SCRIPTURE

THE

PRESENCE

OF GOD

edited by PIERRE BENOIT, O.P.
ROLAND MURPHY, O. CARM.
BASTIAAN VAN IERSEL, S.M.M.

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In the Old Testament the "divine presence" is already seen as characteristic of "God's covenant with his people", so much so that the whole covenant relationship is expressed by this dwelling of God among men (Ex. 25, 8; Num. 35, 34; etc.). Yet, as we shall see, the Old Testament itself announced a special presence of God in the messianic community and in each of its members "at the end of time". This presence was certainly experienced, particularly by Paul, as perhaps the most significant new element in the Christian revelation.

There is no doubt that this was the basic experience of Paul from the day of his conversion. The allusion to this event in Galatians already suggests this if the translation that seems most probable to me is the correct one: "Then God, who had specially chosen me while I was still in my mother's womb, called me through his grace and chose to reveal his Son in me" (1, 16). In any case, the bold confidence which runs through Philippians leaves no doubt whatever (3, 4-12). There Paul tells us not only how much his conversion constituted a break
with his Judaistic past but also in what this break exactly consisted. For Christ's sake he "accepted the loss of everything" (v. 8); he renounced all the advantages which until then he had thought to be factors that assured his salvation: belonging to the chosen race through birth and circumcision, and the faultless observation of the law (v. 6), where "he stood out among other Jews", as he says in Galatians 1, 14. But it was thus that he "gained Christ". By "no longer trying for perfection by my own effort", a perfection which came from the law given by God for that purpose as he first thought, he now "wanted only the perfection that comes through faith in Christ, and is from God and based on faith" (v. 9).

This perfection was no longer essentially the fruit of his own actions, but presupposed that an Other had died and risen for him, and shared his own risen life with him, only asking that he accept this life by a free act of his own. This act was the act of faith as Paul understood it. In v. 10 he describes it as knowing "Christ and the power of his resurrection and the share in his sufferings". Paul "experienced" this power of the dead and risen Christ whose life had become his own. "Assimilated to the death of Christ", which Paul saw essentially as a supreme act of love, he already shared in Christ's resurrection through which he could leave the company of the dead in order to lead a "new life with Christ (Rom. 6, 4), a life essentially identical with that of the glorified Christ (cf. Col. 3, 1), though not flowering in its eternal glory".1

In the same epistle he said: "Life to me, of course, is Christ" (Phil. 1, 21), and he put it still more clearly in the epistle to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me" (2, 20). The context refers once again to the anti-Judaizing controversy. To the concept of a justification thought of as a gift of God, but also as something achieved by man through the observance of a law imposed from outside and "engraved on tablets of stone", Paul opposed a dispensation where

1 Cf. J. Huby, Epîtres de la captivité, p. 348.
man is justified insofar as his own life becomes that of Christ, a life which, Paul stresses once again, he has accepted and made his own in some way "through faith in the Son of God who loved me and sacrificed himself for my sake" (2, 20b).

Now Paul does not hesitate to apply to all Christians what he has said about his own experience. One of the essential and most frequently mentioned thoughts in his writing is the union, and even identification, of the Christian with Christ, in the sense just described. The expressions vary. One of these is the formula "in Christ Jesus" or its equivalents. Though practically absent from the other writings of the New Testament, including the epistle to the Hebrews, it occurs more than 160 times in the thirteen Pauline epistles, with shades of meaning according to the context, which are not always easy to assess with any certainty.

Another formula, equally typical of Paul, is the description of the ecclesial community as the "body of Christ". This phrase is meant to express the mystery of the union between Christ and the Christians, which is the foundation of the unity of the Church and of Christians.

Paul did not develop this formula immediately. For instance, in Galatians 3, 27-28, he expressed that same twofold unity without referring to the image of the body: all those who are baptized form "one single living entity" (heis, in the masculine) with Christ, and, as St. John Chrysostom adds, in a union which is closer than if they formed one body.² In 1 Corinthians and Romans Paul adopted the well-known moral comparison used in the Hellenistic world for the same purpose. The profane authors used it to illustrate "the idea of interdependence and solidarity between different elements within a certain unity", and this unity was merely a moral unity. However, in Paul the comparison with the body is also used to explain the unity of each Christian with Christ (1 Cor. 6, 15-17; 10, 17). In 1 Corinthians 12, 12 and 27, Paul even seems

to identify the local community with the person of Christ: this community forms "a body which is Christ" (*soma Christou*, with the genitive of definition), and "each of you is a different part of it" (27b). It would be hard to stress the immanence of Christ in the Church more powerfully, and perhaps even at the expense of his transcendence, the more so since during the same period the Stoics—as can be seen in a letter from Seneca to his friend Lucilius—also maintained in a more or less pantheistic sense that "the whole which contains us is God: we are part of it, we are the members". Or again: “This universe, which you observe, contains all beings, human and divine, and it is one: we are the members of a vast body.” In any case, in Romans 12, 5 Paul slightly modified the formula: “So all of us, in union with Christ, form one body, and as parts of it we belong to each other.”

