

## Incarnation and Atonement in 2 Corinthians: An 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.’

In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul makes a very compressed statement, which by anyone’s account, is a shorthand. We have to unpack the shorthand. I will do so with special attention to what Paul is saying about the atonement.

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’ and ‘became a servant’ (Phil.2:7 – 8); ‘he became flesh’ (Jn.1:14); ‘he became a curse’ (Gal.3:13); ‘he became sin’ (2 Cor.5:21); and ‘he became 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.

Example #1: Athanasius of Alexandria (298 – 373 AD) discusses many relevant passages in chapters 40 – 45, especially expounding on John 1:14 and Philippians 2:5 – 11 as key texts under debate. In this section, he says:

‘...the Lord who supplies the grace has become a man like us, He on the other hand, the Savior, humbled Himself in taking ‘our body of humiliation’ [Philippians 3:21], and took a servant’s form, putting on *that flesh which was enslaved to sin*. And He indeed has gained nothing from us for His own promotion...’<sup>1</sup>

Athanasius makes a connection between our body and Jesus’ body, identifying ‘our body of humiliation’ as identical with Jesus’ body, which was composed of ‘that flesh which was enslaved to sin.’ The only way this enslavement to sin could be broken, and human nature liberated and saved, was from within. The later Cappadocian language distinguishing nature and personhood was yet to be developed, but Athanasius anticipates it through his logic. He shows that that which defined or affected Jesus’ human nature did not necessarily transfer ‘up’ to his personhood. Hence, Jesus could bear a fallen human nature, and yet not be personally guilty of committing any sin.

Then, Athanasius, in a lengthy passage, links several passages of Scripture to describe the significance of Jesus taking ‘sinful’ and ‘cursed’ human flesh. God’s condemnation fell on the sinful flesh, or rather the sin in the flesh, of Jesus. He links Hebrews 2:14 – 15 and Romans 8:3 – 4 to the compacted references to Isaiah 53, 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Galatians 3:13. Athanasius moves from speaking of Jesus’ body as ‘mortal’ for the sake of sharing in our death (Heb.2:14 – 15) to emerge in his resurrection as the victor over death (1 Cor.15:21), to explaining that Jesus’ mortal body was composed of ‘sinful flesh’ so he could condemn the sin in his flesh (Rom.8:3 – 4). Mention of the word ‘condemn’ in Romans 8:3 appears to make Athanasius immediately think of John 3:17, where the apostle John explains that the focal target of God’s condemnation in and through Christ was not ‘the world.’ Rather, the whole point of the incarnation of the Word was so that ‘the world through him might be saved.’ This corroborates Athanasius’ quotation of Romans 8:3 – 4. Here is the passage:

‘To give a witness then, and for our sakes to undergo death, to raise man up and destroy the works of the devil, the Savior came, and this is the reason of His incarnate presence. For otherwise a resurrection had not been, unless there had been death; and how had death been, unless He had had a mortal body? This the Apostle, learning from Him, thus sets forth, ‘Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same; that through death He might bring to nought him that had the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage [Hebrews 2:14 – 15].’ And, ‘Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead [1 Corinthians 15:21].’ And again, ‘For what the Law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God, sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh; that the ordinance of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit [Romans 8:3 – 4].’ And John says, ‘For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the

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<sup>1</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.43, emphasis mine

world, but that the world through Him might be saved [John 3:17].’ ... For as by receiving our infirmities, He is said to be infirm Himself, though not Himself infirm, for He is the Power of God, and *He became sin for us* [2 Corinthians 5:21] and a curse [Galatians 3:13], though not having sinned Himself, but because He Himself bare our sins and our curse, so, by creating us in Him, let Him say, ‘He created me for the works,’ though not Himself a creature.’<sup>2</sup>

The dense references to the infirmity language of Isaiah 53:4/Matthew 8:17, the sin language of 2 Corinthians 5:21, and curse language of Galatians 3:13 at the end of this paragraph are extremely important. All of them, for Athanasius, are biblical categories of human fallen experience. Athanasius coordinates all of them not to Jesus’ death but to his incarnation. In his third *Discourse*, he quotes Isaiah explicitly, as well as attributes the term ‘infirmity’ to the bearing of sinful flesh, from conception to death:

‘And the Word *bore the infirmities of the flesh*, as His own, for His was the flesh; and the flesh ministered to the works of the Godhead, because the Godhead was in it, for the body was God’s. And well has the Prophet said ‘*carried* [Isaiah 53:4];’ and has not said, ‘He remedied our infirmities,’ lest, as being external to the body, and only healing it, as He has always done, He should leave men subject still to death; but *He carries our infirmities*, and He Himself *bears* our sins, that it might be shown that *He has become man for us*, and that the body which in Him bore them, was His own body; and, while He received no hurt Himself by ‘bearing our sins in His body on the tree,’ as Peter speaks, we men were redeemed from our own affections, and were filled with the righteousness of the Word.’<sup>3</sup>

Example #2: Gregory of Nazianzus (329 – 389 AD), one of only three church leaders the Eastern Orthodox tradition labels ‘the theologian,’ also quotes Galatians 3:13 in reference to the incarnation. He does this in *Oration* 2.55 and *Oration* 30.5 – 6. Most notably, however, in *Epistle* 101.7, ‘to Cleodionus the Priest Against Apollinarius,’ Gregory rejects Apollinarius’ attempt to replace Jesus’ human mind with the Logos. Apollinarius made this theological move in order to avoid claiming Christ was sinful, since it was believed that sin resides in the mind or soul. Gregory, however, argued that such a move compromised Jesus’ true humanity, thus making it impossible for him to secure redemption for the whole human being:

‘For that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved. If only half Adam fell, then that which Christ assumes and saves may be half also; but if the whole of his nature fell, it must be united to the whole nature of Him that was begotten, and so be saved as a whole... Just as he was called a curse for the sake of our salvation, who cancels my curse, and *was called sin*, who takes away the sin of the world, and instead of the old Adam is made a new Adam – in the same way he makes my rebellion his own as Head of the whole Body.’<sup>4</sup>

The early Christians seem to perceive in the apostle Paul an elision: ‘sin’ in the case of 2 Corinthians 5:21 links us to ‘sinful flesh’ in Romans 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.’ John seems to also select this language and meaning, in John 1:14 and 3:5. So for the early Christians, it seems like the phrase, ‘he became sin’ (2 Cor.5:21) is a shorthand way of saying, at minimum, ‘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.

Of course, the apostles and church tradition believed Jesus never sinned by action or omission. This conviction was strengthened not only by the apostolic writings (e.g. Heb.4:15), but also by the dogmatic creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon: Nicaea because the *eternal Son* was said to have *become* human from conception in the Virgin Mary, and Chalcedon indirectly by the additional clarity that the divine person (*hypostasis*) of the Son did not take on a human *hypostasis*; thus Jesus could be *personally* sinless, even though he enhypostasized ‘sinful flesh.’

Second, from a biblical-exegetical framework, the phrase ‘he became sin’ in 2 Cor 5:21 must be situated within 2 Cor.3 – 6 with a view to coordinating our human experience and Jesus’ human experience. There are temple-glory

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<sup>2</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.55

<sup>3</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 3.31, emphasis mine

<sup>4</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistle* 101.7, emphasis mine

motifs and progression-from-inside-to-outside motifs, where what is within us is revealed progressively outside us. What is written on our hearts eventually shows in our lives (3:3, 6). Our faces will eventually bear the light of God's glory from within (3:12 – 18). The God who created light shone light in our hearts (4:6) so that the treasure of Christ within us will show forth through our clay pot human nature (4:7), in the expression of a life of love for others, even suffering for others (4:8 – 12). The Spirit within us, which makes us temples of God, will eventually show forth through us (6:16 – 18). 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) Some transition has happened, even to the human nature of Jesus. The progression we hope for in ourselves – Jesus has already accomplished. This strengthens the conclusion that Paul is thinking of our participation in Christ. But what we participate in by progression, Jesus achieved first from conception, life and ministry, death, and resurrection.

