

# Rethinking identity theory in light of the in-Christ identity in the African context

**Author:**Philip La G. Du Toit<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of New Testament, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Philip Du Toit,  
philip.dutoit@nwu.ac.za

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In social identity theory, the in-Christ identity is understood as primarily a socially directed process in which people categorise themselves relative to other groups. Intergroup behaviour would cause them to discriminate against the so-called 'outgroup', favouring the so-called 'ingroup'. Although social identity complexity theory has moved beyond single ingroup-outgroup categorisation, it is a question if social identity theories can fully account for the in-Christ identity, especially within an African context. In African religious identity, identity is linked to both the community and the ruling deities, which are perceived to be real entities that intervene in human affairs and identity, presupposing a supernaturalistic epistemology.

**Contribution:** In this contribution, the naturalistic epistemological underpinnings of social identity theories are reconsidered in light of a supernatural aspect that is argued to be constitutive of the 1st century in-Christ identity as well as the African Christian identity. Amid current approaches to the in-Christ identity, which is mainly a Pauline concept, some of the main Pauline texts that have bearing on the in-Christ identity are revisited in light of current theories and epistemologies on identity.

**Keywords:** social identity theory; identity; Pauline studies; epistemology; African spirituality; naturalism; supernaturalism.

## Introduction

*Social identity theory* (SIT) falls within the area of social psychology (Esler 2003:19; 2021:101). In SIT, identity is described as a socially directed process of categorisation in which people perceive themselves in terms of performed cultural similarities. In identifying with the so-called 'ingroup', they discriminate against the so-called 'outgroup'. People thus perceive and identify themselves 'in terms of some shared ingroup-outgroup categorization' (Esler 2014:24–25). Within SIT, certain rituals 'provide group boundaries between insiders and outsiders' (Tajfel & Turner 1986:159), serving as identity markers or group norms, to distinguish between the ingroup and the outgroup (Baker 2012:131; Tajfel & Turner 1986:16–17). J.C. Turner (1987) identified three levels of self-categorisation: (1) a superordinate identity that supersedes other categories (e.g., being a human being), (2) a social ingroup identity, indicating the various groups that a person belongs to, and (3) a subordinate identity, which denotes someone's personal identity.

In a certain application of SIT, F. Manjewa M'bwangi (2020) uses the term *social identity political theory* (SIPT) in which the point of departure for identity is taken from the political activities of the ruling elite. In applying SIPT to Galatians 3:1–10, M'bwangi (2020:7) understands Paul to be constructing the congregation's identity by taking the Roman Empire as point of reference to the outlining of Christian normative values. In M'bwangi's view, Paul responded to the Galatians' Celtic cultural identity as well as providing norms and values 'for his community to respond to the political climate of the Roman Empire'. In M'bwangi's (2020:9) understanding, the Galatian believers have 'an identity that upholds the superiority of Christian norms and values in the context of subordinating all other cultural norms and values, particularly emerging from the Celtic ethnic group, diaspora Judaism and the Roman Empire'.

Although social identity within SIT is recognised as a fluid construct in that individuals and groups may emphasise one aspect of their identity while downplaying others (Baker 2012:130), proponents of *social identity complexity theory* (SICT) have moved beyond single ingroup-outgroup categorisation. According to SICT, persons can belong to more than one social group at the same time, holding multiple social identities (e.g., Roccas & Brewer 2002). In applying SICT to the New Testament, Jacobus Kok (2014:1) has argued for the 'dynamic multifaced nature of ancient

**Note:** Historical Thought and Source Interpretation.

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Christian identity'. In this understanding, social identity can be high or low in social complexity, in which those with a high level of identity complexity can be more inclusive of outgroups (Roccas & Brewer 2002). In Kok's (2014:7-8) application of SICT in respect of the so-called 'parting of the ways' of the early church, he argues that Paul envisioned the transcendence of social and other boundaries in Christ, implying a 'new integrative social identity'. Being in Christ would constitute an 'overarching identity'. In other words, in the *ecclesia*, people of 'different social strata, cultures and backgrounds would be seen as being part of the same social group'. Over time, Christ-following Judaeans who had a high level of social complexity in their identity became differentiated from other Judaeans whose social identity was low in complexity by holding onto exclusive boundary markers.

