

# The problem of participation in Paul: a theological study

## **Abstract**

E.P. Sanders, in his influential book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, said that ‘participation’ was the heart of Paul’s thought. He also said that, as moderns, we do not understand the concept of participation. Thus, Sanders posed a challenge that has been an ongoing debate in biblical and theological studies. In this paper I formulate a response to Sanders’ challenge. I argue that participation requires (a) an objective soteriology that calls forth an existential response, and (b) that this is done through the second-personal intersubjective fellowship of the Holy Spirit. I also attempt to explain why participation has been such an elusive concept in modern theology.

## Introduction

*Incorporation in the body of Christ is the heart of Paul's theology.*

E. P. Sanders<sup>1</sup>

*We seem to lack a category of 'reality' – real participation in Christ. ... What Paul concretely thought [about participation] cannot be directly appropriated by Christians today.*

E. P. Sanders<sup>2</sup>

Is Paul's understanding of the concept of participation a mystery to modern people? According to E. P. Sanders, it is. This would not be too much of a problem except for one other assertion from Sanders: that participation is the heart of Paul's thought. String those two assertions together and one has the disturbing conclusion that the modern person, and therefore presumably today's church, is unable to understand Paul. No wonder these assertions have ignited much biblical and theological debate. There may be a certain amount of truth to Sanders' claims; Paul certainly is an enigma. Nevertheless, in this paper I attempt to formulate the beginning of an answer to Sanders.

I intend to sketch a model of participation that reinforces one insight of Sanders' thinking: that Paul's thought ran from solution to problem. This insight has been described as a psychological understanding of Paul's thought.<sup>3</sup> I will attempt to show that the ramifications of this insight point towards an answer to the riddle of participation. In contrast to Sanders, I will contend that a starting point of understanding participation requires an objective soteriology. Without it, participation becomes conditional for salvation which leads inevitably back to a problem-solution paradigm.

The next plank in my model is the argument for a relationship between objective soteriology and subjective, or existential, participation. This contrasts with Sanders who poses a choice between subjective and objective (even though he argues that an objective soteriology is not possible, based on Paul's letters). I will argue that subjective, existential participation is not an alternative option but instead arises out of the objective.

Finally, I will argue for a dimension that is missing in the choices that Sanders presents. This dimension is what modern theorists have called the 'second-personal' – an interpersonal dynamic that maps the subject on to the objective saving work of Christ. I will also propose that this interpersonal dimension is where the Holy Spirit operates by mapping the person

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<sup>1</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Fortress Press, 1977), 434, 520.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 522–523.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Tilling, ed., *Beyond Old and New Perspectives on Paul: Reflections on the Work of Douglas Campbell* (Havertown, UNITED STATES: ISD, 2014), 144.

to the corporate and ultimately to the cosmic. This is where the transformation of the individual and transformation of the world takes place.

In concluding, I will propose that the model as developed in this paper goes some way to explaining participation. In the final parts of this paper I will suggest why Sanders himself was unable to develop such a model, and why participation is inevitably elusive when it is approached by way of certain modern methods and assumptions.

## **E. P. Sanders' Interpretation of Paul**

Sanders' contention that participation, rather than the juridical, is the heart of Paul's thought<sup>4</sup> brings participation into sharper focus by defining the concept in contradistinction to the language of the law court. Although he recognises the close relationship between the two Pauline ideas,<sup>5</sup> Sanders sees a difference between 'mystical' terminology ('in Christ') and juridical terminology such as reconciliation.<sup>6</sup> Receiving the Spirit<sup>7</sup> is different from imputed righteousness; for us to die *with* Christ and to the power of Sin is different from Christ dying *for* us and our transgressions.<sup>8</sup> Sanders proposes that juridical language such as 'righteousness by faith' is not used positively by Paul. Rather, it is used as a "heuristic category... against the notion that obedience to the law is necessary."<sup>9</sup> Sanders argues that we have mistakenly taken the juridical as the centre of Paul's thought because the language of the law court is easier for modern readers to understand.<sup>10</sup> Presumably, another contributing reason is the tendency to read Paul's thought as running from problem to solution instead of the other way.<sup>11</sup>

Sanders' insight that "Paul's thought did not run from plight to solution, but from solution to plight"<sup>12</sup> will not only be supported in what follows, but I will use it to form the basis of my understanding of participation. This insight, derived from scriptural passages such as Philippians 3 which show that Paul did not think he had a plight from which he needed to be rescued,<sup>13</sup> has epistemological and soteriological implications that will be explored in the following section and will show that Sanders is not consistent. For now, it is enough to note that for Sanders, the "solution" is merely the possibility of a solution. For example, consider Sanders' statement: "It appears that the conclusion that all the world – both Jew and Greek –

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<sup>4</sup> Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 434.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 441.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 460.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 492.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 498, 520.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 492.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 522.

<sup>11</sup> Why this is the case is discussed in the next section which highlights the conditional and contractual nature of a problem-solution soteriology.