This reading of 2 Corinthians 5:21 makes more sense of why Paul would be linking Exodus 34:29 – 35 and Jeremiah 31:31 – 34. The Pentateuch itself longed to see the day when all Israel would 'ascend the mountain' into God's presence, the sanctuary would be irrelevant, and the human heart – instead of stone tablets – would contain the writing of God's law on it. The following literary arrangement of the Pentateuch supports this reading:

1. God's Spirit 'hovers' as God creates heaven and earth; God places humanity in a garden land, but they leave in exile and with a corruption in human nature (Gen.6:5 – 6; 8:21); origin of all nations: Gen.1:1 – 11:26
2. Covenant inaugurated with Abraham – blessings and curses: Gen.11:27 – 12:8
3. God's faithfulness to the chosen family: Gen.12:9 – 50:26
  4. Deliverance of Israelites (first generation) from Egypt, arrival at Sinai: Ex.1:1 – 18:27
    5. Covenant Inaugurated, Broken, Re-Asserted: Ex.19:1 – 24:11
      - a. God calls Israel to meet Him on the mountain on the third day: Ex.19:1 – 15
      - b. Israel's failure – to come up the mountain: Ex.19:16 – 23
      - c. God resumes with Moses and Aaron: Ex.19:24 – 25
      - d. God gives Israel the Ten Commandments: Ex.20:1 – 17
      - e. Israel's failure – Israel afraid of God's voice: Ex.20:18 – 20
      - f. God gives all Israel 49 laws (7x7): Ex.20:21 – 23:19
      - g. God and Israel agree to a covenant, and Moses, Aaron, and 70 elders see God, and eat and drink in His presence: Ex.23:20 – 24:11
    6. Tabernacle instructions given to house the **veiled** presence of God: Ex.24:12 – 31:11
      7. God commands Israel to observe the Sabbath to imitate God's original creation Sabbath, and writes the covenant on stone tablets: Ex.31:12 – 18
      8. Covenant broken; Israel worships Aaron's golden calves: Ex.32:1 – 29
        9. Moses mediates for Israel, sees God's glory, restores the covenant: Ex.32:30 – 33:23
      - 8'. Covenant affirmed: Ex.34:1 – 17
      - 7'. God commands Israel to observe three annual feasts and writes the covenant on stone tablets again; Moses is partially purified and transfigured but **veils** his face as a sign of judgment, hiding God's glory from the nation: Ex.34:18 – 35
    - 6'. Tabernacle built to instructions; presence of God comes **veiled**: Ex.35:1 – 40:38
      - 5'. Covenant Mediation Inaugurated, Covenant Broken, Re-Asserted: Lev.1:1 – 27:34
        - a. God calls Israel to approach Him, gives priests a Code for sacrifices: Lev.1:1 – 9:24
        - b. Priests' failure – two of Aaron's sons offer strange fire, are consumed: Lev.10:1 – 7
        - c. God resumes with Aaron's two other sons: Lev.10:8 – 20
        - d. God gives Israel's priests a Priestly Code for the community: Lev.11:1 – 16:34
        - e. Israel's failure – God addresses worship of goat idols: Lev.17:1 – 9 (cf. Acts 7:42 – 43)
        - f. God gives all Israel a Holiness Code: Lev.17:10 – 25:55
        - g. God and Israel agree to a covenant: Lev.26:1 – 27:34
  - 4'. Departure from Sinai, deliverance of Israelites (second generation) from sins (of the first generation): Num.1:1 – 36:13
    - 3'. God's faithfulness forms the basis for Moses' exhortation: Dt.1:1 – 26:19
2. Covenant offered to Israel – blessings and curses: Dt.27:1 – 29:29
- 1'. God must circumcise human hearts after Israel's exile (30:6); 'heaven' and 'earth' (32:1) witness destiny of Israel and nations; God's Spirit 'hovers' (32:11) over Israel as they enter garden land: Dt.30:1 – 34:12

Paul recognized from the Pentateuch that Israel initially failed to approach God on Mount Sinai to make the covenant. Exodus 19:13 reads in the Jerusalem Bible, 'When the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they shall come up *on* the mountain,' not '*to* the mountain' as they were already encamped around the base of the mountain; this is confirmed by Moses when he reflects on their failure by saying, 'For you were afraid because of the fire and did not

go up the mountain' (Dt.5:5).<sup>5</sup> Soon after they agreed to the covenant (Ex.24:1 – 11), Israel failed again by turning to worship the golden calf.