While SICT is certainly a refined version of SIT and arguably constitutes a more nuanced understanding of identity, as per definition, both SIT and SICT concern *social* identity, which implies that identity is understood as a natural, anthropological phenomenon. In other words, identity is understood as being constituted *relative to other human beings*. According to Kevin Schilbrack (2012:103), the underlying operative epistemology<sup>1</sup> that lies beneath social identity formation theories is a naturalistic, western epistemology in which religion is often seen as a social construction of myths for ideological purposes (see also Fitzgerald 2000:12, 245; 2007:8, 14; Johnson Hodge 2007:5; Lincoln 1999:207; McCutcheon 2001; Van den Heever 2001; Weibe 2000). In a strict sense, supernaturalists perceive God and spiritual entities as real and as existing independent from physical things, whereas 'naturalists hold that either belief in God must be abandoned as rationally unsupported or the concept of God must be reconstituted consistently with naturalism' (ed. Audi 2015:1057). It is important to note here that supernaturalism is *not opposed* to natural sources of knowledge, but *additionally* acknowledges the supernatural realm as a valid source of knowledge. Schilbrack (2012:114) argues that western scholars who use 'religion' for premodern or non-western cultures are imposing a foreign, *etic* concept on such cultures. He even goes as far as asserting that the goal of such western scholars is 'to exclude theology as a way of thinking from the academy, so that the academy will be wholly naturalistic'. Of course, not all scholars of religion who utilise SITs will share the exact same sentiment, but the question is if the utilisation of SITs ever transcends its naturalistic, *etic*, epistemological underpinnings. The latter question especially becomes pertinent when studying cultural and religious identity in non-western cultures. Thus, for example, Van den Heever (2001:4-5, 16) recognises the problem of describing indigenous African cultures by 'European-derived categories' on the one hand, but on the other hand, he understands identity formation as 'a social fantasy' – as a process of creating myths in which religion is socially constructed in an ever-changing manner.

1. Epistemology is a core area of philosophy that involves the nature, origin and limits of knowledge (Klein 2005:224).

The main aim of this article is to reconsider identity theory in respect of how the in-Christ identity is perceived in an African context. The underlying questions that this article intends to address are the following: (1) How is identity perceived in Africa? (2) Can SITs fully account for the in-Christ identity in general, and the way in which it is perceived in African context? (3) How does a better understanding of the in-Christ identity help to understand Christian identity in general, and in Africa? (4) What are the limits of SITs, and how does identity theory need to be expanded in order to account for non-western religious identities, especially Christian identity in Africa? In this article, as a first step, the perception of cultural and religious identity in the African context will be addressed. Because the in-Christ identity is predominantly a Pauline idea, some of the main Pauline texts that throw light on the understanding of the in-Christ identity will be examined in terms of identity theory, in discussion with current approaches to the in-Christ identity in Paul. Within the discussion of the Pauline texts, the commentaries of African scholars will deliberately be included (Abate 2006; Andria 2012; Coulibaly 2006; Kasali 2006; Ngewa 2010). Within this discussion, a supernatural element of identity formation will especially be addressed. Lastly, a possible reformulation of identity theory will be proposed in light of how the in-Christ identity is presented in the Pauline corpus and how Christians perceive the in-Christ identity, especially in an African context.

## Identity in African culture and religion

In a recent study, Daniel Darko (2020) has studied the significance of spirit cosmology in identity construction according to the Letter to the Ephesians and identified its parallels with African spirit cosmology. Darko (2020:165-166) argues that while western influence is noticeable from Cairo to Conakry and from Accra to Abuja, in sub-Saharan Africa, religion and culture are inseparable. Individual identity is linked to the community and the ruling deities. Religion is regarded as being integral to culture and human well-being. There exists a strong connection between human beings and spiritual beings in various forms. Spiritual beings are considered to be real entities that are actively involved in human affairs, including the engendering and/or determining of people's fate. In contrast to western epistemology(ies) of identity, supernaturalism thus forms part of the African epistemology of identity.

In respect of African epistemology, Bert Hamminga (2005:57, 66, 75) reasons that an African's sense of being is not based on an individual identity but an identity derived from an ancestor. Ancestors are the roots and give energy to the adults. For example, a decrease in vital power is understood to be because of a spiritual force with evil intentions who deliberately triggers a chain of power transmissions that results to a damage in one's vital powers. Conversely, knowledge of an increase in power should be sought after by research up the chain of power transmissions until the living

or dead person is found who intended the power increase. Elders and diviners monitor these causes for everybody and provide this knowledge to the community, which in itself is considered to be a force and a vital power for the community. A tribe is thus constituted by persons in a system in which power is transmitted to other forces or persons. Power lies in the past and is transmitted to people from their ancestors, who need to be respected via sacrifice, song, and dance.

According to Kwame Bediako (1992) and Keith Ferdinando (2007:122), traditionally, the Christian mission enterprise was largely part of a benevolent western movement of elevating the conditions of African people, which inevitably involved the adoption of western culture. Becoming a Christian thus included adopting western culture. Bediako (1992:237) contends that a lack of appreciation for traditional African religion has disengaged believers from their religious heritage and denied them of a true African theology (cf. Wa Gatumu 2008:25–29). For Bediako (1992:2), an authentic African Christian identity is dependent on a positive reevaluation and recovery of the African's religious past.

