

As It Is Written

Being "in Christ" (ἐν Χριστῷ) is one of St. Paul's signature phrases. The NRSV version of Romans 8:1 is a good example:

*"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are **in Christ** Jesus"*

But let's think about this more deeply. What does it mean to be 'in' someone? If I say, "*there is, therefore, no condemnation for those who are in Robert, our team Manager*", how are we to interpret this?

It turns out that the Greek preposition 'en' (ἐν) commonly translated as 'in' is rather slippery. Like its English translation, 'en' is what linguists call a 'light' preposition, that is, a preposition that usually has little or no meaning on its own. Such prepositions ('in', 'on', 'about', 'with', 'for', and so on) are notoriously idiosyncratic. We should not be surprised, therefore, to discover that in Romans 8:1, the preposition *en* presents a significant challenge to translators. Indeed, one has but to consult most any Greek lexicon to understand the difficulty in translating what we know to be the preposition used with the widest variety of¹ meanings¹.

Some examples in English help demonstrate the range of translation difficulties presented by prepositions.

- While there's air "in an airplane", the people breathing that air are "on the airplane".
- Books are written 'on' a computer but 'with' pencil and paper.

At the same time, some prepositions are optional or implicitly understood:

- "He's lived [in] more places than I know".
- "I've been working here [for] three years."

In these and other examples, we note the inconsistency of definition: "in" meaning

¹ As well as being the most common preposition in the New Testament (F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd Ed. University of Chicago Press, 1979, p. 64).

“on” and vice versa.

And here we encounter the crux of the problem with Romans 8:1, and many other instances of "in Christ". Its use is so vague yet so frequent that we are lulled into believing we know what it means. In other words, we've become so accustomed to the phrase "in Christ" that we often read it without thinking critically. We are fooled because, having encountered the phrase so frequently, our familiarity has bred certainty, but not consistency. If we were to ask ten people what "in Christ" means, we would likely get different answers.

Translators already know that the Greek ἐν should not always be translated as the English 'in'. For example, verses abound in which ἐν is rendered as a preposition other than 'in'. For example, in NSRV translation of I Corinthians 4:21, we find,

*"What would you prefer? Am I to come to you **with [ἐν]** a stick, or **with [ἐν]** love...?"*

The context of this verse requires that we translate "ἐν stick" as "with a stick" instead of the nonsensical "in a stick." Fortunately, almost all translations get this verse right. The translators have done their job and found the right preposition in English. Of course, there are certainly instances in which no obvious choice for ἐν presents itself. Romans 8:1 may well be such an instance? What do you think? Given the context of the verse, which translation makes more sense to you?

*"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are **in** Christ Jesus"*

Or

*"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are **with** Christ Jesus"*

Why or why not?

Now, go and study