relies on an underlying connection between them: Adam is a *τύπος τοῦ μέλλοντος*, a "type of the one who was to come", that is, Christ.⁵⁰ Taking the most basic meaning of *τύπος* as Paul's sense here, Adam is an imprint of Christ, or the hollow left by Christ's imprint, rather like a footprint or the mark of a signet ring. Such an imprint will inevitably be the reverse of the original, just as Adam is a mere reverse copy of Christ. Without Christ Adam would not exist, any more than a *τύπος* could exist without the original. Neither, however, would Christ's actions be effective for Adam's heirs, without such an intimate correspondence between them. As Paul emphasizes repeatedly in 5:6–11, Christ's reconciling death on behalf of Adam's heirs—the ungodly, weak, sinners, and enemies—is precisely the power that

⁴⁸ This divine participation in human dereliction is clearest in Pauline texts which speak of Christ interchanging places with humanity: Gal 3:13; 2 Cor 5:21; 2 Cor 8:9; Rom 8:3; Phil 2:7–11. The classic discussion of this theme is M.D. Hooker, "Interchange in Christ," *From Adam to Christ. Essays on Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge 1991) 13–25. A probing exploration of Christ's identification with humanity under sin in Rom 8:3 is offered by Vincent P. Branick, "The Sinful Flesh of the Son of God (Rom 8:3): A Key Image of Pauline Theology," *CBQ* 47 (1985) 246–262.

⁴⁹ Noting that Paul speaks of suffering and death, the legacy of being "in Adam," in terms of life in union with Christ, Hooker ("Interchange," 24) suggests, "Can it be that these Adamic sufferings have been pulled over (or baptized) into Christ? Man is created again in Christ, but he is not yet free from physical limitations: yet precisely because Christ is fully one with man in all his experiences, these can now be understood in terms of life in Christ."

⁵⁰ "For all the antithesis there is also correspondence between them. This is expressed by the word *τύπος*." Käsemann, *Romans*, 151.

overcomes Adam's legacy. Here is the christological enactment of God's saving solidarity with humanity *in extremis*, yet without effacing Christ's divine identity.

One thinks here of the theme of recapitulation in Irenaeus, drawing on his reading of Rom 5–8:

For in what way could we be partakers of the adoption of sons, unless we had received from Him through the Son that fellowship which refers to Himself, unless His Word, having been made flesh, had entered into communion with us? Wherefore also He passed through every stage of life, restoring to all communion with God. ... For it behoved Him who was to destroy sin, and redeem man under the power of death, that He should Himself be made that very same thing which he was, that is, man; who had been drawn by sin into bondage, but was held by death, so that sin should be destroyed by man, and man should go forth from death. For as by the disobedience of the one man who was originally molded from virgin soil, the many were made sinners, and forfeited life, so was it necessary that, by the obedience of one man, who was originally born from a virgin, many should be justified and receive salvation. ... God recapitulated in Himself the ancient formation of man, that He might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and vivify man; and therefore His works are true.⁵¹

This notion of recapitulation implies that Christ incorporates all human experience, the past as well as the present and future, into himself and recasts it into a new life of communion and fellowship with God. As Michael Steenberg describes Irenaeus' recapitulative and restorative soteriology, "What the incarnate Christ is, he is for all humankind, as all humankind."⁵² Insofar as Rom 5:12–21 depicts such a saving movement by Christ, it undergirds Paul's subsequent depiction of the whole of Christian experience, including experiences of sin, suffering, and oppression where God seems to be absent, as enclosed within God's redemption. To journey in union with such a Lord is to circle back to the past and down to the depths, even while eagerly anticipating the promise of future glory.

4.2. Pastoral Implications

Here I will name briefly two implications of the foregoing analysis for the pastoral work of the church. First, the spiral structure of experience "in Christ" creates room for, and indeed requires, acknowledging the enmeshment of believers and the church in actions and attitudes that belong to the realm of death, not life. To acknowledge this pastorally may include the retelling of wrongs both done and suffered, lament, disruptive cries of protest, and radical questioning of the goodness and providence of God. All of these have an insistent voice in Romans 5–8. Repetition and interruption mandate expressing these difficult realities, whereas a purely linear account of transformation would run the danger of sweeping them under the rug. Real transformation requires both the retelling of the wrong and the assurance that it does not have the last word, in a communal context contained by the gracious love of God in Christ.

⁵¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III.18.7 (ANFI).

⁵² M.C. Steenberg, *Of God and Man. Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (London: Clark 2009) 49.

Finally, Paul's logic of solidarity and the spiral structure of experience go together. Because the self is always a self-in-relation, there can be no transformation of the individual apart from the transformation of the relational matrices that hold and constitute the person. The reverse is also true: there can be no real growth in the life of the community when some individuals or groups are excluded or left behind. The good of the part and the good of the whole belong together. As Paul's cosmic vision of redemption in Romans 8 makes clear, this means that the good of the church and the good of the whole created order also belong together. Rowan Williams has stated this memorably, and I will draw to a close with his words:

We are all to find who we are in the light of God in Jesus, and that finding *is* the process of living in a community struggling to discover means of mutual empowering and affirming, in the conviction that we shall not live or flourish if we consider any person or group dispensable, or merely functional for our own self-definition. And behind the life of such a community stands the event—and the *power*—by which it lives. To understand the Church, we must look at what generates it.⁵³

“Behind the life of such a community stands the event—and the *power*—by which it lives.” The community of faith ends, as it starts, in the experience of a real encounter with Christ as the divine Other who *presses in* upon Paul—and Paul's audience—reminding, renewing, unsettling, interrupting, and transforming.

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⁵³ R. Williams, “Nobody Knows Who I Am Till the Judgment Morning,” R. Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell 2000) 287.

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