<sup>12</sup> Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 443.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

equally stands in need of a saviour springs from the prior conviction that God had provided such a saviour.”<sup>14</sup> The word ‘need’ indicates that the work of Jesus does not actually save, but merely provides the possibility of salvation. I will argue below that, consistent with Paul’s experience of encounter and rescue before he knew of such a need, Jesus’ saving work must take place before one can contribute anything to it.

It is clear, however, that Sanders privileges the conditional over the unconditional for salvation, and to some extent sees participation as more onerous than the juridical.<sup>15</sup> Therefore participation becomes a condition of salvation rather than a result of salvation; i.e. an individual participates in order to be saved, rather than being saved to participate. Not only is participation compatible with a conditional soteriology, it is, in fact, *the* condition. Sanders indeed endorses the concept of “salvation through participation.”<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, Sanders does not entertain Paul’s universalist texts and therefore dismisses objective soteriology. Even though he posits the “death of Christ [as] a cosmic event”<sup>17</sup> together with “magical transference: the soteriological event as taking place apart from man’s will”<sup>18</sup> as one possible way of understanding participation, he immediately dismisses it as an invalid option. According to Sanders, “there is no magical transfer,” or “soteriological event ... taking place apart from [the human] will.”<sup>19</sup> He briefly considers the possibility that all will be saved, on the basis of Paul’s Adam/Christ schema, but concludes that Paul was “carried away by the force of his analogy and argued for more than he intended.”<sup>20</sup>

Having dismissed the objective understanding of participation, Sanders is also unhappy with the existential option, what Bultmann called a revised self-understanding. This option is located in the individual who has “to make a decision when faced with a demand which challenges one’s self-understanding.”<sup>21</sup> Sanders agrees that accepting the gospel does result

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> The following quotes from Paul and Palestinian Judaism highlight this: “...one is a member of the body of Christ and one Spirit with him, and that one remains so **unless one breaks the participatory union by forming another.**”(514)

**“For those in it there is salvation; for those outside condemnation and death,** while remaining in it requires obedience, and disobedience leads to expulsion and condemnation.”(513)

“one is a member of the body of Christ and one Spirit with him, and that one remains so **unless one breaks the participatory union by forming another.**”(514)

“But that God had appointed Jesus Christ as Lord and that he would resurrect or transform **those who were members of him by virtue of believing in him.**” (514)

“Paul repeatedly tells us what his dominating conviction was: that the end is at hand, that Christ is Lord and that **only those who belong to the Lord** will be saved on the Day of the Lord.”(515)

“It agrees with this that in Paul, as in Jewish literature, **good deeds are the condition of remaining ‘in’**, but they do not earn salvation.”(517)

<sup>16</sup> Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 466.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 521.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 522.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 473.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 522.

in a revised understanding, but tentatively attributes this to the “individual and internal consequences of Paul’s theology, rather than the exhaustive interpretation of it.”<sup>22</sup>

Sanders’ assessment of Bultmann appears to accept “the individual and internal consequences of Paul’s theology” without question. Part of the reason for this is that Sanders shares Bultmann’s concern that the gospel is meant to have a life-changing impact on the individual and that a decision has to be made. According to Myers, Bultmann was emphasising the “kerygmatic character of God’s Word” in a way that stopped it from being an objective knowledge apart from its life-changing effects. So, “the Word of God can never be a set of general doctrinal propositions, nor simply a word from the historical past; it must be a concrete word of address which encounters me here and now in my own personal existence.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore it is ironic, according to Susan Eastman, that Bultmann’s concerns for an encounter with a divine Other ends up being cast in “individualistic and self-referential” terms.<sup>24</sup> Part of an explanation for this, according to Eastman, is that Bultmann was trying to translate the “mythological expressions” of the New Testament into “contemporary terms.” Eastman proposes that these contemporary terms “were the individualistic existential philosophy of [Bultmann’s] times.”<sup>25</sup> Campbell suggests that Bultmann’s analysis was in the Cartesian tradition with an emphasis on “individuals in isolation.”<sup>26</sup> Hence, Bultmann adopts modern philosophical individualism in making the kerygma a reality for the individual. It may be due to the pervasive nature of this philosophy that individualism carries over into Sanders’ assumptions, even though he was not happy with Bultmann’s conclusions.

Having not accepted either a subjective or objective understanding of participation, Sanders does not go on to propose an interpretation of what Paul is saying, but leaves the following open challenge:

We seem to lack a category of ‘reality’ – real participation in Christ, real possession of the Spirit – which lies between naïve cosmological speculation and belief in magical transference on the one hand and a revised self-understanding on the other. I must confess that I do not have a new category of perception to propose here. This does not mean, however, that Paul did not have one.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin Myers, “Faith as Self-Understanding: Towards a Post-Barthian Appreciation of Rudolf Bultmann,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10 (2008): 29.