The final formula, “the body of Christ” (with two articles: *to soma tou Christou*), appeared in the epistles to the Colossians (1, 18. 24) and the Ephesians (4, 12). The Church, the whole of the Church, forms such an intimate unity with the risen Christ that one must express it by the unity which exists between the human person and his body. Here the transcendence of Christ is fully maintained, first of all, by the fact that “I am not my body”, and then, in the same epistles, by the special place reserved for Christ—namely, that of the head (Col. 1, 18; 2, 19; Eph. 1, 23; etc.).

Finally, in Ephesians 1, 23 Paul explains in greater detail the metaphor of the head and the body as applied to the Church with the help of another idea—namely, that of “fullness”, added by way of apposition. The Church is the “fullness of Christ”, which means that she is filled with Christ, as Christ himself is filled with God—at least this seems the most probable sense to me—precisely as Paul explains in Colossians 2, 9 that “the fullness of divinity dwells in Christ”, and that “in him all Christians are associated with this plenitude”. In other words, all that is in God is in Christ and all that is in Christ is in the

Seneca, *Letter to Lucilius* 92, 30 and 95, 52.
Church, the body of Christ. The relationship between the Church and Christ is analogous to that between Christ and the Father. In the same way we see in the fourth gospel that Christ invokes his relationship with the Father whenever he explains the relationship of Christians with himself: “My sheep know me as my Father knows me and I know the Father” (10, 14-5); “I am in my Father and you in me and I in you” (14, 20); “Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you... that they may be one as we are one, with me in them and you in me” (17, 21-23).

For both Paul and John this presence of Christ in the Church and in every Christian is linked with the active presence of the Spirit. It is this presence of the Spirit which makes every Christian a son of God in the true sense of the word and allows him to address God in the same way, “Abba, Father”, as the only Son (Gal. 4, 6; Rom. 8, 14-15). Christ’s prayer becomes that of the Christian because in reality it is Christ who, in the Spirit, prays to the Father in each of us, just as it is Christ who loves his fellow men and his Father in the same Spirit. Thus Paul could write to the Romans that “the love of God—the love with which God loves us—has been poured into our hearts by the Spirit which has been given us” (5, 5). St. Augustine always had a particular liking for this verse and saw in it, quite rightly, the affirmation of the presence of God’s love in our hearts through the love of the brother. He refers to it, for instance, when, in commenting on 1 John 3, 24, he states that “we know that he lives in us by the Spirit that he has given us”, and shows that “the work of the Spirit in man is precisely to stir up in him the love of brotherly love (dilectio caritatis)”.

In the same way Paul also said of himself and his fellow workers in the apostolic field: “The love of Christ urges us” (2 Cor. 5, 14a). That love by which Christ loved us to the degree that he died for us (cf. v. 14b) “presses” the apostle

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4 St. Augustine, *On the First Epistle of St. John 6*, 9 (Sources Chrétiennes 75, p. 6).
and holds him, as it were, in a vise, pulling him out of himself in order to give himself to the work to which Christ had called him, the work which God entrusted to his Son and which must be fulfilled, the “reconciliation of the world” (vv. 18-20). Moreover, Paul seems to give the Greek verb synechein, translated as “urging” or “pressing”, the meaning which it had acquired in popular philosophy, such as it occurs in the passage of Wisdom where the Spirit of the Lord is said “to hold all things together by filling the universe” (Wis. 1, 7)—the function which the Stoics attributed to that fluid force immanent in the world for which they used the word “spirit” and which the author of Wisdom attributed to Yahweh’s own Spirit. It is this function which Paul attributes to that “love of God, poured into our hearts by the Spirit which has been given us.” It is this love which later theology will describe as “theological” because it “unites us directly with God”—that is, with what, if one may use the expression, is most God in God, since “God is love” (1 Jn. 4, 8).

II

As I said at the beginning, in this active presence of Christ and the Spirit in man, Paul saw something so radically new that his conversion implied a real break with Judaism as he had practiced it. But he could not fail to see that this was also the fulfillment of what the Old Testament had announced for the messianic age.

