

'To Be Sin On Our Behalf'

Paul's Ontological and Medical Understanding of Atonement and Salvation

A Brief Analysis of 2 Corinthians 5:21

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'He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.' Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:21 makes a very compressed statement, which by anyone's account, is a shorthand. We have to unpack the shorthand.

In a nutshell, I believe that incarnation and atonement are linked, through Jesus' human obedience and the effect that his obedience had on his human nature. I.e. Jesus infused the Holy Spirit into every area of his humanity, 'condemned sin in his own flesh' (Rom.8:3), and bent human nature back into shape by his perfect faithfulness to the Father. And I think Paul in 2 Cor.5:21 is referring to the incarnation, when Jesus took on 'sinful flesh' in order to put to death 'the old self' (Rom.6:6) in his moment-by-moment choices, and ultimately at his death. Five main areas of support for that:

First, patristic writers regularly grouped all the 'he became' passages together to refer to Jesus' conception in the womb of Mary as human: He 'became human/a servant' (Phil.2:7 – 8); 'flesh' (Jn.1:14); 'a curse' (Gal.3:13); 'sin' (2 Cor.5:21); and 'poor' (2 Cor.8:9). The idea here is that 'he became sin' per se refers to the 'moment' of incarnation, albeit with Jesus' whole life, death, and resurrection in view. The early Christians seem to perceive in the apostle Paul an elision: 'sin' in the case of 2 Cor.5:21 links us to 'sinful flesh' in Rom.8:3, which was part of Paul's longer explanation of his view of humanity/himself. Paul could distinguish between the 'I myself' in Romans 7:14 – 25 and the 'sin which indwells,' that is, 'the flesh.' So for the early Christians, it seems like the phrase, 'he became sin' is a shorthand way of saying, 'he became incarnate in sinful human flesh.' The phrase 'he became sin' did not refer to Jesus' experience on the cross in isolation from him taking on fallen humanity for us, to cleanse it.

Second, from an exegetical framework, at the very least 'he became sin' in 2 Cor 5:21 and 'he became poor' in 8:9 need to be coordinated, because they occur in the same letter. The latter refers to the incarnation. So why would the former not refer to the incarnation as well? Michael Gorman has a very good article about this: 'Paul's Corporate, Cruciform, Missional Theosis in 2 Corinthians,' edited by Thate, Vanhoozer, and Campbell in their book, "In Christ" in Paul.

Third, 2 Cor.3 – 6 needs to be considered together when we are coordinating our human experience and Jesus' human experience. There are temple-glory motifs and progression-from-inside-to-outside motifs, where what is within us progressively is revealed outside us. What is written on our hearts eventually shows in our lives (ch.3). Our faces will eventually bear the light of God's glory from within (ch.3). Our clay pot human nature will eventually show forth the treasure of Christ within us (ch.4). The Spirit within us, which makes us temples of God, will eventually show forth through us (ch.6). Sandwiched within that sequence is Paul's statement about Jesus' humanity from his humble incarnation to his present glorified state. 'We have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know him in this way no longer.' (5:16) The progression we hope for in ourselves – Jesus has already accomplished.

Fourth, the word 'righteousness.' 'Righteousness' means 'covenant keeping,' whether we are using the term to refer to God or an Israelite. That is especially true in 2 Cor.5:21, where we become the 'righteousness of God in him.' That refers to the quality of our lives, as we participate in Jesus' quality of human life. It is especially linked up with 'circumcision of the heart,' which was commanded within the Sinai covenant (Dt.10:16), never fully accomplished by Israel through their own obedience, but fully accomplished by Jesus as perhaps 'the criterion' for emerging on the other side of Israel's exile (Dt.30:6). If Jesus was fully 'righteous,' it was because he was fully faithful to the Father in every command, and fully fixed the internal problem of sinfulness within human nature: He cut something away from his human nature. This is what we participate in, in him. The word 'righteousness' does not mean 'God's retributive punishment which he had to pour out on someone, in order to satisfy His offended sense of holiness.' If it did, 'we might become the righteousness of God in him' would make no sense. 'Righteousness' in 2

Cor.5:21 therefore has in view Jesus' human faithfulness on our behalf, from birth to death and resurrection and ascension as he presented himself to the Father on behalf of all.

Fifth, the word 'reconciliation.' God reconciled the world to himself, in and through Christ (2 Cor.5:17 – 19) because Jesus was a 'new Adam' and all creation is implicated by him because it belongs to him. God did not reconcile Himself to the world, which is what is required if God exhausted his retributive justice so that He could continue tolerating the world. Rather, the atoning act has to do with the human agency of Jesus, gathering up his human nature on behalf of everyone else, and even the rest of creation, and adjusting it, fixing it, correcting it, purifying it, for the Father, and for everyone to participate in.

This reading of 2 Cor.5:21 makes more sense of why Paul would be stressing how the 'tablets of human hearts' needed the writing of the Spirit on them, which has Jeremiah 31:31 – 34 behind it. Jeremiah longed to see the day when the Jerusalem Temple would be no more, and instead the human heart would contain the writing of the law of God on it, as opposed to the writing of sin (Jer.17:1 – 10), and as opposed to God writing only on stone tablets. Jeremiah therefore saw the new covenant as involving a new human temple of God, where God dwelled in us. Thus, human nature needed to be physically changed. Paul knew this. Paul was already working from an OT perspective that 'sin' has a physical root in corrupted human nature. This is why Paul gets so excited that human nature is being restored to what God always meant it to be: a vessel for the glory of God (2 Cor.3), although we are earthen jars, we bear a great treasure that shines out through us (2 Cor.4), and eventually our physical bodies too will be made like the resurrected Jesus' body (2 Cor.5). If Paul is working consistently with an ontological-relational category of thought throughout 2 Cor.3 – 6, then it is most natural to see this also in 2 Cor.5:21.