<sup>24</sup> Susan Eastman, *Paul and the Person: Reframing Paul’s Anthropology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 2017), 98.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>26</sup> Douglas A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), 297.

<sup>27</sup> Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 522–523.

For Sanders, neither the subjective nor the objective view captures Paul's theology in which "Christians really are one body and Spirit with Christ" and "Christians really are being changed" and "transformed," so that "real change was at work in the world and that Christians were participating in it."<sup>28</sup> In what follows, I develop a model of participation that I believe meets the challenging questions of Sanders and also shows how Christians, as one body and Spirit with Christ, are both being transformed (by the Spirit) and transforming the world in which they live.

In developing this model, I will support aspects of Sanders' thought consistent with a solution-problem soteriology: namely that participation rather than the juridical is the heart of Paul's thought. I will then carry through the solution-problem assumption to construct a model that has the following differences to Sanders, namely:

- that participation is not conditional for salvation, and that an objective soteriology is a necessary starting point; and
- that participation involves a relationship between an objective soteriology (a 'cosmic event in Christ in which a 'magical transference' that takes place apart from human will) and a subjective, existential participation in which the individual comes to a new self-understanding.

In the next section, I begin to construct a participatory model that responds to the challenge and questions proposed by Sanders. The first step will be to show the necessity of an objective soteriology.

## **The necessity of an objective soteriology**

In this section I will argue for the necessity of an objective soteriology. While an objective soteriology is fundamental to the model of participation that I will develop, the case for an objective soteriology arises from a solution-problem dynamic, and consequently avoids the pitfalls inherent in a problem-solution epistemology and soteriology.

First, I will turn to the inherent problems of a problem-solution epistemology and soteriology.

In a problem-solution soteriology, the conditions pre-existing the 'solution' are meant to be objectively available to all. What is objectively true is not the saving work of Christ (as this is not yet true for the individual) but the pre-existing conditions that should lead one to seek salvation. In his book *The Deliverance of God*, Campbell makes a sustained theoretical criticism of this model detailing over fifty intrinsic, systematic, empirical difficulties including textual over and under determinations.<sup>29</sup> Space does not allow these to be

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 522.

<sup>29</sup> Campbell helpfully summarises these in chapter 11 of Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*, 397–410.

rehearsed here other than to make four observations on the model derived from its “forward, prospective, or a priori”<sup>30</sup> movement.

The first observation is that in a forward model, the problem defines the solution:

“Absolutely fundamental truth claims are present in any definition of a problem.”<sup>31</sup> Truth criteria are defined by the problem, and these truth criteria are derived from the world and used to judge the solution. The ‘objective’ set of truth criteria are contained in the world apart from the solution as they are meant to lead, or provide tension, to seek the solution. It follows then, as Campbell claims, that in this forward system “we place another truth criterion over the top of God to judge God.”<sup>32</sup>

The second observation is that the “problem” is the ‘objective’ knowledge. This “general, atemporal, philosophical, and rational conception of knowledge”<sup>33</sup> must be available to all through “objective philosophical reasoning.”<sup>34</sup> Everyone can and should know the problem based on this understanding. However, not everyone can know the solution because the conception of knowledge in the witness of scripture is “particular, historical, revelatory, and interpersonal.”<sup>35</sup> Campbell argues that these are “incompatible epistemologies.”<sup>36</sup>

Thirdly, implied by the model of “solution seeking” is individualism, rationalism, and self-interest.<sup>37</sup> The individual, detecting the problem rationally, seeks to be ‘saved’ motivated by self-interest. As the problem defines the solution, these properties must remain in the saved state.

Finally, as the solution is subjective and existential, the model is also inherently conditional and contractual: “It ... requires the fulfilment of some criterion for the appropriation of salvation, and [because] it presupposes the centrality of individual action, it is an essentially voluntarist model.”<sup>38</sup>

Barth also warns that an existential soteriology such as this has instrumentalism hidden within it. Salvation, rather than Christ is the end; Christ becomes the means or instrument of salvation.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>31</sup> Douglas A. Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics: The Triumph of God's Love* (Grand Rapids, UNITED STATES: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 96; Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*, 34.

<sup>32</sup> Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics*, 36.

<sup>33</sup> Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*, 37.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>39</sup> George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York, UNITED STATES: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1993), 143–144.

Sanders would agree with much that is asserted above, given his insight of solution -problem rather than problem-solution. However, what should give him pause for thought would be the affinity of a conditional, contractual system to a problem-solution soteriology. This raises the question: can a conditional, contractual system, which Sanders advocates, be compatible with Sanders' solution-problem insight? And, can participation be compatible with a contractual, conditional system?

To begin to answer these questions, I now turn from the problem-solution scheme to investigate its alternative: solution-problem. The starting point for a solution-problem soteriology is not the problem, or even a solution, but the revelation of God, Jesus, who is not a mere means to an end. The concept of solution implies a problem, yet Jesus is revealed to humanity before we know there is a problem.