The Old Testament indeed frequently mentioned a covenant of the future (from Hosea 2, 16-25 on), a covenant of peace (e.g., Is. 54, 10), an eternal covenant (cf. Is. 55, 3; Jer. 32, 40; Ezek. 37, 26), a new covenant (Jer. 31, 31). This last passage, the only one where the expression “the new covenant”

5 This is the definition of a “theological virtue” given by St. Thomas in his remarks on 1 Corinthians 13, 13; cf. his Commentary on 1 Cor. 13, lect. 4 (ed. R. Cai, n. 805).
occurs in the Old Testament, and to which the New Testament and Qumran texts refer, even contrasts this covenant in detail with the old one. Both are defined, in Jewish fashion, by "the gift of the law", the mattan torah. But while on Mount Sinai God had promulgated his law, the expression of his will, as a norm imposed on man from outside, Jeremiah declared: "No, this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel when those days arrive—it is Yahweh who speaks. Deep within them I will plant my law, writing it on their hearts. Then I will be their God and they will be my people" (Jer. 31, 33).

God will therefore not be satisfied with a law promulgated from outside, as laws are usually promulgated, but will put it right within man, and not written on tablets of stone (cf. Ex. 32, 16), but on the heart of every Israelite. The mediation of a mere man like Moses would not be enough for that. This interior renewal demanded a personal intervention by God in each member of the messianic community. This is what Deuteronomy had foretold in different terms when, instead of summing up the whole law in the single precept: "Circumcise your heart" (Dt. 10, 16), it says that in the future "Yahweh your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, until you love Yahweh your God with all your heart and soul, and so have life" (Dt. 30, 6). Then there is Ezekiel, who, some twenty years after Jeremiah, took up the formula coined by his predecessor and substituted the term "spirit" for "law": "I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you... I shall put my spirit in you" (Ezek. 36, 26-27). The gift of "the law engraved on the heart" is identical with the gift of Yahweh's own Spirit.

The conclusion is clear: If God's law has become so much something in man himself, and God's Spirit has become the very principle of our moral conduct, our conduct will necessarily be consistent with God’s law (that is, his will) in the degree in which man achieves this interior assimilation, even though this will only be complete in heaven. And this is what Jeremiah said: "Then there will be no further need for neighbor
to try to teach neighbor, or brother to say to brother, 'Learn to know Yahweh.' No, they will all know me, the least no less than the greatest" (Jer. 31, 33-34). And Ezekiel states it more clearly still: "I shall put my spirit inside you, and make you keep my laws and sincerely respect my observances" (Ezek. 36, 27).

"They will no longer have to teach each other" because God himself will be their master, a master who intends to be present and to act upon man from within. This theme is a common one in the Bible (cf. Is. 48, 17; 54, 13 [quoted in Jn. 6, 45]; 55, 1-3; Dt. 8, 2; Ps. 32, 8; etc.). A variation on this theme occurs in Proverbs 9, 2-6 ("Wisdom has laid her table. . . . Come and eat my bread, drink the wine I have prepared. Leave your folly and you will live, walk in the ways of perception") and in Ecclesiasticus 24, 19-21 ("Approach me, you who desire me. . . . They who eat me will hunger for more, they who drink me will thirst for more"). All these expressions are echoed in the New Testament, which applies them to Christ sharing his life and his love with the Christians.

It has not been sufficiently realized how much the two oracles of Jeremiah and Ezekiel which proclaim this presence of God and his Spirit in man influenced and explained a number of things said by Paul and John. The direct or indirect references are quoted, such as John 6, 45, which refers to the parallel passage in Isaiah 54, 13, or 2 Corinthians 3, 3-7, which opposes the ministry of death, written on stones, to the ministry of the Spirit, and is explicitly linked up with "the new covenant". But it is perhaps not often pointed out that the epistle to the Romans takes up this opposition between "the old letter" and the "new Spirit", first in 2, 29, in connection with the pagans who observe the commandments of the law without understanding them, and then in 7, 6, which introduces the development of chapter 8 about the Christian life understood as a life in the Spirit.

