

How Was Jesus “Made” Sin?

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2 Corinthians 5:21 (NASB)

²¹ He made Him who knew no sin *to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*

A verse commonly misinterpreted by cultist is **2 Corinthians 5:21**, where the apostle Paul tells us that God “*made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.* (NASB, *italics* emphasis added).

Based on this verse, for example, the Christadelphians argue that Jesus had to engage on self-redemption before seeking to redeem the rest of humanity: “He himself required a sin offering”; (1) He “saved himself in order to save us.” (2)

Word-Faith leaders take a different-though even more heretical-spin on the verse. Kenneth Copeland, for example, asserts that Jesus “had to give up His righteousness” (3) and “accepted the sin nature of Satan.” (4)

Benny Hinn likewise declares that Jesus “did not take my sin; He became my sin....He became one with the nature of Satan.” (5)

In what follows, I will demonstrate in brief fashion that there are five key hermeneutic principles that disallow such distorted understandings of Christ and His salvific mission.

These principles, which guide our understanding of the apostle Paul’s intended meaning (the only correct meaning), are:

- (1) interpret Bible verses in context;
- (2) *correctly* understand, assess, and draw insights from Old Testament typology;
- (3) interpret verses in accordance with lexical insights gained from the original languages of the Bible;
- (4) interpret Scripture by Scripture, recognizing that *Scripture is its own best interpreter*; and
- (5) interpret difficult verses in light of the clear verses.

1. Interpret Bible Verses in Context.

The immediate context of **2 Corinthians 5:21** centers on reconciliation to God (see [vv. 18-20](#)). The Greek word for reconciliation in these verses, (*katallages*) refers to “the exchange of hostility for a friendly relationship.” (6)

The state of hostility exists because of human sin against a holy God, which, according to the apostle Paul, was dealt with at the cross of Christ ([2 Corinthians 5:14-15](#)).

2 Corinthians 5:14-15 (NASB)

¹⁴ For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died;

¹⁵ and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.

In view of this, the friendly relationship that Adam and Eve lost can now be restored through faith in Christ. The basis of Paul's reconciliatory message is then stated in **verse 21**: God "*made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*"

2. Correctly Understand, Assess, and Draw Insights from Old Testament Typology.

A type is an Old Testament institution, event, person, object, or ceremony that has reality and purpose in biblical history, but that also---by divine design---foreshadows something yet to be revealed. The Passover lamb in the Old Testament (**Exodus 12:21**) was a "type" of Christ, who is Himself the Lamb of God (**John 1:29, 36**).

Exodus 12:21 (NASB)

²¹ Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel and said to them, Go and take for yourselves lambs according to your families, and slay the Passover *lamb*.

John 1:29 (NASB)

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and *said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

John 1:36 (NASB)

³⁶ and he looked at Jesus as He walked, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!"

An understanding of the Passover Lamb in the Old Testament provides significant insight on the concept of substitution. For example, the sacrificial lamb had to be "unblemished" (**Exodus 12:5; Leviticus 4:3, 23, 32**).

Exodus 12:5 (NASB)

⁵ Your lamb shall be an unblemished male a year old; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats.

Leviticus 4:3 (NASB)

³ if the anointed priest sins so as to bring guilt on the people, then let him offer to the LORD a bull without defect as a sin offering for the sin he has committed.

Leviticus 4:23 (NASB)

²³ if his sin which he has committed is made known to him, he shall bring for his offering a goat, a male without defect.

Leviticus 4:32 (NASB)

³² But if he brings a lamb as his offering for a sin offering, he shall bring it, a female without defect.

At the time of the sacrifice, a hand would be laid on the unblemished sacrificial animal to symbolize a transfer of guilt ([Leviticus 4:4](#), [24](#), [33](#)).

Leviticus 4:4 (NASB)

⁴ He shall bring the bull to the doorway of the tent of meeting before the LORD, and he shall lay his hand on the head of the bull and slay the bull before the LORD.

Leviticus 4:24 (NASB)

²⁴ He shall lay his hand on the head of the male goat and slay it in the place where they slay the burnt offering before the LORD; it is a sin offering.

Leviticus 4:33 (NASB)

³³ He shall lay his hand on the head of the sin offering and slay it for a sin offering in the place where they slay the burnt offering.

Notice that the sacrificial lamb did not thereby *actually become* sinful by nature; rather, sin was imputed to the animal and the animal acted as a sacrificial substitute. In like manner, Christ the Lamb of God was utterly unblemished ([1 Peter 1:19](#)), but our sin was imputed to Him and He was our sacrificial substitute on the cross of Calvary. Simply because our sin was *imputed* to Him does not mean He *changed in nature* or *actually became* sinful.

1 Peter 1:19 (NASB)

¹⁹ but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.

3. Interpret Verses in Accordance with Lexical Insights Gained from the Original Languages of the Bible.

In [2 Corinthians 5:21](#), the phrase “on our behalf” (“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf”) derives from the Greek term *huper*. This word can bear a number of nuances, not all of them substitutionary in nature.

As professor **Daniel Wallace** has noted in his *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, however, there are a number of factors that argue in favor of a substitutionary use of the word in New Testament times.