Jesus then, is the ultimate criteria of truth. There are no higher truths that can be appealed to in order to authenticate this truth; therefore, this revelation must be self-authenticating.<sup>40</sup> Barth rejected any defence of truth "as if it were something neutral and capable of being grounded in general possibilities otherwise known to us ... through rational reflection."<sup>41</sup> We cannot "cross over conceptually to God," instead, "God cross[es] over to us."<sup>42</sup> According to Barth, "the truth is never something that is accessible to us except as mediated by Jesus Christ."<sup>43</sup>

If people do not have the capability to understand a need for salvation apart from Jesus, they are also incapable of taking any action conditional for salvation.<sup>44</sup> We need to be "rescued first, and then taught to think about God and behave correctly."<sup>45</sup> God, through love, initiates this rescue<sup>46</sup> while we were enemies of God, and as such, it is unconditional.<sup>47</sup>

God's action in Christ is, therefore, not only objectively revelational, it's objectively saving.<sup>48</sup> This rescue is also not a response to a problem. Christ is much more than a solution to sin. He is 'the firstborn of all creation' and 'all things have been created through him and for him' (Col 1:16). Humanity's rescue then, is part of God's creative purpose and plan for us and the cosmos, "established before the foundation of the world."<sup>49</sup> As van Driel notes in Colossians

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<sup>40</sup> Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics*, 39; Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 36, 54, 71; Adam Neder, *Participation in Christ: An Entry into Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), Loc 178, 260, 272.

<sup>41</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 52.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>44</sup> Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*, 78.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>48</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 103.

<sup>49</sup> Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics*, 577.



and Ephesians, “Christ does not enter a pre-existing relationship between God and the world; rather, he is both this relationship's origin and source.”<sup>50</sup>

In Christ, salvation is a “gift” that comes to us “complete,” without our “cooperation or consent.”<sup>51</sup> It is “not a possibility, but a reality”<sup>52</sup> through the event of Christ. Because it is unconditional, the action of God in Christ must be universal.<sup>53</sup>

The above illustrates a departure point to Sanders. Rather than being dismissed, objective soteriology is foundational to understanding participation in the model I will develop. In the next section I will show that there is a relationship between existential participation and objective soteriology. A person comes to faith and existential participation through truth that is mediated and witnessed, rather than through a forward-looking understanding of a problem requiring a solution. Faith arises from a recognition of this truth, rather than something that is added to achieve salvation.

### **Existential participation and objective soteriology**

In this section I argue for a relationship between the objective soteriology and subjective participation. I propose that it is this relationship that makes sense of each of them in a way that Sanders could not in framing them as an unrelated choice.

I also make a case for the claim that existential participation cannot be conditional for salvation. That is, existential participation does not make sense in a forward-looking problem-solution soteriology. This is also in contrast to Sanders who, in dismissing an objective soteriology, leaves a *conditional* existential soteriology as the only choice.

As established in the previous section, a solution-problem soteriology means that God takes the initiative in our salvation. Barth anchors this action of God Christocentrically. This action of Christ establishes our objective participation in Christ: “In Jesus Christ, God has made peace between himself and sinful humanity by overcoming sinful humanity and creating a new humanity in its place.”<sup>54</sup> Jesus creates this humanity through his life, death and resurrection.<sup>55</sup> By fulfilling the covenant between God and humanity, Jesus objectively establishes, constitutes and defines human being and identity.<sup>56</sup>

Barth calls this objective form of participation in which we participate through being human, *de jure* participation.<sup>57</sup> But there is also a subjective form of participation (called *de facto*

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<sup>50</sup> Edwin Christiaan Van Driel, “Climax of the Covenant vs Apocalyptic Invasion: A Theological Analysis of a Contemporary Debate in Pauline Exegesis,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17, no. 1 (January 2015): 23.

<sup>51</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 116–117; Neder, *Participation in Christ*, Loc 820.

<sup>52</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 118; Neder, *Participation in Christ*, Loc 816.

<sup>53</sup> Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics*, 174; Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*, 71; Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 108, 109.

<sup>54</sup> Neder, *Participation in Christ*, Loc 816.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, Loc 395.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, Loc 395, 564.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, Loc 392.

participation) which is grounded by the objective: the objective provides a “telos” for the subjective.<sup>58</sup> For Barth, subjective participation cannot happen without objective participation: “objective participation in Christ guarantees that participation in Christ will also include a subjective form.”<sup>59</sup> According to Barth, self-understanding is only possible through understanding our identity in the objective action of Christ.<sup>60</sup> In other words, our existential participation is only possible through the cosmic event of Christ. It is *de jure* participation that invites us to be “who [we] really are”<sup>61</sup> and “awaken[s us] to our own truest being as life and act.”<sup>62</sup> How this happens in the relationship between the objective and subjective is what I’d like to expand on in the final section.

