# Was Paul a Mystic?

> *"See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ."*
> *—The Apostle Paul, Colossians 2:8*

**Introduction**
Although defying exact definition because the practices and experiences of mystics are so various and mysterious, one dictionary defines mysticism as, "the doctrine of an immediate spiritual intuition of truths believed to transcend ordinary understanding, or of a direct, intimate union of the soul with God through contemplation and love." **[1]** Note that in contrast to God revealing Himself in Scripture, mystical truth is individually, intimately, and immediately intuited through spiritual experiences.

In his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James identified four main characteristics of mystical experience: first, ineffability; second, noetic quality; third, transiency; and fourth, passivity. **[2]** James also notes that absorption, fusion, or union of the individual into the Absolute, or deity, is "the great mystic achievement." He adds, "In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness." **[3]** On this point, James apparently suggested a fifth characteristic of mysticism—absorption.

There are those who speak of "Christian mysticism" and assert that the apostle Paul was a mystic. **[4]** From his epistles, they cite his experience, that of going to Paradise, and his condition, that of being "in Christ," as evidences of his mysticism. For this reason, it is incumbent upon Bible believers to understand what Paul was saying about his

experiences.

To determine if Paul was a mystic, analysis shall be offered regarding the incident of his being carried to “the third heaven,” and his state of being “in Christ.” The apostle’s experience and spiritual state shall be evaluated according to William James’ five characteristics of mystical experiences to determine whether or not Paul was a mystic. We note first the two primary New Testament references causing some to deduce that the apostle was a mystic.

*Paul’s Journey to “Paradise”*
In the twelfth chapter of 2 Corinthians Paul provided this autobiographical account of what some consider to have been a mystical experience. He wrote,

> *I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise, and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak (2 Corinthians 12:2-4).* ***[5]***

*Paul’s Life “In Christ”*
William James and others consider Paul’s statement of being “in Christ” to be descriptive of the mystical state of absorption. This state is indicated by these well-known words written to the Galatians.

> *For through the Law I died to the Law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me (Emphasis mine, Galatians 2:19-20).*

Because of his teaching on the believer's union with Christ, some label Paul's teaching, "Christian 'mysticism'." **[6]**

But before looking at Paul's transport to "the third heaven," and his state of being "in Christ," Paul's spirituality needs to be distinguished from mysticism.

*Reactive Spirituality versus Proactive Mysticism*
In a chapter "Mysticism and Morality," contained in his book *A Man in Christ*, Scottish preacher and Professor James S. Stewart (1896-1990) pointed out that Adolf Deissmann categorized mysticism to be of two types: acting, and reacting. For our purposes, the two different models might be called proactive mysticism, and reactive spirituality. Reactive spirituality is of grace, an "experience in which the action of God . . . produces a reaction towards God." **[7]** In other words, God initiates and man responds. On the other hand, proactive mysticism is of works, a mystic communion resulting from the mystic's "own action, from which a reaction follows on the part of Deity." **[8]** In other words, by engaging intentional mystical practices, man initiates, then God responds. Though disagreeing with labeling the apostle's theology of the spiritual life "Christian mysticism," Stewart's distinction helps differentiate between Paul's reactive spirituality, and proactive mysticism. Of this distinction Professor Stewart wrote:

> *Much religion has been made of the latter kind [i.e., proactive mysticism]. Man's action has been regarded as the primary thing. The soul has endeavoured to ascend towards God. Spiritual exercises [e.g., spiritual disciplines] have been made the ladder for the ascent. But all this savors of the religion of works as contrasted with the religion of grace. Paul's attitude was different. His mysticism was essentially of the reacting kind. Christ, not Paul, held the initiative. Union with the eternal was not a human achievement: it was the gift of God. It came, not by any spiritual exercises [e.g., spiritual disciplines], but by*

> *God's self-revelation, God's self-impartation. The words "It pleased God to reveal His Son in me," which remind us that the Damascus experience itself was the foundation of the apostle's mysticism, are Paul's emphatic way of saying that God's action always holds priority: His servant simply reacts to the action of God.* ***[9]***

Stewart then concludes by stating that Paul's spirituality was "all of grace; and it is well to be reminded by the apostle that union with Christ is not something we have to achieve by effort, but something we have to accept by faith." **[10]**

In separating Christianity from the mystery religions, David Rightmire also observes that the apostle, "viewed communion with God as an act of divine grace, coming not by any spiritual exercises, but by God's self-revelation (Gal. 1:16)." **[11]** In other words, spirituality based upon reaction to revelation is of a different sort than spirituality conjured up through the practices and disciplines of the mystical way. The former is initiated by God, and based upon "faith," while the latter is initiated by man, and based upon "works."