Yet, according to a survey that Darko (2020:210) conducted in Ghana (Accra and Kumasi), African Christians perceive conversion to Christianity as requiring 'radical distancing' from their 'previous allegiance to deities', including 'ancestors and practices such as divination, sorcery, soothsaying, etc.'. For new converts, 'gods, priests, ancestors and pagan festivities' are generally condemned, demonised and 'regarded as spiritual opposition'. Darko reasons that in African perspective, salvation is understood as comprehensive, including God's 'forgiveness of sins and admission into God's family', but also as involving 'deliverance from the forces of darkness and alignment with God who is able to protect as well as provide for and make his people prosper in their undertakings'. Even within the perception of Christian identity, a supernaturalistic epistemology is thus retained. In other words, after conversion, supernatural entities remain to be considered as real and active, but as evil and in opposition to God's Spirit.

## Current approaches to the in-Christ identity in the Pauline corpus

Before some of the main Pauline texts can be probed for its bearing on the in-Christ identity, current approaches to identity in Paul will be discussed in terms of its underlying epistemology.

### Approaches that focus on ethnic identity and the human creation of a new hybrid social identity

Various New Testament studies that utilise SIT have been produced, of which just a few will be mentioned here. In most of these studies, the focus is on explaining the perception of the *ethnic diversity* of the in-Christ identity. In Philip Esler's (2003:154) study on Romans, he argues that his Roman addressees now have a 'new shared identity' that is 'adapted

to their entirely different social origins, non-Judean/Greek sinners not subject to the law of Moses and Judean sinners subject to the law'. In Esler's view, Paul's approach is 'to recategorize members of two (generally antipathetic) groups into a new common ingroup identity that posits the need for each group to be roughly equal in status'. Similarly, in respect of 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1, Esler (2021:108) contends that Paul envisions a 'sharply differentiated ingroup and outgroup' in which the outgroup is designated as the *apistoi* – the unbelievers. He sees the outgroup as anyone who does not accept Paul's gospel, including idol-worshippers and Paul's opponents. Esler (2021:109) argues that Paul is 'presenting himself as prototypical' of the identity-descriptor of righteousness, as 'something that the Corinthians must interiorize within their own identity to be loyal members of the Christ-movement'.

In his work on identity in the Pauline corpus, William Campbell (2008:56–65, 140–158) argues for the strong continuity in which Judean Christ-believers stand with historical Israel. He understands the 'new creation' (2 Cor 5:17) as a diverse Christ-following community that retains their ethnic identity. Judean Christ-followers remain to be fully Torah observant, while the gentiles are required to adhere to the so-called 'Noachide Laws', which refers to a minimum set of requirements that are based on the Apostolic Decree (Ac 15:19–32; 16:1–5; 21:25), in order to be accommodated within God's people.

In a way similar to that of both Esler (2003) and Campbell (2008), Christopher Zoccali (2014:256) interprets Romans 4 such as that the 'descendants of Abraham' represent a 'superordinate identity that ultimately demarcate all those who are in Christ, both Jews and gentiles'. For Zoccali (2014:257), Romans 4 concerns a 'new social phenomenon' in which Judeans and gentiles come together in a new 'unified, eschatological covenant community, in which *previous social identities necessarily retain their fundamental status*' (emphasis original). In Christ, Judeans remain fully Torah-observant, being 'an appropriate expression of ethnic identity and faithfulness towards God' (Zoccali 2014:270). In discussing identity according to Galatians 3:10–12, Zoccali (2015) also argues for the continued significance of the Torah in demarcating Judean believers' identity and as basis for covenant practice. He, in fact, contends that Paul specifically instructs gentile Christ-followers not to become Judean proselytes.

Together with Campbell, Brian Tucker (2010) does not see the new identity in Christ as a third entity but rather as representing diverse expressions of the Christ movement identity. In Tucker's estimation, for Paul, ethnic identities did not become irrelevant in Christ. On the basis of 1 Corinthians 7:17–24, he argues that Paul remains to be law observant but follows a relaxed halakha. Judean and gentile identities thus remain intact in Christ. Rather than seeing Paul as the creator of a new identity (Campbell 2008; Esler 2003; cf. M'bwangi 2020), Tucker (2010:228) considers Paul as an 'ancient

pedagogue who employed kinship-formation as a way to form distinct Christ-following communities’.

The tendency in the above approaches is to see the in-Christ identity as some kind of newly formed *hybrid social identity*. A common denominator in all of these approaches, is the fact that identity is viewed as purely a *social construction* in which identity is understood relative to *other human beings*. Identity is thus a *human-made* construction in which Paul is seen as instrumental. Paul’s ‘theologising’ is seen as serving a social agenda. Similar to Campbell (2008:161), according to Tucker (2010:39), ‘Paul’s theologizing defines the Christ-movement in the context of social categories of identity’ and ‘Paul’s theologizing provides ideological justification for the formation of Christ-movement social identity’. In Sze-kar Wan’s reasoning (2000), all constructions of reality are perceived as ethnocentric. Paul’s ‘theologising’ is thus ultimately seen as *subordinate to a socially directed process*, which confirms the naturalistic epistemology beneath these approaches.