Before doing so, I need to tackle a couple of objections to an objective *de jure* participation. The first is that participation is possible in a forward-looking problem-solution conditional soteriology. The second is the question: why should a person come to faith if they are already ‘in Christ’ objectively?

Is participation possible in a forward-looking, problem-solution, conditional soteriology? For Sanders, participation is the condition of salvation. That is, there is no *de jure* participation. In answering the question above, I want to highlight the implications of having existential participation as a condition of salvation rather than arising from *de jure* participation. The following line of thought shows that these implications relate to the fundamental assumptions about the nature of God. Without objective soteriology, the following scenarios and implications arise:

1. When human decision (faith, belief, or the existential moment, however assisted) is decisive for the occurrence of salvation, a split vision of humanity results.<sup>63</sup>
2. However, faith cannot be placed in a possibility;<sup>64</sup> faith can only be in something that is already true that calls into existence this faith, otherwise people come to faith on a foundation other than Christ as if there is a neutral position to evaluate the Truth of God.
3. Therefore, an existential soteriology seems to ask the individual to participate in what is true, but the only truth objectively available to the individual is the pre-existing conditions or problem. This results in a condition where no one comes to faith through a scenario that locks the ‘unsaved’ into an endless loop:

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., Loc 392, 822, 828.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., Loc 392.

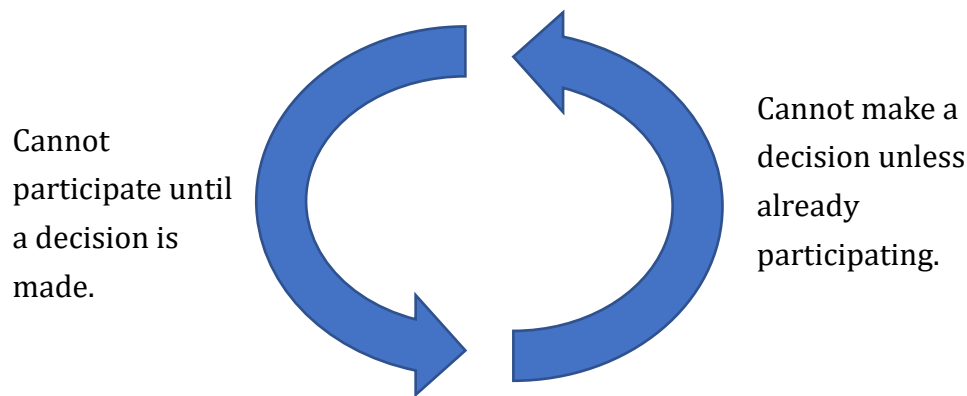
<sup>60</sup> Ibid., Loc 692.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., Loc 829.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., Loc 837.

<sup>63</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 105.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 117.



4. If no-one comes to faith, then participation is not possible as "it is impossible for anyone actively to participate in Jesus Christ and the salvation he has accomplished apart from the decision of faith."<sup>65</sup> An objective soteriology is required to call faith into being. If not, the following would be necessary:
- a. The objective moment would have to remain unreal or abstract until the existential moment makes it real and concrete;<sup>66</sup>
  - b. The objective moment would not be effective for every human, its deficiency requiring the existential moment to effect a transition from being outside to being inside the objective moment;<sup>67</sup>
  - c. Faith would have to create or contribute something to the saving work of Christ<sup>68</sup> – it is not actual and complete unless through our faith;<sup>69</sup> the gospel is not Covenantal good news, it is conditional;<sup>70</sup>
  - d. The decisive locus of salvation needs to shift from Christ to the individual;
  - e. Faith, instead of being the "acknowledgement of salvation as an actuality accomplished by him and in him for our sakes (IV/1, 285),"<sup>71</sup> becomes the actualization of salvation as a *possibility* created by Christ;<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

f. Christ becomes instrumentalised towards satisfying a need in us.<sup>73</sup>

In summary, faith or believing cannot be apprehended on problem-solution grounds without turning the gospel into a contractual system of possibility and instrumentalising Christ.

Many people who think in a forward-looking problem-solution model would instinctively react against an unconditional model with a subsequent objection. If everyone is saved, then why have faith? In such an understanding, faith is a transfer term, as it is understood by Sanders.<sup>74</sup> It is the mechanism of salvation. In the model of participation that I have developed here, faith is the acknowledgement of this love given in election.<sup>75</sup> It is not a choice to “believe things in order to be saved” as we “simply cannot decide to believe that certain things are true.”<sup>76</sup> “Things have to impress us as true,” that is, “we assent to truth.”<sup>77</sup> Campbell’s assertions in these statements reinforce the concept that truth is mediated and witnessed to, a feature of the revelational model. In this model, faith is not something we do to get saved “but is a marker of our existing inclusion in Jesus.”<sup>78</sup> Therefore, “it is the result of salvation and not its instrument.”<sup>79</sup>