The contemplative spirituality promoted by and amongst evangelicals today belongs to the acting, or proactive, category of mysticism. Spiritual directors advise using various spiritual disciplines or techniques—solitude and silence, fasting, walking prayer labyrinths, Taizé worship, spiritual retreats, lectio divina (reading sacred things), journaling, religious pilgrimages, and so on—to initiate intimacy and revelatory encounters with God. But as Professors Stewart and Rightmire pointed out, Paul did not embrace such a works model of spirituality. If practices (i.e., means of grace) are engaged in to promote spiritual growth, then they ought to find precedent in the revealed Word of God (i.e., prayer, Scripture reading and study, singing spiritual songs, witnessing, fellowshipping with the saints, and observing the

ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Table). If methods of spiritual growth are not sourced in the Bible, but are of human invention, then Paul's question to the Galatians seems appropriate. He asked them, "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3). Paul's paradigm of spirituality focused upon grace. He gave no advice for experiencing spirituality via works of the mystic way. **[12]**

Before determining whether Paul was a mystic by evaluating his spirituality according to William James' five characteristics of mystical experiences, Paul's Paradise experience and his state of being "in Christ" need to be understood.

*Imposter Apostles*

As to Paul's reference to his being transported to "the third heaven," we must know that the Christians at Corinth were beguiled by imposter apostles who projected themselves as strong, self-assured, and successful, and who made claims to have had extraordinary religious experiences. As compared to Paul, whose personal presence was "unimpressive" and whose speech "contemptible," the false teachers appeared to be slick, self-confident, and smooth (See 2 Corinthians 10:10.). To counteract the super apostles who boasted of their strength, Paul boasted in his weaknesses (2 Corinthians 11:12-15, 30).

*Revelations in Paradise*

In the face of the false apostles' claim to have had superior spiritual experiences, Paul reluctantly countered them by referring to his "visions and revelations of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 12:1). Because Paul's trip to Paradise came fourteen years before he wrote 2 Corinthians around A.D. 55-56, the experience can be placed as having happened sometime before his first missionary journey around A.D. 42-44. Efforts by scholars to reconstruct the historical context of this event in Paul's life are futile. All that can be known about his experience is contained in the apostle's

second letter to the Corinthians. In comparison to his overall ministry, Paul's transport to Paradise was an obscure, if not minor, event. Paul did not set up his experience as an example for others to try to emulate. Unlike many contemplative spiritualists, he offered no advice to others on how they could achieve a similar experience.

Paul states that his "visions and revelations" were "of the Lord." Jesus was either the subject or the origin of the "visions and revelations" he received. Possibly both ideas play out in Paul's statement. The visions originated from the Lord, and were about Him. They were revelatory. From a general statement regarding "visions and revelation" he had received, Paul proceeded to relate one particular experience.

Beginning with ineffability, we now turn to analyze Paul's spirituality in accord with the five characteristics of mysticism as stated by William James.

*Ineffability—"I Can't Explain It"*
Paul experienced unexplainable ecstasy in Paradise. In their seeking after similar divine encounters, Christian mystics identify with Paul and find precedent for their experience—or so they think—from the apostle. In addition to his experience in Paradise being passive and transient, Paul's Paradise experience was primarily ineffable. First, Paul was unable to tell whether his experience was "in the body," or "out of the body." He also was unable to define his experience of going to, and being in, Paradise. His experience was inexpressible. That Paul's experience was inexpressible marks it out to have been ineffable; and because it was ineffable, it is therefore categorized to have been mystical. Based upon his writings, and within the context of ancient Judaism, some persons claim that Paul was a merkabah mystic. **[13]**

Winfried Corduan agrees that ineffability (i.e., the incapability of being expressed or described), is perhaps the most common characteristic of mystical religious experiences.