In actual fact, Paul directly refers to these two prophecies in a very significant passage of his first epistle to the Thes-
salonians (4, 8-9), in which he reminds them of “the instructions he has given them about the kind of life that God wants” and which they already observe in their conduct (v. 1) not only in the sense that their sanctification is willed by God, but also in the sense that “the will of God achieves sanctity”, as the Jerusalem Bible observes in a note, and as Paul said in his second epistle to them: “God chose you from the beginning to be saved by the sanctifying Spirit” (2 Thess. 2, 13). And so the apostle adds that “anyone who objects” to being sanctified in this way “is not objecting to a human authority, but to God, who gives you his Holy Spirit” (v. 8). Such a refusal is therefore not simply disobeying a commandment, not even a commandment given by God himself, but obstructing God’s activity operating in the very heart of the Christian through the gift of his Spirit. The present participle (ton kai didonta), which the editors have preferred to the aorist participle, underlines the continuity of this activity of God as he operates at the heart of our being through his Spirit, as Ezekiel had already prophesied for the messianic age.

The following verse refers no less clearly to Jeremiah’s saying about the gift of a law written on man’s heart through which men no longer need to be instructed by each other, since they are directly taught by God: “As for loving the brother, there is no need for anyone to write to you about that, since you have learned from God yourselves to love one another” (v. 9). The Thessalonians have not simply learned the existence of a divine precept commanding them to love the neighbor, but God has taught them to love one another by putting his law (Jeremiah), his own Spirit (Ezekiel), in the very ground of their being. In other words, God shares his own love with them through Christ in the Spirit, so that each of them can say with St. Paul: “It is no longer I that love but Christ who loves in me” (cf. Gal. 2, 20).

Once we see this, we can understand without difficulty why, in Galatians, Paul bases the filiation of the Christian, and therefore his freedom, on the gift of the Spirit (Gal. 4, 6-7; Rom.
8, 14-15), the characteristic feature of the "new covenant", just as the filiation and freedom of Israel were based on the first covenant, of which the characteristic feature is the gift of the law. It will be equally clear that this freedom of the Christian is essentially and simultaneously a being freed from the law and the fulfillment of the law, as Paul explains in Romans 8, 2-4. It is true that more than one scholar still finds this a difficult passage, but the meaning becomes clear when we see there, as it were, a résumé of Jeremiah 31, 33 and Ezekiel 36, 27.

Verse 2 says first that the Christian has been set free by what Paul calls "the law of the Spirit of life" (i.e., with the genitive of definition), "the law which is the Spirit", the law written on the heart, as announced by Jeremiah 31, 33, identified with Yahweh's own Spirit by Ezekiel (36, 37) whose vision of the dry bones (37, 1-14) shows how this Spirit is able to give life. Verse 4 then sets out God's aim in putting his Spirit in the ground of our being: "... that the commandment of the law may be fulfilled in us." This is therefore the law to which Jeremiah and Ezekiel referred. But Paul here purposely uses some very careful wording, and there are two expressions that deserve scrutiny. First, instead of using the usual plural, the "commandments of the law", he uses the singular, the "commandment of the law", because "one single precept contains the whole law in its fullness", as he had said in Galatians 5, 14 and as he would repeat it in Romans 13, 8-10. Then, and especially, he puts the verb in the passive mood ("the commandment is fulfilled") because in his eyes this fulfillment is much less our effort than that of the Spirit, "who, creating in us that love of the neighbor, the fullness of the law, is the new covenant".

In St. John we find exactly the same teaching, although he uses different terms. The importance of the gift of the Spirit in the fourth gospel is well known. In the prologue Christ is

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6 Cf. Ex. 4, 22-23; Lev. 26, 13, where the Septuagint even has the term parrhesia. The Passover is still preeminently the feast of freedom for the Jews.

7 St. Thomas, On 2 Cor. 3, lect. 2 (ed. R. Cai, n. 90).
presented as the one from whom “grace and truth have come” (1, 17). As John the Baptist explains, this is the one who will “take away the sin of the world” by “baptizing in the Spirit” (1, 29, 33), a mission which the evangelist develops in detail throughout his narrative, from the mysterious allusion to the “spiritual temple” (2, 19)—from which a source of living water will spring forth (4, 10, 14), with a reference to Ezekiel (47, 1f.), and explicitly identified with the Spirit Christ will will send after his glorification (7, 37-39)—up to the unusual formula with which the death of Christ is described as the “giving up of the spirit” (19, 30). By this phrase John meant that “the last breath of Jesus foreshadows the pouring out of the Spirit” (Jerusalem Bible). This is clearly emphasized by the episode of the pierced side “out of which came blood and water”, a double allusion to the first Easter and the prophecy of Zechariah: “When that day comes, a fountain will be opened for the house of David and the citizens of Jerusalem, for sin and impurity” (13, 1; cf. 14, 8 and Ezek. 47, 1f.). Jesus is in truth the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world by baptism in the Spirit”, as John the Baptist said. Finally, on the evening of Easter day, Christ would give his Church the same power to give the Spirit for the remission of sins (Jn. 20, 22).