Once belief or faith is framed as a transfer term, it becomes a choice between limited atonement or a conditional contractual gospel. If limited atonement, then rather than election “creating us precisely so that we can respond” and “establishing our freedom,”<sup>80</sup> it becomes a “sinister decision on God’s part prior to the foundation of the world [in which some people] must ultimately be excluded.”<sup>81</sup> If the choice is a conditional-contractual gospel, then “rationalistic individualism” is unleashed along with the issues associated with ‘problem-solution’ framework.<sup>82</sup> The solution for Campbell, is not to understand ‘believing’ soteriologically as a transfer term for salvation, but to understand it ethically and “as part of formation.”<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, “we respond in a relationship with believing;”<sup>84</sup> people come to faith through encountering a witnessing and mediating community which embodies the gospel and invites people into participation. It is not merely coming to assent some facts about Jesus which are more foundational than Jesus himself. It is this relational, interpersonal nature of witness, mediation and formation, which is also how the objective gives rise to the subjective, that is developed in the following section.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>74</sup> Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 446.

<sup>75</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 37, 113, 117.

<sup>76</sup> Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*, 126.

<sup>77</sup> Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics*, 317; Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*, 126.

<sup>78</sup> Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics*, 320.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 320.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 317.

## **Beyond objective and subjective: the second-personal dynamics of participation**

In this section, I propose a way of understanding participation that builds on the discussion so far and offers a framework for understanding participation that may give some answers to Sanders' questions. I propose that this is the missing ingredient that defines participation.

As described above, Sanders left us with a choice between two unsatisfactory poles of participation: an objective cosmic event apart from human will; *or*, a subjective, existential revised self-understanding. The assumption built into these two poles is that participation is located either apart from the human will, or it is located in the individual. In the discussion so far, I have kept this objective-subjective duality intact while showing that both are required and there is a relationship between them. However, missing in this duality - absent in both options - are interpersonal and relational dynamics.

Throughout *Pauline Dogmatics*, Campbell uses language and concepts that indicate an interpersonal emergent nature of participation. This language is neither centred on a cosmic event, nor the individual. For example, Campbell uses the following terms and language:

- embodied persons as relational entities (49)
- persons as constellations of intersecting relationships (51)
- learning communities and mediated truth (198)
- unconditional relationships as fundamental to learning (199)
- complex structures (204)
- the dynamic formative nature of relationships (224) – second-personal (227)
- inter-personal and inter-subjectivity (229)
- collective cognition – the mind of Jesus (231) and the Holy Spirit (232)
- community as a body which is porous and relational (247)
- persons and narrative (266)
- circle processes (351)
- the intensity of groups (369)
- open networks (371, 373); informal networks and mission as friendship (488)
- diversity (483)
- conversation (523) and request ethics (548)
- complexity and particularity (548)
- traditioned innovation (554)
- emergent meaning (555)

All these terms are somehow related to the complex and collective nature of groups or networks and the effect they have on the individual and the world around them. Campbell does not develop in a systematic way how these terms relate to each other, which would be

the subject of further research. However, Campbell relies extensively on the modern theoretical concept of the “second-personal” as capturing the “interactive and relational formation of the person.”<sup>85</sup> Campbell goes on to claim that the second-personal “neatly explains” the intersubjective and relational dynamics of participation and the work of the Spirit in Paul’s theology.<sup>86</sup>

According to Susan Eastman, whom Campbell considers the departure point in the study of Paul’s anthropology,<sup>87</sup> the second-person stands in distinction to “first-person, self-referential modes of knowledge or third-person, objectifying and distancing modes of knowledge.”<sup>88</sup> Thus, the third-personal loosely relates to the objective category, and the first personal relates to the subjective, existential dimension. What appears now in the model is a new category that links the subjective and the objective: the second-personal.

Barth and Campbell also link the objective and the subjective through the action of the Spirit. Barth considers that it is the Holy Spirit who is the “teleological power of th[e] transition” from *de jure* participation to *de facto* participation.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, Campbell contends that it is the Spirit that “‘maps’ or ‘moulds’ people [the subject] onto Christ’s prototypical trajectory [the objective].”<sup>90</sup>

One can see from this analysis that the second-personal is a missing category between the objective (third-person) and the subjective (first-person), and that the Spirit also works in the “space” linking the objective and subjective. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the Spirit works in this interpersonal dimension.

This assumption is what Eastman confirms in her reading of Paul. Most of Paul’s language about the Spirit, according to Eastman, is related to the Spirit’s work “in and among people, in the midst of the community: The site of “spiritual experience” is not in private, inward sensations or thoughts, but in the relational bonds between members of Christ’s body.”<sup>91</sup>

This conclusion is consistent with Eastman’s understanding of Paul’s anthropology. Eastman’s analysis of Pauline texts suggests that for Paul, “the self is never on its own but always socially and cosmically constructed in relationship to external realities that operate internally as well.”<sup>92</sup> Such an understanding means that a discrete separation of the first, second and third personal dimensions may not accord with Paul’s theology. That is, there is

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>88</sup> Eastman, *Paul and the Person*, 15.