**[14]** Though noting that all human communication is deficient in one way or another, Corduan asks in one chapter, "Can Language Describe Mystical Experience?" After discussing the issues, he answers, "Upon analysis, mysticism and a meaningful use of language seem to be mutually exclusive." **[15]** As Gordon Clark described ineffability,

> *Then there were the outright mystics who fell into trances. The droplets of their personality were poured out into the ocean of God's being. Like air when it is so impregnated with light that it is more light than air, and like iron, which in the fire looks more like fire than iron, so the mystic soul becomes ineffably divine. No conceptual information is thus received, but it is a deeply satisfying experience.* ***[16]***

Mystics often use paradoxical language to express the inexpressible, sayings like "mute language . . . shouting silence . . . shoreless lake," and so forth. In contrast to a mystic whose experience defies explanation, Paul's experience was inexpressible because God forbade him to describe the details of what he saw. Paul "heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak" (1 Corinthians 12:4). It's not that Paul could not describe his experience, but rather that for reason of God's prohibition, he would not describe it. For good reasons, he was under a gag order from God not to talk about the details of being in Paradise. By forbidding Paul to speak of his experience, "God ensured," writes Scott Hafemann, "that the basis of apostolic authority did not become ecstatic, mystical experience." **[17]** Unlike the imposter apostles, there was and is nothing to be gained by self-promotion based upon claims of hearing mystical voices or seeing mystical visions.

As they boasted in the details of their spiritual experiences to one-up Paul's authority amongst the Corinthians, the imposter apostles had apparently taken their stand on visions they had seen (Colossians 2:18). But Paul was under strict

orders not to create a competition of experiences, a “can-you-top-this-one” contest. Unlike his opponents, Paul made no claim that his experience enhanced his spiritual résumé, or added to his apostolic authority. Paul waited fourteen years to relate this incident to anyone, indicating that he considered his private experiences unessential for asserting his apostolic credibility, maintaining his spirituality, and pursuing his ministry. Though his letters are full of directions for practicing the faith, Paul provides no directions to the Corinthians for pursuing experiences like the one he had in Paradise. By Paul’s example we can assume that, contrary to the advice of many contemplative spiritualists, neither are extra-biblical visionary and auditory experiences essential for our spirituality either. On the point of ineffability, Paul’s experience departs from mysticism. It’s not that he couldn’t describe being in Paradise, but rather that he wouldn’t describe it, because God forbade him to do so.

*Noetic Quality—“The Mind Game of Timelessness”*
Noetic means “of or pertaining to the mind.” James wrote that though similar “to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge.” **[18]** To mystics, the mystical states of timelessness in inner space (i.e., in their minds), may be compared to an astronaut’s experience of weightlessness in outer space. The goal of mysticism is to shed the gravity of history to experience the weightlessness of eternity, and it’s all intuited in the mind. Among other descriptions, this mystic state is called a “dateless ecstasy,” or the “beginningless beginning.” Through contemplation and other spiritual exercises, mystics desire to attain a state of suspended animation in which they can taste eternity in their souls. For them, heaven can’t wait.

When mystics have transcendently tasted of eternity, time becomes illusory. Two characteristics of mystical experiences

are non-spatiality, and non-temporality. **[19]** Mystics who have experienced "dateless ecstasy" live in what they believe is the eternal present. One result of this view of time is that many mystics believe in reincarnation. For mystics, the experience of timelessness carries with it "a curious sense of authority for after-time." **[20]**

But such a view of spirituality directly contradicts the Christian faith which presents history as "His story." First, to Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, and then through John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles, God revealed Himself to man in and through sequential historical events. "The Hebrew-Christian faith" as George E. Ladd once put it, "did not grow out of lofty philosophical speculation or profound mystical experiences." **[21]** The Christian faith is spatial, material, temporal, and therefore historical, logical, and rational. Jesus was born into history. God sent forth his Son in "the fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4). Jesus died in history. Jesus rose from the dead in history. And Jesus is coming again in history. Christianity was not intuited by man from below, but revealed to man by God from above, and as such, possesses a propositional content and objectivity that distinguishes it from other religions. About a century ago, Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921) stated the difference between Christianity and mysticism to be as follows:

> *Christ is history, and Christ's cross is history, and mysticism which lives solely on what is within can have nothing to do with history; mysticism which seeks solely eternal verities can have nothing to do with time and that which has occurred in time.* ***[22]***

About such a supra-historical view, when time is viewed as illusory, Arthur Johnson notes that,

> *[O]ne result is that the way is opened to say that truth is whatever one happens to believe. It has no real relation to*

> *the objective world of actual events and things. Truth may then be said to be totally subjective and relative.* ***[23]***

Mystical religion, and contemplative spirituality, will go down easy with and amongst post moderns who reject the notion that there is such a strange critter as objective truth, or true truth, as Francis Schaeffer put it.