But the allusion to both Ezekiel and Jeremiah becomes as clear in the first epistle of John as it was in Paul. Boismard has pointed out: “In this letter John deliberately presented the relations between God and men as the fulfillment of the proph­ecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel about the new convenant.” More recently, de la Potterie, in his study of 1 John 2, 12-14, expressed the opinion that “practically all the details of these verses have some point of contact with one or other of these two prophetic texts”.

In fact, it is not merely a matter of a single passage, but

of the whole epistle, and these two texts throw a new light on all its main statements. For instance, 2, 20 reads: “But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and have all received the knowledge.” And 2, 27 states: “But you have not lost the anointing that he gave you, and you do not need anyone to teach you: the anointing he gave you teaches you everything.” And still more strongly, 5, 20 declares: “We know that the Son of God has come, and has given us the understanding (ten dianoian) so that we may know the true One.” Boismard quite correctly compares this text with Jeremiah 24, 7: “I will give them a heart to know that I am Yahweh. They shall be my people and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.” The term dianoia (understanding), which occurs only here in John, corresponds to the kardia (heart) of Jeremiah. But the correspondence of this use with that in Jeremiah 31, 33 is no less striking when we look at the Septuagint translation which states: “I shall put my laws in their dianoia (the only passage where the Hebrew term is thus translated) and I shall write them on their kardia.” If the Christian “knows God” (2, 3; 4, 7-8; 5, 20), “observes his commandments” (2, 3), “does not sin” (3, 5-6) and “conducts himself as Christ conducted himself” (2, 6), according to the commandment which is both old and new (2, 7; cf. Jn. 13, 15. 34), it is because “God dwells in him and he dwells in God” (2, 3; 3, 5. 24; 4, 13), “the anointing given by the Holy One remains in him” and “teaches him everything” (2, 27), “God has given him his Spirit” (3, 24; 4, 13), and “God’s love comes to perfection in him” (2, 5).

It is therefore clear that for both John and Paul the presence of God in man through Christ in the Spirit really constitutes the essence of that message of salvation which Christ charged his apostles to proclaim to the world. Thus this is probably the full meaning of the phrase used by Paul in his epistle to the Colossians, “Christ in you” (Col. 1, 27). It undoubtedly means that the message, first reserved for Israel, is now preached also to the pagans, but at the same time it specifies the content of
this message (Christ, the only source of salvation for both Jews and pagans, is henceforth your life, shares with you his Spirit, the Spirit of God himself, and enables you through this presence in the ground of your being to “lead a life worthy of the Lord” and to fulfill his will (Col. 1, 9-10). In concrete terms this means “to love one another as Christ has loved you”. Without doubt this is also the full meaning of the confession of faith mentioned, for instance, in Romans 10, 9: “If your lips confess that Jesus is Lord and if you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, then you will be saved.” To proclaim the lordship of Christ and his resurrection from the dead is not merely asserting Christ’s divinity and the historical reality of a past event, but also, as Paul did according to Festus (Acts 25, 9), that “a dead man called Jesus is alive today”—alive, no doubt, “at the right hand of the Father” where he does not cease to “intercede for us” (Rom. 8, 34), but is alive in his Church and in the heart of every disciple.

This active presence dominates the Christian’s moral conduct, his behavior and his *peripatein* (walking) throughout life, and therefore demands constant docility. It also necessarily requires that we accept and cooperate with this activity which is going on at the very root of our freedom. As Paul states: “The commandment of the law is fulfilled in us who do not live according to our unspiritual nature but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8, 4). And the following verses show that the Christian cannot maintain this docility to the Spirit without a constant struggle, as Paul had said in Galatians 5, 17-24. For the Christian can cease to be “animated by the Spirit” and will have to undergo the consequences: “If you live according to your unspiritual nature, you are doomed to die” (Rom. 8, 13a). Paul even talks of “mortification”: “If by the Spirit you put an end to the misdeeds of the body—the actions of the ‘old man’ who reasserts himself constantly in us—you will live” (v. 13b). In the same way he had warned the Galatians: “You cannot belong to Christ Jesus unless you crucify all self-indulgent passions and desires” (Gal. 5, 24). But we should not
forget that this "mortification" and this "crucifixion" are still the work of the Spirit in us, not of the law. All that the Christian does—particularly in the faith, of which baptism is the sacrament, and in the exercise of the Christian virtues, especially brotherly love, of which the eucharist is the sacrament—is thus directed toward the reception and maintenance of the active presence of Christ and the Spirit in us.