<sup>89</sup> Neder, *Participation in Christ*, Loc 1392.

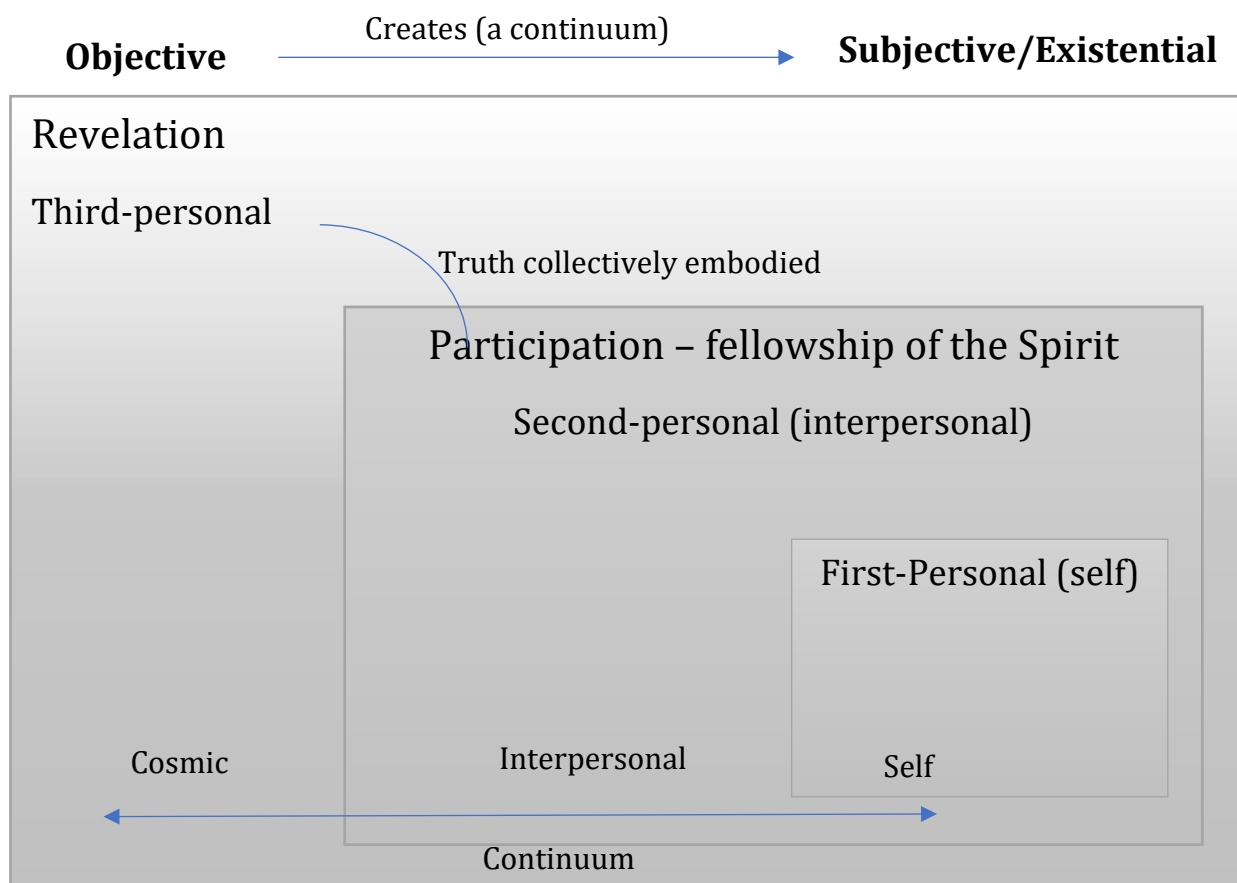
<sup>90</sup> Douglas A. Campbell, *The Quest for Paul’s Gospel : A Suggested Strategy* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2005), 59.

<sup>91</sup> Susan G. Eastman, “Oneself in Another. Participation and the Spirit in Romans 8,” in *“In Christ” in Paul: Explorations in Paul’s Theology of Union and Participation*, ed. Constantine R. Campbell, Michael J. Thate, and Kevin J Vanhoozer (Tübingen, GERMANY: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 122.

<sup>92</sup> Eastman, *Paul and the Person*, 8.

a tightly integrated and overlapping relationship between the cosmic and internal self. Therefore, the final model will show this overlapping and integrated nature of the first, second and third personal as a continuum from the objective to the subjective, the cosmic and the self.