For reason of his view of history, the apostle Paul cannot be considered a mystic. As his writings attest, he often refers to and quotes from the revelatory events and words of the Old Testament. Paul firmly believed in history, history that had a beginning, and will end. Paul also did not allow his view of eternity to consume his understanding of time, and the importance of events that happen in time. Paul's faith was more than a state of mind.

*Transiency—"Once Upon a Time"*
By nature, all religious experiences are transient. Circumstances and people vary from day to day. Because they're rooted in life, and because from day to day situations do not remain the same, our feelings change. Feelings are fleeting, and do not last. Life is filled with various experiences! About emotions, Martin Luther (1483-1546) wisely wrote,

> *For feelings come and feelings go,*
> *And feelings are deceiving;*
> *My warrant is the Word of God.*
> *Naught else is worth believing.*

Mysticism seeks the mountain peaks of experience where the air is rare (See Matthew 17:1-8.), but it cannot survive in that altitude for long. Real life, even our spiritual life, must be lived below. Therefore, any mystical taste of timelessness does not last.

Did the spirituality of Paul possess qualities of transience?

It should not surprise us that some aspects of his spirituality were transient, while others were not. For example, Paul stated that the filling of the Holy Spirit is transient in the lives of believers (Ephesians 5:18). So too were some spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 13:8-11). Paul's trip to Paradise did not last. It happened fourteen years before he related it to the Corinthians. While the ramifications of it were ongoing in his Christian life, the apostle's Damascus Road experience did not last. But because this was true of some of Paul's experiences, does not mean that it was true of all his experiences.

As opposed to the temporality of some spiritual gifts, love is unfailing (1 Corinthians 13:8). Too, the spiritual presence of Christ in the life of the believer, the state of being "in Christ," is not temporary. He is always with and will never forsake believers (Matthew 28:19; Hebrews 13:5). Scripture does not portray Paul's, or a believer's, experience of being sealed with the Spirit as temporary. Far from being transient, the sealing of the Spirit is permanent in the life of the believer until the day of redemption; that is, until we arrive in the Lord's presence for eternity (Ephesians 4:30; 1:13; 2 Corinthians 1:22). Furthermore, all believers have been baptized by the Spirit, and the baptism cannot be broken (1 Corinthians 12:13). Although aspects of Paul's spirituality were transient, others were constant and continuing in the apostle's life, and so also they are for all true believers.

*Passivity—"I Can't Control What Happens"*

We should note that according to James, passivity is another characteristic of mystical experiences. Yet these experiences, as he points out, "may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations, as by fixing the attention, or going through certain bodily performances, or in other ways which manuals of mysticism prescribe." **[24]** Typically, Christian mystics engage in meditative techniques, or disciplines, in order to generate mystical ecstasy, experiences, and encounters. In other words,

they are proactive.

Paul's experience however, was passive-reactive. Two parallel phrases bear this out. First, Paul states that he was "caught up" (Greek, *harpazo*), that is, raptured to the "third heaven" (2 Corinthians 12:2; Compare 1 Thessalonians 4:17.). Presumably speaking of himself, Paul again mentions "a man . . . was caught up" (Greek, *harpazo*), that is raptured into Paradise (2 Corinthians 12:4). The passive verbs in both references to the same event indicate Paul was acted upon. The apostle did nothing to initiate what for him was an exceptional experience. As one commentator affirms, "What has happened has been done to Paul; he did nothing to obtain the vision." **[25]** Paul's experience was not the result of following the procedures and preparations of the mystic way. But like the coming translation of the church (1 Thessalonians 4:17), Paul was "caught up." His transport to Paradise was sudden, unexpected, and abrupt, an event for which he made no preparations. By God's sovereign grace it happened to him one time. In short, he did not experience Paradise by the proactive works of mystical methods, but as a gift of sovereign grace. Therefore, his experience cannot be categorized as mystical.