### Approaches that identify a divine element in identity formation

While Kok (2014) utilises SICT in a similar fashion than the above approaches, viewing the in-Christ identity as a superordinate identity that constitutes a multifaced and inclusive identity in which people of different ethnic backgrounds come together (cf. Kok & Swart 2021), he argues that ‘a believer has received a brand new recreated status before God and man, a status that created a new symbolic world where the man-made boundaries no longer play the same role as before’ (Kok 2014:7). Kok (2014:7) agrees with Hans Betz (1987:190) that ‘Paul’s statements have social and political implications of even a revolutionary dimension’. Kok thus seems to identify a divine origin for the in-Christ identity with implications on a social and political level, which stands in tension with the notion that Paul’s ‘theologising’ would serve a social agenda. In other words, while Kok also utilises *social* identity theory, believers’ social identity seems to reflect or embody the new reality that was *created by God*.

A comparable approach is followed by Kar Yong Lim (2014). While utilising SIT, he argues that Paul’s concept of the ‘new creation’ (2 Cor 5:17) implies that ‘one’s identity is transformed in Christ’. It is ‘the new community that allows their previous identities to be transformed in light of the gospel’ (Lim 2014:298). Lim (2014:299) argues that the main question that Paul addresses is whether ‘the group behaviour’ of the Corinthians is ‘compatible with their new identity in Christ’. If not, ‘then decisive actions need to be taken to *align* themselves to it’ (emphasis added). Lim (2014:300) maintains that after ‘declaring’ the Corinthians’ new identity (2 Cor 5:17), Paul moves on to the theme of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18–19), which has social implications. Lim thus sees the new identity in Christ as a newly created reality with implications on a social level, to which believers must *align* themselves.

While Darko (2020:104) does not specifically utilise SIT, he also sees the new identity in Christ as an identity ‘couched in kingship parlance to depict God as the father and members as his adopted siblings’ in a ‘multi-ethnic household’. Yet, he understands believers’ identity to be ‘rooted in divine initiative and agenda for the cosmos’ (Darko 2020:115). In reference to ‘learning’ Christ (Eph 4:20), Darko (2020: 122–123) links morality ‘to identity with Christ as a learned experience’ in which the ‘old identity’ needs to be ‘put off’. He further argues that the church’s ‘communal identity is a product of God’s creation’. According to Darko’s (2020:216) study of Ephesians, ‘spiritual beings are the main actors’ of the construction of believers’ identity and their moral framework.

While in these approaches, social identity theory is utilised or acknowledged, a divine element in the formation of identity is seen as having an effect in the way in which people relate socially. When N.T. Wright (2013:39) discusses the worldview underlying Christian history, he expresses the concern that to merely reduce Christian history to social forces at the cost of the theology and spirituality that the biblical characters thought they were dealing with, is reductionistic. That is not to say that biblical scholars such as Esler (2003; 2021), Campbell (2008) or Tucker (2010) who utilise SIT do not acknowledge or accommodate a divine element in identity, but rather that they rely on a model that is derived from the *social sciences*, which, in terms of its epistemology, does not intrinsically pursue a divine element in the understanding of identity. Subsequently, some of the main Pauline texts that have bearing on the identity in Christ will be probed, specifically in respect of the divine element in identity formation and the underlying epistemology on Paul’s perception of identity.

## Paul’s theological reflection on the identity in Christ

Within the build-up of Paul’s argument in his Letter to the Romans, Romans 3:21–31 constitutes a major turning point (e.g., Dunn 1988:176; Longenecker 2016:382; Moo 2018:241; Schreiner 2018b:188). Here, Paul announces the revelation of God’s righteousness in Christ as a definitive moment in the history of salvation (Longenecker 2016:399; Moo 2018:241; Schreiner 2018b:188). ‘Now’ (νῦν, v. 21), God’s righteousness has been ‘manifested’ (φανερώω) apart from the law, through faith in<sup>2</sup> Christ (v. 2). On the basis of faith, people are ‘justified’ (δικαιώω) by God’s grace as a gift, through the redemption that is ‘in Christ Jesus’ (ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ). The justification (δικαιώω, v. 24) of believers involves their ‘standing with God’ (Moo 2018:248) and putting them in a ‘right relation with God’ (Schreiner 2018b:197; cf. Jewett 2006:280). According to Douglas Moo (2018:78), ‘God’s people have been redefined in

2. While many proponents of the New Perspective on Paul argue that πίστις Χριστοῦ should be read as the faith (fulness) of Christ (subjective genitive), mainly on the basis of the apparent redundancy of mentioning εἰς πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας right after (e.g., Hays 2000:239–240; Wright 2013:838–39; Longenecker 2016:409–13), the fact that Paul never unambiguously ascribes faith or faithfulness to Christ amid many unambiguous references to human faith (objective genitive), makes ‘faith in Christ’ the preferred reading (Moo 2018:244–246; Schreiner 2018b:190–194; Thielman 2018:204–205).

relationship to Christ', which involves a change of who they are before God and thus their *identity before God*. Yet, within setting people right in their relationship with God, there is 'no distinction' (οὐ διαστολή, v. 22), which also involves people's relationship to other people and thus their *social identity*. According to Robert Jewett (2006:281), the notion of 'no distinction' of people's new identity specifically implies 'a fundamental lack of distinction between believers either in shame or honor'. In Pauline terms, identity thus has two dimensions or aspects: one's status and identity before God, and one's status and identity in relation to other people. These dimensions are intricately related, and the one implies the other.