The final step in this model's development is to include the assertion that this activity of the Spirit can be called 'participation'. According to Eastman, the Spirit "mediat[es] the experience of union with Christ," and "generates and sustains a mutually participatory bond of love between believers and God, as well as between persons "in Christ."<sup>93</sup> Campbell's understanding of the Spirit's work in mapping us on to Christ also tightly links participation and pneumatology.<sup>94</sup> My final model for understanding participation, therefore, is as follows:



I propose that this model offers some response to Sanders' challenge. For example, Sanders thinks Paul believed that "Christians really are being changed" and "that a real change was at work in the world and that Christians were participating in it."<sup>95</sup> With its second-person dynamics, my model offers at least a partial explanation to this transformation of the individual and transformation of the world. Contemporary fields of study continue to

<sup>93</sup> Eastman, "Oneself in Another. Participation and the Spirit in Romans 8," 105.

<sup>94</sup> Campbell, *The Quest for Paul's Gospel*, 61.

<sup>95</sup> Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 522.

investigate how second-person participatory dynamics shape and transform a person.<sup>96</sup> The group (with its web of relationships) nurtures and transforms the individual in a way that the individual cannot do for themselves. In the other direction, modern theories of complexity show how a collective body can act in ways that change the environment beyond the sum of the individuals involved.<sup>97</sup> These two transformational dynamics can happen simultaneously.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have sketched out a model of participation. The model's starting point is an objective soteriology. It assumes Christ's liberating rescue of humanity before humanity could do anything to save itself. This is not a solution to a problem, but is part of God's purpose in creation to "gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."<sup>98</sup> This objective soteriology results in an objective participation as Jesus objectively creates a new humanity and defines human being and identity through his life death and resurrection. We participate by being human.

This *de jure* participation is the grounding and telos for subjective, existential *de facto* participation. Subjective knowledge is mediated through witness and is transformative as the Spirit maps people onto the new human prototype in Christ. The Spirit works in the space that links the objective (third-personal) and the subjective (first-personal). This space is the second-personal, a new category that indicates the interpersonal relationship-driven way in which the Spirit works in and amongst people, transcending both the purely objective and subjective. This is where participation happens – amongst people, and where the transformation of the individual and transformation of the world takes place. This model encompasses all three loci of participation: it requires objective participation and links it to the subjective through the second-personal.

The model I have proposed takes Sanders' solution-plight schema as the point of departure, but goes beyond Sanders' assumptions in a number of respects:

- it consistently works from solution to problem and therefore avoids the inherent problems of a problem-solution soteriology;
- it does not make salvation conditional on participation; instead participation is a response to the saving work of Christ;

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<sup>96</sup> For example, see Warren S. Brown and Brad D. Strawn, *The Physical Nature of Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology, and the Church*, 1 edition. (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>97</sup> For example, see Matthew Croasmun, *The Emergence of Sin: The Cosmic Tyrant in Romans*, 1 edition. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press USA, 2017).

<sup>98</sup> Ephesians 1:10, NRSV translation.



- it proposes a second-personal category that integrates the objective and subjective, the cosmic and the self, and reflects the pneumatological interpersonal nature of participation.

I conclude that Sanders could not have arrived at the networked, interpersonal, pneumatological nature of participation outlined in this model, even though he has the insight of solution-problem. One has to assume an objective soteriology in order to explore the relationship of the objective to the subjective, and consequently arrive at the second-personal, participatory dynamics of the Spirit. Sanders' methods, as a biblical scholar, may not allow him to create a theological structure or fabric to make sense of Paul and even though he begins to move in this direction when he elevates the conditional over the unconditional. This does leave an inconsistency between Sanders' solution-problem insight, and the conditionality he places on participation. This may partly explain why participation remains a mystery for Sanders.

There are three other reasons for the elusiveness of the meaning of participation in Sanders' work.

The first is that Sanders' methodological lens, the 'pattern of religion', investigated "how a religion is understood to admit and retain members."<sup>99</sup> Although Sanders was not happy with the connotations, he does admit that 'pattern of religion' has close parallels with 'soteriology'.<sup>100</sup> The questions that Sanders was asking of Paul were about how one gets in and stays in, that is, how one is saved, rather than how one participates. I propose that the question 'How is one saved?' is different to 'What does it mean to be in Christ?' and will therefore deliver different answers. Sanders' approach in his book was to answer the first question, not the second.

The second reason that participation remains elusive is that, while Sanders was reacting against Bultmann, he did not have access to the language or theories of second-personal formation available today, and so did not have the language to critique Bultmann adequately.

Finally, Sanders, in keeping with a great deal of Pauline biblical studies, does not include Ephesians and Colossians in his data.<sup>101</sup> These letters give a clear account of Christ reconciling the world to himself. According to van Driel, these letters "expound an understanding of the incarnation ... as not simply a response to human sin, but as motivated by considerations that go deeper than the need to deal with the sin problem."<sup>102</sup> If Sanders included Ephesians and Colossians, there is a possibility that he may have moved beyond

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<sup>99</sup> Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 17.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 431–432.

<sup>102</sup> Van Driel, "Climax of the Covenant vs Apocalyptic Invasion," 22.

applying solution-problem to Paul's experience, to understanding participation in Christ as Paul's deepest theological conviction.

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