What is the meaning of “in” and “in Christ”?

Iver Larsen

Prepositions in any language are notoriously *flexible, stretchable, and ambiguous*. In the case of NT Greek the most common and flexible preposition is ἐν. From a historical and phonological point of view it corresponds to English *in*, and it is often translated by *in*. In fact, it is far too often translated by *in*. There are so many other possibilities for translating it. The range of options can most easily be seen in the 21 senses that Louw and Nida[1] (L&N) suggest for the word:

1 in (location)

2 among (location)

3 on (location)

4 at (location)

5 in (state)

6 into (extension)

7 in union with (association)

8 with (attendant circumstances)

9 with (instrument)

10 with (manner)

11 with regard to (specification)

12 of (substance)

13 to (experiencer)

14 by (agent)

15 by (guarantor)

16 by (means)

17 because (reason)

18 so that (result)

19 when (time)

20 during (time)

21 in (content)

So, how do we decide between this array of possibilities? We need to look at the noun phrase that the preposition governs as well as the verb it is connected to. It is also helpful to see if a similar construction occurs in other Greek texts.

Let me begin with an example from Galatians. The preposition ἐν occurs 41 times in this small book. The first is Galatians 1:6:

Θαυμάζω ὅτι οὕτως ταχέως μετατίθεσθε ἀπὸ τοῦ καλέσαντος ὑμᾶς ἐν χάριτι [Χριστοῦ] εἰς ἕτερον εὐαγγέλιον

I am shocked that you so quickly are being pushed away from the one who called you ἐν grace [of Christ] towards a different gospel.

We cannot know whether the reading with or without *of Christ* is likely to be the original reading. We note that there is no definite article before grace, which gives it a qualitative sense. It is not referring to a particular act of grace, but to the kind or quality of grace that originates with God and Christ. The verb is "call", so we would need to look at this verb in connection with ἐν.

We find an example in 1 Cor 7:15: ἐν δὲ εἰρήνῃ κέκληκεν ὑμᾶς ὁ θεός (But it is ἐν peace that God has called you. This cannot mean that God was feeling peaceful when he called you, nor did he use peace as an instrument or agent for the calling. It has to be *into* peace (sense 6 above). In order to translate that into English NIV says: "God has called us to live in peace." (It should have been "called you", but that is a textual issue again.) It is legitimate to add the words "to live" in order to make an accurate and meaningful translation.

Another example is 1 Thess 4:7: οὐ γὰρ ἐκάλεσεν ἡμᾶς ὁ θεὸς ἐπὶ ἀκαθαρσίᾳ ἀλλ᾽ ἐν ἁγιασμῷ (You see, God did not call us to uncleanness, but rather ἐν holiness). Again, the NIV has correctly added the words "to live (a life)" and they say: "For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life." They might have said: "not to live in impurity, but in holiness," or they might have said: "not to live a life in impurity, but in holiness". There is seldom ONE correct translation, but some translations are better than others - according to various criteria.

From these examples it is reasonable to suggest that the verb *call* followed by ἐν indicates the kind of life we are called to live. This fits well with Gal 1:6, and if we look at the new NIV2011, we find that they are actually saying: "the one who called you **to live** in the grace of Christ." The addition of the definite article is caused by the genitive "of Christ". If we were to translate the text without this word – what Paul probably wrote – we could easily make it parallel to 1 Cor 7:15 and 1 Thess 4:7: "the one who called you to live in grace". The Galatians were being pushed from a gospel of grace to a "gospel" of law which is not a gospel (good news) at all, as Paul went on to say in the next verse.

We have so far been looking at the Greek ἐν and its large array of possible meanings. I suggested that when the verb is “to call” and when the noun is a kind of abstract concept (without the definite article) like “peace, holiness, grace” then it is better to translate ἐν with “to” in English. We are called to grace, to peace, to holiness.

Another preposition that can be used with “call” is ἐπὶ. We saw it in 1 Thess 4:7: οὐ γὰρ ἐκάλεσεν ἡμᾶς ὁ θεὸς ἐπὶ ἀκαθαρσίᾳ (You see, he did not call us to (live in) uncleanness). We find the same ἐπὶ in Gal 5:13: Ὑμεῖς γὰρ ἐπ᾽ ἐλευθερίᾳ ἐκλήθητε (After all, YOU have been called to (live in) freedom.) Some translations do not add any verb like NET, RSV: For you were called to freedom. Others add “be” and change the noun to an adjective as NIV, TEV: As for you, my friends, you were called to be free. Others again add “live” as the NLT: For you have been called to live in freedom. The same idea is expressed with a dative rather than a preposition in Gal 5:1 τῇ ἐλευθερίᾳ ἡμᾶς Χριστὸς ἠλευθέρωσεν. (It was to (live in) freedom that Christ set us free.)