In Romans 6, Paul further elaborates on the implication of the new position in Christ, specifically in relation to sin. Paul reasons that those who are baptised, were baptised into Christ's death and raised with him unto new life (vv. 3-4). In verse 6, Paul refers to the *παλαιὸς ἄνθρωπος* that was crucified with Christ, which can be translated as the 'old person' (domain 41.43 in Louw & Nida 1988:509; Porter 2015:134; Schreiner 2018b:316; cf. Moo 2018:398) or the 'old self' (Andria 2012:109; Kasali 2006:1387; Longenecker 2016:614; English Standard Version [ESV]; New International Version [NIV]; New Revised Standard Version [NRSV]).<sup>3</sup> The same expression is also used in Ephesians 4:22 and Colossians 3:9.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Ephesians 4:24 mentions the *καινὸν ἄνθρωπον*, the 'new self' (ESV; NIV), that believers must clothe themselves with (ἐνδύω).<sup>5</sup> The 'old person' does not only refer to a person's former behaviour (Jewett 2006:402; domain 41.43 in Louw & Nida 1988:509), but also points to someone's old existence (Schreiner 2018b:316-317) and one's *old identity* (Esler 2003:214). In contrast, the new life (Rm 6:11, 23) that believers 'live with' (συζῶω, Rm 6:8) Christ, and the 'new self' that believers must clothe themselves with (Eph 4:24) involves a believer's *new identity* in Christ (Esler 2003:213; Lincoln 1990:287). The clothing metaphor (see Col 3:9-10; Eph 4:22-44; Gl 3:27) can specifically be associated with identity in that clothing in antiquity denoted a person's status (Matthews 2006:692-693; Neyrey & Stewart 2008:86). According to David Kasali (2006), Africans understand what it means to go through a rite of passage. In respect of the new position in Christ, he writes that:

[O]nce an African has gone through a rite of passage, he or she is expected to live a new life and will face grave consequences if he or she reverts to his or her old self. (p. 1387)

Jewett (2006:403) notes that the old and new 'self' does not merely pertain to individuals, but to the corporate body of

3. Moo (2018:398) here rightly remarks that the *παλαιὸς ἄνθρωπος* is not pointing to a part of a person such as the old nature, but to the person as a whole.

4. Although the authorship of these two letters is disputed, they are included here as the concepts that are discussed here closely and correspond to the material in the undisputed letters (especially Rm 6:3-4).

5. Similarly, Colossians 3:10 refers to the *νέον [ἄνθρωπον]* (*ἄνθρωπον* supplied by v. 9) that a believer must clothe him- or herself with. The reflexivity of the verb is indicated by the middle voice, indicating the subject's participation in the action (Wallace 1996:414-417).

believers, indicated by ἡμῶν ('our') in ὁ παλαιὸς ἡμῶν ἄνθρωπος ('our obsolete self').

Another passage in Paul's Letter to the Romans that pertains to the new identity in Christ is Romans 8:1-17. Here, Paul declares that 'now' (νῦν, v. 1), in the new eschatological age or the new stage in salvation history (e.g., Longenecker 2016:684; Moo 2018:495), those 'in Christ' are under 'no condemnation' (οὐδὲν κατάκριμα). This is part of their new position. The 'law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus' has set believers free from the law of sin and death (v. 2). Their new position and the new reign of the Spirit under which they now live, pertain to their new status as God's children (Dunn 1988:452; Longenecker 2016:702; Moo 2018:524; Thielman 2018:390) and thus their *new identity* (Esler 2003:243-244; Fee 1994:564). Their new identity is especially indicated by verses 15 to 17 in which Paul declares that believers have not received the spirit of slavery to fear again but 'received the Spirit of adoption as sons/children' (ἐλάβετε πνεῦμα υιοθεσίας), who bears witness with believers' own spirit that they are 'children of God' (τέκνα θεοῦ) and thus 'heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ' (κληρονόμοι μὲν θεοῦ, συγκληρονόμοι δὲ Χριστοῦ). Solomon Andria (2012:144) reasons that the children of God's 'status has changed from being *slaves* to being sons' (emphasis original). For Kasali (2006:1389), believers have 'received the legal status of sons'. Believers' adoption and their change of status specifically pertain to 'the relationship of God's people to God himself' (Longenecker 2016:704; cf. Thielman 2018:390). According to Paul's exposition, in Christ, one's identity thus pertains to one's *position and relation to God*, which accounts for a *theological dimension in identity*. It must also be noted here that believers 'received' (ἐλάβετε, v. 15) their new status before God, which means that they did *not (socially) construct* this aspect of their new identity; it was *given to them* by the working of God's Spirit.