If the coming translation of those "in Christ" provides a parallel (The same Greek word for "caught up" is used in both 2 Corinthians 12:2, 4, and 1 Thessalonians 4:17.), Paul's trip to the third heaven may well have come to him as "a thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians 5:2). Because of the interruptive nature of Paul's experience, it departs from the mystical pattern of preparing for experiences.

*Fusion—"I am One with the Absolute"*

Though not noted by James to be among the four basic characteristics of mysticism, absorption into, or fusion with, the Absolute, or Love, is the climax and goal of mystical practices. Of such assimilation into God, James stated,

> *[T]his overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness.* ***[26]***

Evangelical E. Glenn Hinson stated that a fundamental conviction of contemplatives is that they "may see God or be united with God, though fleetingly, while [they] are still living in this present state of existence." **[27]** This state of absorption into God is also known as theosis.

For reason of Paul's statement that "it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me," William James viewed that Paul's and Jesus' personalities had become fused into mystical oneness. The two had become one. **[28]** By engaging spiritual exercises, Paul was absorbed into union with the Christ-God. Some might even suggest that mystically he had become a god-man. However, there are reasons why such fusion could not have taken place.

*First*, God is holy. That God is holy marks Him out to be separate from His creation and from His creatures, including men and angels. God is "wholly other" from His creatures. To Israel Jehovah said, "For I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst" (Hosea 11:9). The chasm between the being of God and the being of humans will never be completely bridged.

Yet Lucifer once vowed, "I will be like the most High." (Isaiah 14:14). Satan tempted Eve by telling her, "you will be like God" (Genesis 3:5). The Babylonians deludingly boasted, "I am, and there is no one besides me," and in doing so, insulted the holiness of the One who declared, "I am the Lord, and there is no other" (Compare the Lord—Isaiah 44:6; 45:5,6, 18, 22; 46:9; to the Babylonians—Isaiah 47:8, 10.). The aspiration of Lucifer to "be like" God, the temptation of Eve to "be like God," and the "I am" claim of the Babylonians to be God, directly assaulted God's holiness. Disregarding the

indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit which makes God immanent in the life of the believer (Romans 8:9b), the idea that any person could view that they were absorbed into God, and vice versa, challenges God's apartness from humanity.

*Second*, Jesus is God (Philippians 2:6). Paul was not. The apostle's personality did not become deity. By his own admission, Paul did not view himself to be divine. To Paul there was "one God and Father of all" (Ephesians 4:6). Paul understood that a coming "man of lawlessness" would claim to be God, that he would exalt "himself above every so-called god or object of worship," and that he would take "his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God" (2 Thessalonians 2:4). The spirit of anti-Christ in the world ever claims divinity for itself. Paul never claimed to be deity, or thought he had achieved theosis, a state of fusion with God.

*Third*, for reason of Jesus' sinlessness and Paul's sinfulness, the distinct persons of the Lord and the apostle could not have become mystically one. Regarding Jesus' sinlessness, something He claimed and the apostles claimed for Him (John 8:46; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:22; 1 John 3:5), Paul would never have embraced the idea that Jesus' perfection was fused into him so that he was without sin (See Romans 7:24.). Though after his conversion Paul sinned less, he never claimed to be sinless (1 Timothy 1:15). For reason of the Lord's perfection and Paul's imperfection, his personality was not, and could not have been, absorbed into Jesus'.

*Fourth*, in this verse Paul states, "The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." For reason of being in Christ, Paul did not lose his ego. He retained his unique personhood. Even though possessing a new nature, Paul's personality was not mystically absorbed into Jesus.