Now let me look at the concept of “reveal” together with ἐν. The two Greek verbs I am looking at are ἀποκαλύπτω and φανερόω. They are tri-valent verbs of perception. By this I mean that a full expression would have three participants or arguments, for instance: A revealed B to C. They can be analysed as a causative of “to see”. A caused C to see B. A is the semantic Agent or Cause, B is the semantic Patient (what is seen), while C is the semantic experiencer or recipient. In Greek, an Agent is typically, but not always, expressed by a nominative, a Patient by an accusative and a recipient by a dative. However, a participant that would usually be expressed with a dative in older Greek is often expressed with a preposition in Koine Greek. For these verbs we find both a dative and a prepositional phrase in the NT. Let me give some examples, first with the dative for the recipient of the revelation:

Mat 11:25 ἔκρυψας ταῦτα ἀπὸ σοφῶν καὶ συνετῶν καὶ ἀπεκάλυψας αὐτὰ νηπίοις You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and you have revealed them to “small children”.

Mat 16:17: σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα οὐκ ἀπεκάλυψέν σοι flesh and blood did not reveal this to you.

John 7:4 φανέρωσον σεαυτὸν τῷ κόσμῳ Show yourself to the world.

1 Cor 2:10 ἡμῖν δὲ ἀπεκάλυψεν ὁ θεὸς διὰ τοῦ πνεύματος But God has revealed (it) to US through the Spirit.

The dative use is the most common, even in the NT, but there are a few cases where prepositions are used to express the recipient of the revelation. I have found εἰς in two places:

Rom 8:18 πρὸς τὴν μέλλουσαν δόξαν ἀποκαλυφθῆναι εἰς ἡμᾶς (compared) to the coming glory to be revealed to/towards us.

2 Cor 11:6 ἀλλ᾽ ἐν παντὶ φανερώσαντες ἐν πᾶσιν εἰς ὑμᾶς But in every way having shown this to/towards you in everything (we did).

There are also a few places where ἐν seems to be used to indicate the recipient of the revelation:

Rom 1:19 τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ φανερόν ἐστιν ἐν αὐτοῖς What can be known about God is clear (has been shown) to them. (The use of the adjective rather than verb may be the reason for the preposition.)

Gal 1:16 ἀποκαλύψαι τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἐν ἐμοί He revealed his Son to me (not in me.)

1 John 4:9 ἐν τούτῳ ἐφανερώθη ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν ἡμῖν In this has the love of God been revealed to us.

Since the dative is by far the most common way to indicate the recipient, the instances with ἐν are disputed, and some people prefer to understand ἐν in a different way. For 1 John 4:9 It is possible that the use of ἐν indicates more than just a recipient. One may argue that the love of God is not only revealed to us, but also among us and is to be seen in us, in what we do. For Gal 1:16 I would say that the context points to Paul's experience on the Damascus road, and this suggests that Paul is thinking of God revealing Jesus to him. Louw and Nida list a number of other places apart from Gal 1:16 (but with other verbs) where ἐν is used to indicate the experiencer or recipient.

One of the most common and elusive uses of "in" by Paul is found in the phrase ἐν Χριστῷ (in Christ).

The BDF grammar (§219 (4)) says in frustration: "The phrase ἐν Χριστῷ (κυρίῳ), which is copiously appended by Paul to the most varied concepts, utterly defies definite interpretation." So, I would be well advised to say no more. I won't heed the advice, though, and comment anyway, first more generally about ἐν.

In its basic locative sense ἐν can refer to position inside something in a 3-dimensional space or at/on something in a 2-dimentional space. English normally uses "in" for the first and "on" for the second. (The Greek ἐπί is also used for the 2-dimentional space).

In an extended locative sense ἐν is used to point to the context or environment of a state or activity (often called "sphere"), and it can also indicate a *reference* for a predicate or modifier (Lk 16:10; 2Co 10:3; Eph 2:4; 1Pe 4:11).

Sometimes ἐν can refer to the target (or goal, direction), although the more usual preposition for this is εἰς. I made some comments on this in connection with πιστεύω in another article: *Genitives and the semantics of love and faith.*

Another common function of ἐν is temporal, either as time-when or the situation/circumstances in which something happens (English can do the same: in sickness and in health).

A common function of ἐν is "means", which can be either an *instrument* or a *method* used by an agent to accomplish something. Closely related to "means" is "manner". They both answer the question "How?"