In 1 Corinthians 1:30, Paul states that 'out of' or 'because of' (ἐξ) God, the members of the Corinthian congregation are now 'in Christ Jesus' who 'became' (ἐγενήθη) for them 'wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption' (σοφία ἡμῖν ἀπὸ θεοῦ, δικαιοσύνη τε καὶ ἁγιασμὸς καὶ ἀπολύτρωσις). This statement of Paul confirms the notion that the in-Christ identity has its *origin or source in God* (Gardner 2018:117; Thiselton 2000:193) and that these qualities that Paul mentions are not inherent to any believer. Instead, Christ 'became' these qualities for them (cf. Schreiner 2018a:74), in which believers share in their position 'in Christ'. The gift of righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) that believers receive in Christ specifically involves their right standing with God (Fee 2014:90; Schreiner 2018a:74). Anthony Thiselton (2000:189) argues that to be 'in Christ' is a gift that comes from 'outside', involving 'sharing in Christ's *own identity* and indeed becoming incorporated into "Christ's body"' (emphasis added). Regarding Paul's advice to believers in 1 Corinthians 7, Victor Furnish (1999:65) reasons that one of its underlying premises is that 'believers have been claimed by the Lord, and in their belonging to him they

have been granted a new identity and status'. For Furnish, this principle also applies to the advice Paul provides to believers regarding staying in the 'social situation' in which they were called (vv. 17–24). A close relationship between the divine and social aspects of identity can again be detected here.

A Pauline passage that prominently pertains to the epistemology of identity is 2 Corinthians 5:16–21. Paul starts by stating that 'now' (νῦν), 'we know no one according to the flesh' (οὐδένα οἶδαμεν κατὰ σάρκα). He continues that even though believers once knew (γινώσκω) Christ 'according to the flesh' they do not know (γινώσκω) him as such any longer (v. 16). Although it is relatively sure that the verbs οἶδα and γινώσκω ('know') are used synonymously here (Harris 2005:427), it is not immediately certain what exactly it means to know 'according to the flesh' (κατὰ σάρκα). According to Issiaka Coulibaly (2006:1430), it means to 'understand things from a human point of view', which is also the view of the Bauer lexicon (see §5 in Bauer et al. 2021:814) and similar to how commentators generally interpret the expression.<sup>6</sup> By implication, the opposite of knowing someone 'according to the flesh' is thus to know someone from a divine perspective. Paul then motivates further by stating that therefore, anyone who is in Christ is a 'new creation' (καινὴ κτίσις), that the 'old' (ἀρχαῖος) has passed away and that the 'new' (καινός) has come (v. 17). In epistemological terms, what Paul seems to be arguing here is that the in-Christ person's *epistemology has changed* from being solely based on what is knowable in *human* terms to an epistemology that is *divinely* informed. If this underlying principle is applied to the questions asked at the beginning of this article, it would suggest that a naturalistic epistemology cannot fully account for the operative epistemology of someone who is in Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 5:18–19, Paul reasons that the whole of the new creation is 'from God' (ἐκ θεοῦ) who through Christ 'reconciled' (καταλλάσσω) believers to God and gave them the 'ministry of reconciliation' (διακονίαν τῆς καταλλαγῆς), confirming the origin of the new creation as coming from God. It is important to note here that the way in which other people, including Christ, is known (v.16), involves people's *identity*, that is, how they are perceived by God and other people. The reshaping of believers' identity is also indicated by the theme of dying and rising with Christ, which is explicitly mentioned in verses 14–15 (Keener 2005:184). The new creation itself also pertains to a *person* that is recreated (τις, v. 17), implying a change of identity. According to this passage (2 Cor 5:16–21), in terms of identity theory, believers' identity is primarily being *determined by God* in Christ, but has *consequences* for the way in which *other people are perceived* in light of the new creation. This is also the kind of approach that Lim (2014) seems to follow.