Regarding this whole idea of Paul's mystical absorption into

Christ, Richard Longenecker commented,

> *[T]he mysticism of biblical religion is not some esoteric searching for a path to be followed that will result in union with the divine, but is always the nature of a response to God's grace wherein people who have been mercifully touched by God enter into communion with him without ever losing their own identities.* ***[29]***

Though Paul's theology of spirituality was one of communion with the divine, it was not one of fusion, or union, with the divine. As Peter put it, according to God's power and promise, Paul was a "partaker" of the divine nature, but he was not wholly possessed by it (2 Peter 1:2-5). As Rightmire stated, "The relation of Christians to Christ is one of faith, not mystical absorption." **[30]** If Christianity is to remain Christian, the "I and Thou" relationship between man and God must be respected and advocated.

Someone has said that the Christian faith is not so much about pronouns as it is prepositions, and no prepositional phrase has more meaning than the little phrase "in Christ."

*In Christ*

The phrases "in Christ," "in the Lord," in Him," "in the Spirit," and a few similar ones, occur hundreds of times in the writings of Paul. The phrase does not occur in the Gospels. Though the disciples were "with" (Greek, *meta*) Christ, they were not "in" (Greek, *en*) Christ until after Pentecost. What does it mean for Christian believers to be "in Christ"? How does someone become "in Christ"? And what are the implications of being "in Christ" for our Christian experience?

The phrase describes what some call the Christian's mystical union with Christ. To the Galatians, Paul explained this bonding when he wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the

life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20). Professor David Rightmire states that "in Christ" describes "a spiritual reality that interpenetrates all of life and finds corporate expression in the body of Christ." **[31]** With the vine and branches metaphor, Jesus illustrated His union with the disciples. He said,

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing (John 15:4-5).

But given the tenets of mystical practices and beliefs, referring to this union between Christ and the Christian as mystical, is a misnomer, and confusing.

Almost four-hundred years ago, Henry Scougal (1650-1678) wrote,

> *[T]rue religion is a union of the soul with God, a real participation in the divine nature, the very image of God drawn upon the soul. In the apostle's words, it is "Christ formed in you."* ***[32]***

No phrase bespeaks the infusion of divine life into a human soul more than the little phrase "in Christ." "If any man be in Christ he is a new creation . . ." (2 Corinthians 5:17). We note the words "if any." Spiritual union "in Christ" is the universal experience of ordinary Christians who by faith belong to God. Divine union is the fait accompli of all those who come to God through faith in Jesus Christ, and not awareness obtained by a mystical few. According to His divine power and promises, Peter stated that God has made us to "become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust" (2 Peter 1:4). To every believer, Paul says, "in Him you have been made

complete" (Colossians 2:10). The believer's state of being "in Christ" is not a mystical end in itself, but issues forth in real moral and ethical life changes.

We should note that not only did Paul's extraordinary vision occur "in Christ" (2 Corinthians 12:2), but he also lived every day "in Christ." Like Paul, and for reason of being "in Christ," it can be further observed that, unlike mystical experiences, God's presence is abiding, not spasmodic. Given the fact that all believers possess this bonding in Christ by faith, why should they seek exceptional experiences with, even absorption into God, by the works of intentional mystical and spiritual practices? After all, by grace Christians are already bonded to Him. Of Paul's exceptional experiences, Stewart writes that,

> *[H]e would never dream of using them to disparage the more normal experiences of souls 'hid with Christ in God.' On the contrary, it was in the daily, ever-renewed communion, rather than in the transient rapture, that the inmost nature of Christianity lay.* ***[33]***

Spiritual union is not the special province of those who, through the works of mysticism, cultivate the higher life, and their sense of a divine presence. There is a tendency to elevate some mystical Christians to a special status, and to revere them. But as Charles Spurgeon wrote,

> *Do not, then, look upon the ancient saints as being exempt either from infirmities or sins; and do not regard them with that mystic reverence which will almost make us idolaters. Their holiness is attainable even by us. We are "called to be saints" by that same voice which constrained them to their high vocation.* ***[34]***

All of this raises the question, how does it come upon a person to be found "in Christ"?

*The Baptism of the Spirit*

The event which places a believer into spiritual union with Christ is the baptism in, with, or by the Holy Spirit. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "For by (Greek, *en*, preposition) one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:13). About the Spirit baptism mentioned here by Paul, we need to answer the question, who does the baptizing? Is it the Holy Spirit, or Jesus? Most Bible versions translate the preposition (Greek, *en*) with the English preposition "by" (KJV, NASB, NIV, and NKJV), in which case, the Holy Spirit is suggested to be the one who does the baptizing. In other words, we are spiritually united to the church and other Christians "by" the Spirit. However, given the theological context of Spirit baptism, this is not the preposition's best meaning. The Spirit does not perform the baptizing. Here's why.