Turning to the phrase ἐν Χριστῷ (κυρίῳ/Ἰησοῦ), Pam Bendor-Samuel[2] says (page 159): "It is Paul's short-hand formula, a formula which encapsulates and summarises the unique, close, living, dependent relationship between the believer and Christ, with all the implications which flow from that." She then suggests the three main semantic roles behind the preposition to be *sphere*, *agency* and *target* (p 166.) Concerning "sphere" she says: "The term 'Sphere' is itself figurative, and implies context, framework, environment, setting, conditioning, hence also description, reference, and even definition."

When she discusses ἐν Χριστῷ in the section about *sphere* the focus is on the *state* of being in a close relationship with Christ. The GNB often translates it as "in union with Christ".

In the section about *agency* she notes that the more usual preposition for this is διά, but Paul often uses ἐν Χριστῷ in the sense of agency. In that sense ἐν Χριστῷ can be understood as a shorthand expression for "by way of or as a result of what Christ has done." In such contexts, the English "through" or "by way of" may be the most appropriate translation, but "because of (what) Christ (has done)" is also a possibility.

Sometimes the focus is on the state that is a result of what Christ has done and then it shows the close, dependent relationship between Christians and Christ. To be "in Christ" is almost the same as being a Christian. In other words, it is often difficult do decide whether the focus is on the agency of Christ in bringing about the state or whether the focus is on the resultant state. It is quite possible that Paul did not intend to make such a distinction.

Pam B-S. also discusses the less common semantic role of *target*. She says: "Christ is the object of faith, hope and joy for the believer. The role of Target is commonly expressed by the prepositions εἰς and ἐπί." And she continues: "Target is also a role of ἐν Χριστῷ, though much less frequently than the other two." She lists the following examples, but also notes that there is not agreement about the function of the preposition in several of these: John 3:15; Gal 3:26; Eph 1:15; Col 1:4; 1 Tim 3:13; 2 Tim 3:15. There are other examples of ἐν showing target (or direction) with a different noun than Χριστῷ, for instance: Mark 1:15; 1 Cor 2:5; Rom 3:25.

Let us look at some of these ἐν phrases in Galatians:

1:13 you have heard of my previous way of life *in Judaism* – temporal, circumstantial, my life as a Jew.

1:22 churches of Judea that are *in Christ* – remembering that ἐκκλησία is a general word for assembly, the phrase ”in Christ” indicates the sphere or more specifically specification. It describes these assemblies as Christian assemblies.

1:24 And they glorified God *in me* (KJV) – they praised God for me. The ἐν indicates “with reference to” or “with respect to”, but there is a metonymy, where ”me” stands for what happened to me or what Jesus accomplished in me. L&N calls it ”with regard to (specification)”. NIV says: ”they praised God because of me” and God's Word says: ”they praised God for what had happened to me.”

2:4 the freedom we have *in Christ Jesus* (NIV) – both agency and sphere may be seen here. The freedom has come about through what Christ did, and we are now in the state of being free. GNB says ”the freedom we have through our union with Christ Jesus.” CEV says ”the freedom that Christ Jesus had given us.”

2:17 we seek to be justified *in Christ* (NIV), we seek to be justified *by Christ* (KJV) – It is the same idea of both agency and state: through what Christ did and the resultant state of being united with him (because of our faith in him) we are justified. The concept of faith is implicit and made explicit by the NLT: “seek to be made right with God through faith in Christ.”

2:20 The life I live *in the body*, I live *in faith* in the Son of God – temporal, circumstantial and descriptive of my current life.

3:8 *In thee* shall all nations be blessed (KJV) – by means of you and through you. Instrument and method.

3:11 no one is justified before God *by (ἐν) the law* – same as above: instrument and method.

3:16 You are all sons of God through faith *in Christ Jesus* – the target or direction of faith, although some prefer to take it as agency+state. (NIV2011 changed the old NIV here.)

4:14 And my/your temptation which was *in my flesh* ye despised not (KJV) – in reference to my bodily condition, which could have tempted you to despise me.

4:20 I am perplexed *about (ἐν) you* – with regard to you.

5:10 I have confidence in (εἰς) you *through (ἐν) the Lord* (KJV) – probably agency + state, through what Jesus has done for you, you are now in union with him, and that gives me confidence in you that you will come to agree with me. However, some prefer to take this as describing Paul’s confidence in himself and his authority as an apostle.

I hope to have shown that translation is no simple matter. If a translator thinks that the Greek *ἐν* simply means “in” and can always by translated in that way, they will often obscure the intended meaning.

NOTES

1. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, Eds. (1988). Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains. United Bible Societies. ↩
2. https://www.sil.org/resources/archives/9375 ↩