In response, God made the covenant with Moses, as mediator for Israel. Moses' mediation allows for the presence of God to remain with Israel, but in a veiled way. Without Moses, God would simply give up on the nation and start over with Moses. The impact of Moses' choices on his relationship with God was: He had the intimacy of seeing God's glory 'face to face' (Ex.33:11) yet not quite 'face to face' (Ex.33:20 – 23). The corresponding impact of Moses' choices on his own human nature was: purification and transfiguration. As God's face shone with the glory of the divine light, so also Moses' face shone with the glory of the divine light, to a lesser degree (Ex.34:29 – 35). Moses became 'like' God. This is the closest indication of anyone bearing the 'likeness' of God, which was God's original intention from Genesis 1:26 – 28.

As Moses made his ascent up Mount Sinai through divine fire (Ex.19:20), and trusted in God to do so, he was purified to some degree, signified by his face reflecting divine light. Therefore, the approach of Israel and her priests annually re-enacted the ascent, where the high priest enters the holy of holies as Moses ascended to the top of the mountain, to re-enact the covenant with God on behalf of Israel. Just as Moses passed through the divine fire, the worshipers at the sanctuary 'passed through' the fire in the bronze altar (Ex.27:1 – 8). Anyone who touched the bronze altar was 'holy' or 'purified' to some degree (Ex.29:37). The bronze laver of washing also signified 'purification,' of course (Ex.30:17 – 21). Just as Moses was purified, so the worshipers were ritually and symbolically 'purified' especially through the sin offering (Lev.4); the animal was partitioned; and the organs which deal with toxins and waste (kidneys, liver, intestinal fat) were burned and this act alone was said to 'soothe' God (Lev.4:31), reflecting God's interest in obtaining human partnership in purifying their own humanity. This purification culminated in the Day of Atonement when the high priest alone entered the holy of holies and saw God, as Moses alone ascended the peak of Mount Sinai and saw God 'face to face.' On the Day of Atonement, the cleansing of the land began, and if it was a jubilee year, the jubilee was announced on the Day of Atonement (Lev.25), so the cleansing brought about renewal of the garden-land inheritance, debt-forgiveness, and liberation from servitude. This means that the cycle of sacrifices were for purification of the worshiper, not the appeasement of God's retributive justice. Through the sanctuary and sacrifices, God was acting like a dialysis machine, taking into Himself impurities, and giving back purified life (blood).

God wanted 'a Temple people', a people with whom He talked face to face. He did not want 'a people with a Temple.' God veiled His glory via the Tabernacle as a concession. And to also express this, Moses veiled his face because his face shone with the glory of God to communicate to Israel that God was also veiling Himself among them. Israel does not experience God 'face to face' as Moses did. The Tabernacle structure became God's divine accommodation to Israel's repeated failures. His original command was to meet Him on the mountain, as Moses did, face to face (in a manner of speaking). The mediation of Moses is central to the Pentateuch, and to the Sinai covenant. In fact, the progressive growth of mediation is what stabilizes the covenant between God and Israel, for Moses was still mortal and institutions had to be set up to stabilize the covenant for Israel. However, even Moses dies before entering the promised land and enjoying God's sabbath rest, perhaps symbolic that the Law (represented by Moses) cannot bring one into rest fully (Heb.4:8 – 11).

Jeremiah also seemed to perceive this same message from the Pentateuch. He lamented the degree to which the Israelites of his generation had written on their hearts, not the law of God, but the writing of sin (Jer.17:1 – 10). The Proverbs also admonished people to write God's law on the heart (Pr.3:3; 7:3) as one of many expressions of internalizing God's commandments. Jeremiah used this image as well to signify that the 'tablets of the human heart' would take the place of the broken tablets of stone contained in the Temple (Ex.32:15 – 19; 34:1 – 4, 27 – 28). Jeremiah therefore saw the new covenant as being superior to the Sinai covenant in the sense of deepening two interrelated and probably synonymous elements: (1) a new human temple of God, where God dwelled in us, and (2) God inscribing a profound internal change upon the human heart, which the Sinai covenant itself did not achieve.

Thus, as Paul read both the Pentateuch and Jeremiah, he could say that the Sinai covenant was written on tablets of stone, and brought condemnation and death.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992)

<sup>6</sup> For further literary analysis of the Pentateuch showing that the Sinai covenant brought about 'death' for the Israelites, see Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016 second edition), p.263 – 267

Third, the phrase 'he became sin' in 2 Corinthians 5:21 and the phrase 'he became poor' in 8:9 need to be coordinated, because they occur in the same letter. The latter, 'he became poor,' refers fairly clearly to the incarnation.<sup>7</sup> Michael J. Gorman reminds us that both 2 Cor.5:21 and 8:9 are 'interchange' or 'exchange' texts. 'He became... that we might become...' This similarity of structure strengthens the argument.