After his self-deprecating remarks, John the Baptist pointed to Jesus and said, "I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with (Greek, *en*) the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:8; See also Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5.). In other words, just as John had physically baptized believers into the Jordan waters, so one day Jesus would spiritually baptize believers into union with the Spirit and Himself, thereby bonding true believers together in Christ's body, the church. If this understanding is correct, then Jesus can be understood to be the unnamed agent who does the spiritual baptizing in 1 Corinthians 12:13. **[35]** For reason of their being baptized "in" the Spirit by Christ, believers enter the state of being "in Christ."

It must be understood that in every instance where Holy Spirit baptism is mentioned, the recipients of it are passive. "For by one Spirit we were all baptized (Greek, *baptizo*, passive form) into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1

Corinthians 12:13). In other words, as a sovereign work of God, the event comes upon all believers, not just a mystical few. For this reason, there is no mystical meaning to being "in the Spirit" and "in Christ," for the recipients of Spirit baptism are reacting, not acting. The passivity of Spirit baptism fits the grace paradigm of spirituality the New Testament sets forth.

By virtue of his being united to the Lord, of being "in Christ," Paul acknowledged the spiritual presence of Christ in his life. However, Paul did not derive understanding of his spiritual state via intuition and contemplation, but by revelation from God.

**Conclusion:** *Was Paul a Mystic?*
In order to make the determination whether Paul was a mystic, we evaluated Paul's Paradise experience and his state of being "in Christ" according to the mystical characteristics of ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, passivity, and absorption. We found that Paul's theology of spirituality is adverse to these qualities. Though he was intensely and passionately spiritual, Paul was not a religious mystic. He viewed that his spirituality originated from outside, not from inside, himself (Romans 10:6-10). He understood that Jesus Christ was the revelatory source of this knowledge (Galatians 1:12). **[36]** And he asserted that the Holy Spirit teaches believers about spiritual things so "that we might know the things freely given to us by God" (1 Corinthians 2:12b; See 1 Corinthians 2:6-16.). In the Word and through the Spirit, New Covenant believers have access to all the knowledge they need to know about the spiritual life. In Christ we "have been made complete" (Colossians 2:10; See Ephesians 3:10-14.).

*Something More*
Yet Professor David F. Wells observes, "People who are attracted to mysticism usually assume that what is hidden in God is other than what is revealed, or that it is deeper or more interesting or spiritually nourishing." **[37]** But Paul did

not view that there was something more to the spiritual life than what Jesus Christ had made known to him, and presumably through him to us. The mysteries of the faith were revealed to him, not concealed from him. As he wrote to the Colossians, "God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). The knowledge of a believer's being "in Christ" was revealed to Paul. As with the rest of the saving and sanctifying Gospel, such knowledge was received "through a revelation [from] Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:12; See Romans 16:25; Ephesians 3:3.). Paul did not discover his state of being "in Christ" by contemplating the hidden things of God. He did not unravel the mystery of his being in Christ, and of Christ being in him, through mystical meditation. Rather, it was revealed to him by Christ. Paul was not a mystic, and to refer to the apostle's teaching as "Christian mysticism" is confusing and misleading.

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**Endnotes**

**[1]** *The Random House Collegiate Dictionary*, Jess Stein, Editor in Chief (New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 1988): 882.

**[2]** William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, NY: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1919): 380-382.

**[3]** Ibid: 419.

**[4]** Seemingly, in 1931, Albert Schweitzer wrote a seminal work defining the mysticism of Paul. See *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, Translated by William Montgomery (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

**[5]** In a footnote Arthur L. Johnson wrote he could find few, if any, events or experiences in the Bible that were unqualifiedly mystical. In his opinion, one that might qualify was Paul's being caught up into the third heaven, into Paradise (2 Corinthians 12:1-5). See *Faith Misguided, Exposing the Dangers of Mysticism* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1988): 22. Of course, this paper explains the view that Paul's Paradise experience was not mystical.