In view of the Antioch incident (Gl 2:11–14), Paul in Galatians 2:15–16 is at pains to emphasise that although he himself

6. For example, 'from a worldly perspective' (Harris 2005:426); knowing 'according to the practical judgements of human reasoning' (Seifrid 2014:247).

was a 'Judaean by birth' (φύσει Ἰουδαῖοι, §1 in Bauer et al. 2021:951; Ngewa 2010:78; ESV; NIV) and not a gentile sinner, he and his fellow Judaeans also had to come to faith in order to be justified. According to Samuel Ngewa (2010), Paul here refers to his Judaean ethnic identity by birth (cf. Keener 2019:167). Yet, in 2:19–20, Paul states that he has been crucified with Christ. Paul then writes: 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (ζῶ δὲ οὐκέτι ἐγώ, ζῆ δὲ ἐν ἐμοὶ Χριστός). The use of ἐγώ ('I') that is used together with the verb ζῶ, which is already a first person singular, indicates emphasis (DeSilva 2014:48). Ngewa (2010:86–87) argues that Paul now leads 'a life in which "self" has died', indicating 'a different master'. In 2:20–21, Paul continues that the life that he 'now' (νῦν) lives 'in the flesh' (ἐν σαρκί), which refers to earthly, bodily life (Moo 2013:171; cf. Das 2014:271; Keener 2019:196), he does not nullify God's grace. In light of mentioning his ethnic identity in verse 16 and the new life that Paul now lives in which his 'self' has died, one is hard-pressed not to envision a *change of identity*. In this regard, Andrew Das (2014:270) argues that Paul 'has left behind an entire way of life which had been orientated around the Law and human traditions'. Pointedly, Richard Hays (2000) writes the following:

Having died to his old identity, and to the Law that shaped that identity, Paul lives in the mysterious power of the risen Christ. This means that all his values and practices are reshaped in accordance with the identity of the crucified one. The character of that identity is sketched by the latter part of v. 20: 'The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith – that is, by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.' The hallmarks of this new identity are love and selfgiving, rather than circumcision and Law observance. (p. 244)

My point here is not so much to flesh out the intricacies of Paul's relationship to the law, but to argue that according to Paul's epistemology of identity as put forth in Galatians 2:20, there are *two distinct but interrelated aspects* of identity, namely Paul's *new identity in relation to God and the law*, and his identity in respect of the *life that he now lives on this earth in the body*, which also relates to his relationship to other people by implication. In Paul's perception, his entire identity is first and foremost *determined by his position in Christ*, which influences the way in which he now lives in this world.

A passage that specifically pertains to identity is Galatians 3:26–29. Here, Paul states that in light of faith that 'has come' (ἐλθούσης, v. 25) 'in Christ', all believers are 'sons of God' (υἱοὶ θεοῦ). He continues that as many as were baptised 'into Christ' (εἰς Χριστόν) have 'clothed themselves with Christ' (Χριστόν ἐνεδύσασθε, v. 27).<sup>7</sup> As a result, there is 'neither Judaean nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female' for all are 'one in Christ Jesus' (v. 28). Finally, if people are 'in Christ', then they are Abraham's offspring and heirs according to the promise (v. 29). According to Ngewa (2010:117), Galatians that clothed

7. As with Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:9, the verb is here in the middle form, indicating its reflexivity and the subject's participation in the action (Wallace 1996:414–417).

themselves with Christ (v. 27) 'have identified themselves with Christ'. Ngewa (2010:117–118) points to the role that clothes play in African culture. As examples, he mentions that school children have to wear uniforms and people dress in a certain way at weddings, arguing that 'in the same way, all believers have clothed themselves with the uniform of Christ-likeness. We are to take on "the characteristics, virtues, and/or intentions" of Christ'. The idea of a new identity that is taken on is also advanced by scholars such as J.L. Martyn (1997:374), L.A. Jervis (1999:106), Das (2014:388) and C.S. Keener (2019:294–296). Jervis (1999:106) argues that putting on Christ involves 'putting on Christ's character, which is that of righteousness' and that believers have to 'recognize their new identity as those who are clothed with Christ'. Martyn (1997) reasons that in baptism, the Galatians have:

Stripped of their old identity, they became God's own sons, putting on Christ, God's Son (2:20), as though he were their clothing, thus acquiring a new identity that lies beyond ethnic, social, and sexual distinctions. In a word, the Galatians became one new person by being united in Christ himself. (p. 374)

In respect of identity theory, it can be concluded that Galatians 3:26–29 presents identity as a new relationship to God in Christ, being his spiritual offspring, as a believer's core identity. But this new core identity also has social implications. Within the new identity that believers receive in the new era in Christ, ethnic boundaries are relativised and not constitutive of their status and identity before God any more (see Du Toit 2018). Yet, this new-found identity also affects how believers relate to other believers from different ethnic backgrounds. They are now on equal footing with them. Das (2014:388) is thus right that people of different cultural backgrounds that come to belief in Christ retain their ethnic or cultural identity, but this cannot be absolute either. Not everything that pertains to culture is spiritually neutral. Gentiles had to refrain from heathen practices such as idolatry and sorcery (e.g., Rm 1:23; Gl 5:20). I have argued elsewhere that even for Judean believers, keeping Sabbaths, circumcision and dietary laws, which were more than mere cultural symbols but also stood in relation with their covenant status, became obsolete in Christ (Du Toit 2018, see e.g., Gl 2:14; 4:10; 5:2–4). As was already discussed, as was shown by the survey under African believers that Darko (2020:210) conducted, Africans that come to faith in Christ also tend to distance themselves from the spiritual dimensions of their cultural past. This is most likely the case for protestant Christianity in Africa, which forms the largest contingent of African Christianity (Murphy 2015).