Fourth, 'that we might become the righteousness of God' is symmetrical to the progression of Jesus from incarnate in sinful flesh, all the way to his resurrection and ascension. The word 'righteousness' cannot mean, as Protestant penal substitution advocates claim, 'God's retributive punishment which he had to pour out on someone, in order to satisfy His offended sense of holiness.' If it did, the phrase, 'we might become the righteousness of God in him' would make no sense. The word 'righteousness' – when referring to a human being – means either 'willingness to participate in the plan of God' in a general sense, or 'Sinai covenant keeping' in a particular sense with reference to Israel under the Sinai covenant. 'Righteousness' refers to the lived quality of our lives, as we participate in Jesus' quality of human life.

Moreover, 'righteousness' is linked up with 'circumcision of the heart,' which was commanded within the Sinai covenant (Dt.10:16), and never fully accomplished by Israel through their own obedience. God promised to enact this internal transformation on the other side of Israel's exile (Dt.30:6). If Jesus was fully 'righteous' as an Israelite, 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 sinfulness away from his human nature. Therefore, '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.

Gorman also notes that we cannot 'become righteous' unless we are 'in Christ.' He reasons this out because of the phrase 'in Him' which Paul provides at the end of 5:21.

'This suggests, then, that the purpose of Christ's death was not merely to effect a *status* change in people but to effect an *existential* change among those who have entered the realm of Christ.'<sup>8</sup>

Defenders of penal substitutionary atonement would surely say that the status change is precisely what leads to the existential change, or makes it possible. However, Paul's use of the phrase 'that we might *become* the righteousness of God' indicates that 'righteousness' for Paul is *not* about an imputed legal status which operates like a legal fiction in the mind of God and hovering over the heads of the believers. Richard B. Hays says that Paul:

'does not say "that we might *know about* the righteousness of God," nor "that we might *believe* in the righteousness of God," nor even "that we might *receive* the righteousness of God." Instead, the church is to *become* the righteousness of God: where the church embodies in its life together the world-reconciling love of Jesus Christ, the new creation is manifest. The church incarnates the righteousness of God.'<sup>9</sup>

Fifth, 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. The directionality of reconciliation is important here. God did not reconcile Himself to the world, which is what is required in penal substitutionary atonement, 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

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<sup>7</sup> This might open the door to even more of the patristic witness to see 2 Cor.8:9 as related to the incarnation. Ambrosiaster says, 'Paul is saying that Christ was made poor because God deigned to be born as man, humbling the power of his might so that he might obtain for men the riches of divinity and thus share in the divine nature, as Peter says' (*Commentary on Paul's Epistles*, cited in Bray, *1 – 2 Corinthians*, 269). Augustine of Hippo says, 'When he assumed our mortality and overcame death, he manifested himself in poverty, but he promised riches though they might be deferred.... To make us worthy of this perfect gift, he [Christ], equal to the Father in the form of God, became like to us in the form of a servant and refashions us into the likeness of God' (*Feast of the Nativity* 194.3)

<sup>8</sup> Michael J. Gorman, 'Paul's Corporate, Cruciform, Missional Theosis in 2 Corinthians,' edited by Michael J. Thate, Kevin Vanhoozer, and Constantine R. Campbell, *"In Christ" in Paul: Explorations in Paul's Theology of Union and Participation* (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), p.195

<sup>9</sup> Michael J. Gorman, p.196 citing Hays, *Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1996), p.24

even the rest of creation, and adjusting it, fixing it, correcting it, purifying it, for the Father, and for everyone to participate in.

### **Conclusion**

In a nutshell, then, I affirm along with Athanasius of Alexandria and Gregory of Nazianzus that incarnation and atonement are linked, through Jesus' human obedience and the effect that his obedience had on his human nature. That is, Jesus pressed 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. Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:21 is referring to the incarnation, when Jesus took on 'sinful flesh' in order to resist every temptation, and eventually put to death 'the old self' (Rom.6:6) in his moment-by-moment choices, and ultimately at his death.