**[6]** R. David Rightmire, “Union with Christ,” *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible*, Walter A. Elwell, Editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996): 792.
**[7]** James S. Stewart, *A Man In Christ* (New York, NY: Harper and Row Publishers, n.d.): 163.
**[8]** Ibid: 164.
**[9]** Ibid.
**[10]** Ibid.
**[11]** Rightmire, “Union.”
**[12]** In *The God of Intimacy and Action* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2007): 12, a book he co-authored with Jesuit trained professor Mary Albert Darling, Tony Campolo rightly notes the theological impasse between “intentional spiritual practices” (proactive mysticism) which he and Darling advocate, and a spirituality based upon grace. To resolve this conflict, Campolo appeals to Jesus’ Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:3-9).
**[13]** The Hebrew word “merkabah,” meaning chariot, was associated with Ezekiel’s chariot vision contained in chapter one, verses 15-20 of his prophecy.
**[14]** James, *Religious Experience*: 380. James states that the number one characteristic of mystical experiences is ineffability, “that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words.”(380).
**[15]** Winfried Corduan, *Mysticism: An Evangelical Option?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991): 92.
**[16]** Clark, “Revealed Religion”: 16.
**[17]** Scott J. Hafemann, *The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000): 460.
**[18]** James, *Religious Experience*: 380.
**[19]** R.A. Gilbert, *The Elements of Mysticism* (Boston, MA: Element Books, Inc., 1991): 84.
**[20]** James, *Religious Experience*: 381.
**[21]** George E. Ladd, “The Knowledge of God: The Saving Acts of God,” *Basic Christian Doctrines*, Carl F.H Henry, Editor (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1962): 7.

**[22]** Benjamin B. Warfield, “Mysticism and Christianity,” *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, Volume 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2003): 424.
**[23]** Johnson, *Faith Misguided*: 37.
**[24]** James, *Religious Experience*: 381
**[25]** Ralph P. Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary: 2 Corinthians* (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publishers, 1986): 398.
**[26]** James, *Religious Experience*: 419.
**[27]** E. Glenn Hinson, “The Contemplative View,” *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, Donald L. Alexander, Editor (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988): 176.
**[28]** James, *Religious Experience*: 418.
**[29]** Richard N. Longenecker, *Word Biblical Commentary: Galatians* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, Publishers, 1990): 93.
**[30]** Rightmire, “Union”: 791.
**[31]** Ibid: 790.
**[32]** Henry Scougal, “The Life of God in the Soul of Man,” *The Works of the Rev. Henry Scougal*, Dr. Don Kistler, Editor (Morgan, PA: Soil Deo Gloria Publications, 2002): 3.
**[33]** If Jesus is the unnamed agent who does the Spirit baptizing, then this further indicates there to be one spiritual baptism, and not as Pentecostalism asserts, two. There is one baptizer who performs one baptism (See Ephesians 4:5.). In the Acts passages, chapters 2, 8, 10 and 19, what Luke narrates in every instance is an initial baptism by Jesus in the Spirit, not a second. Additionally, in the baptism, the recipients are passive, not active. They do not “get” the baptism in the Spirit. They receive it from Jesus Christ.
**[34]** Charles H. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, Morning July 5 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991): 374.
**[35]** If Jesus is the unnamed agent who does the Spirit baptizing, then this further indicates there to be one spiritual baptism, and not as Pentecostalism asserts, two. There is one baptizer who performs one baptism (See Ephesians 4:5.). In the Acts passages, chapters 2, 8, 10 and 19, what Luke narrates in every instance is an initial baptism by Jesus

in the Spirit, not a second. Additionally, in the baptism, the recipients are passive, not active. They do not “get” the baptism in the Spirit. They receive it from Jesus Christ.

**[36]** The question regarding the prepositional phrase, “through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Italics mine, Galatians 1:12, NASB), is whether Jesus Christ was the object, or the agent, of what was revealed to Paul. If the genitive (i.e., “of”) is objective, then the revelation was about Jesus Christ. If we understand the genitive (i.e., “of”) to be subjective, then the revelation was from Jesus Christ. The latter interpretation makes the best sense. The revelation came to Paul through Jesus Christ, perhaps at the time he encountered Him on the road to Damascus. See Longenecker, Galatians: 23-24.

**[37]** David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994): 132.