A passage that needs to be mentioned in this discussion is Philippians 3:3–9. In verse 3, Paul states that 'we' (ἡμεῖς) are the circumcision who worship by God's Spirit, glory in Christ and 'put no confidence in the flesh' (οὐκ ἐν σαρκὶ πεποιθότες), which he follows up by mentioning his accomplishments in the flesh such being of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, being a Pharisee, among others (vv. 5–6). But then, in verse 7, he declares that he now counts these

accomplishments as a loss for the sake of Christ. In verses 8 and 9, Paul states that he now counts everything as a loss and as refuse or dung (σκύβαλον) because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ as his Lord, in order to gain Christ and to 'be found in him' (εὑρεθῶ ἐν αὐτῷ) not having his own righteousness that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, which is a righteousness that comes from God. Apart from confirming the origin of Paul's new in-Christ identity as coming from God, he seems to distinguish between the *nature of identity* in Christ versus the identities or aspects of his Judaeian identity that he had 'in the flesh' (ἐν σαρκί, vv. 3, 4). According to Bauer et al. (2021:814, §5), the designation 'in the flesh' here pertains to 'earthly things or physical advantages'. For Hansen (2009), confidence 'in the flesh' denotes 'national identity and physical ceremony'. A distinction between an eschatologically old way of existence 'in the flesh' and a new eschatological existence in the Spirit can also be detected here (Fee 1995:302). According to Eshetu Abate (2006), God's righteousness:

Gives us a new identity as people of God whatever our past identity and history. Like Paul, we should discard our pride in such things as our race, social status, caste and sex. As new people of God we should boast of our new identity in Christ, and our desire, like Paul's, should be to become like Christ in all respects. (p. 1472)

Abate thus understands the in-Christ identity as a new-found identity that supersedes 'physical' or social aspects of identity. In this passage, the *new identity in Christ* is thus prioritised and presented as *Paul's core identity*, whereas his *former social identities* or aspects of his Judaeian identity are *relativised* or even considered as insignificant.

## Conclusion

Current theories of identity are largely based on a naturalistic, etic epistemology in which identity is seen as a social construction. In current theory, people identify with others on the basis of similar social norms or boundary markers in distinction from other people who do not share the same norms or markers. In African spiritual identity formation, however, a divine element is constitutive of identity, which remains after conversion to Christianity. Although an African's religious and cultural identity is intertwined, identity is not merely based on a social process of negotiation between group norms and boundaries, but includes divine intervention. The tendency under the majority of African Christians is that their new-found identity in Christ supersedes their cultural identity, including spiritual dimensions thereof. In fact, they tend to distance themselves from spiritual aspects such as ancestry divination, sorcery and soothsaying or ritual aspects that are associated with it. In other words, in light of the in-Christ identity, not everything in their culture is considered as morally or spiritually neutral. But in terms of the in-Christ identity, it is perceived to be a new corporate identity that is received by divine intervention. In fact, for African Christians, other spirits or personalities are still acknowledged, but considered as against the Spirit of God.

In Pauline terms, the in-Christ identity is presented as a gift from God, which coheres with the new righteous status of a believer. Yet, this new identity has implications for how a believer relates to other people. In fact, the new-found identity in Christ is presented as primary, whereas social or ethnic identities are presented as being relativised. A supernaturalistic epistemology can thus be detected behind Paul's reflection on identity. In Christ, there are aspects of cultural or ethnic identity that are presented as becoming redundant or even unnecessary. Previous social or ethnic identities are still acknowledged but not as being constitutive of the in-Christ identity, which is primary. Social or cultural differences are thus still made room for as long as the boundaries or elements within such a culture do not impinge on the new-found core identity in Christ. In respect of identity theory, from both a Pauline perspective and a Christian African perspective, the in-Christ identity is seen as primarily a divinely imparted corporate identity and secondarily as an identity that has implications on how a believer relates to other cultures or social identities.

In terms of identity theory in general, the in-Christ identity from an African perspective challenges the naturalistic epistemological underpinnings of identity theory. From both a Pauline and Christian African perspective, identity formation is not a mere social process, but a reality that is divinely mediated, primarily involving a new identity in relation to God and secondarily a new identity in relation to other people. In this equation, it is not as if SIT and SICT are considered as not viable, but as theories that are inadequate to fully account for the in-Christ identity, especially from an African perspective. If identity theory is expanded beyond its naturalistic western epistemological underpinnings and includes the *emic* reappraisal of non-western cultures, it should make room for a supernatural element in identity theory and thus become more holistic, working towards a *holistic identity theory* (HIT).

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