For example, the substitutionary sense of *huper* is found in extra-New Testament Greek literature (see, e.g., **Plato, Republic 590a**; **Xenophon, Anabasis 7.4.9-10**), the Septuagint (e.g., [Deuteronomy 24:16](#); [Isaiah 43:3-4](#)), and in the papyri (e.g., **Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 1281.11-12**; **Tebtunis Papyrus 380.43-44**). (7)

One papyri example relates to a scribe who wrote a document *on behalf of* a person who did not know how to write. In all, Professor Daniel Wallace counts 87 examples from the papyri in which *huper* is used in a substitutionary sense, and this by no means exhausts the extant papyri data. Professor Wallace concludes that “this evidence is overwhelming in favor of treating *huper* as bearing a substitutionary force in the New Testament era.” (8)

The *Friberg Greek Lexicon* likewise affirms that the word is used “with a component of representation or substitution in the place of, for, in the name of, instead of.” (9)

Christ’s death, as the Lamb of God, was “for” (*huper*) us in the sense that it was *on our behalf* ([2 Corinthians 5:21](#)). The word is used in this same *on-behalf-of* sense elsewhere in Scripture. Jesus at the Last Supper said: **This is My body which is given for you**” ([Luke 22:19](#), emphasis added here and in the verses that follow). Likewise in [John 10:15](#) Jesus affirmed, “**I lay down My life for the sheep.**”

Paul exults that “**God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us**” ([Romans 5:8](#); see also [Galatians 3:13](#); [1 Timothy 2:6](#); [Hebrews 2:9](#)).

Galatians 3:13 (NASB)

¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE”—

1 Timothy 2:6 (NASB)

⁶ who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time.

Hebrews 2:9 (NASB)

⁹ But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone.

Jesus “gave Himself for us to redeem us” ([Titus 2:14](#)), “the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God” ([1 Peter 3:18](#), see also [1 Peter 2:21](#)). The idea of substitution richly permeates these verses.

4. Interpret Scripture by Scripture.

Since Scripture is its own best interpreter, we must approach [2 Corinthians 5:21](#) in light of the clear teaching of other verses. While there are quite a number of pertinent theological facts we could derive from other verses that may have relevance for a proper understanding of this verse, for illustration’s sake I cite alone: the *immutability* of Christ.

Scripture reveals that Christ, as God, is unchanging and unchangeable (cf. [Malachi 3:6](#); [James 1:17](#)).

Malachi 3:6 (NASB)

⁶ For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed.

James 1:17 (NASB)

¹⁷ Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.

In [Hebrews 1:12](#) the Father is drawing a contrast between the universe that ages and is passing away, and Jesus who is untouched by the passing of time---speaking of Jesus.

Hebrews 1:12 (NASB)

¹² AND LIKE A MANTLE YOU WILL ROLL THEM UP; LIKE A GARMENT THEY WILL ALSO BE CHANGED. BUT YOU ARE THE SAME, AND YOUR YEARS WILL NOT COME TO AN END."

Hebrews 13:8 (NASB)

⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Whatever else we might conclude from such verses, they certainly prohibit any suggestion that Jesus changed in His essential nature as God, or, more specifically, took on the nature of Satan.

5. Interpret Difficult Verses in Light of the Clear Verses.

Among the more obvious teachings in the clear verses of Scripture is the perpetual sinlessness of Jesus Christ (emphasis is added in the following verses). The writer of Hebrews affirmed that “we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, *yet without sin*” ([Hebrews 4:15](#)).

Jesus was:

Hebrews 7:26 (NASB)

²⁶ For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, **holy, innocent, [and] undefiled**, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens;

He was One:

1 Peter 2:22 (NASB)

²² WHO **COMMITTED NO SIN**, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH;

Jesus' betrayer was remorseful, saying:

Matthew 27:4 (NASB)

⁴ "I have sinned by betraying **innocent blood.**" But they said, "What is that to us? See *to that* yourself!"

A hardened Roman soldier cried out:

Luke 23:47 (NASB)

⁴⁷ Now when the centurion saw what had happened, he *began* praising God, saying, "Certainly **this man was innocent.**"

The apostle Peter affirmed that we are redeemed:

1 Peter 1:18-19 (NASB)

¹⁸ knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers,

¹⁹ but with precious blood, as of a lamb **unblemished and spotless,** the blood of Christ.

John said:

1 John 3:5 (NASB)

⁵ You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and **in Him there is no sin.**

In view of such verses, it is impossible to argue that Jesus' essential nature actually became tainted or corrupted by sin.

The Apostle Paul's Intended Meaning.

Based on the preceding hermeneutic considerations, we cannot help but to conclude that the apostle Paul's intended meaning in **2 Corinthians 5:21** is that Jesus was always without sin *actually*, but at the cross He was made to be sin for us *judicially*. While Jesus never committed a sin *personally*, He was made to be sin for us *substitutionally*. (10)

Just as righteousness that is imputed to Christians in justification is extrinsic to them, so the sin that was imputed to Christ on the cross was extrinsic to Him and never in any sense contaminated His essential nature.

As one Bible expositor put it, "**The innocent was punished voluntarily as if guilty, that the guilty might be gratuitously rewarded as if innocent.**" (11)

In a nutshell, then, the whole redemptive plan is one of *substitution*---and without such substitution there can be no salvation. It was by His utterly selfless sacrificial death on the cross that our sinless Savior---unblemished Lamb of God---paid the penalty for our sins and thereby canceled the debt of sin against us, and as a consequence made possible our reconciliation with God. The redeemed of God can only respond in exultation and praise:

Revelation 1:5-6 (NASB)

⁵ and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood—

⁶ and He has made us *to be* a kingdom, priests to His God and Father—to Him *be* the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

1. Frank Jannaway, ed., *Christadelphians Answers* (Houston: Herald Press, 1920), 24.
2. Ibid., 24
3. Kenneth Copeland, “The Incarnation,” Audiotape #01-0420 (Fort Worth: Kenneth Copeland Ministries, 1985) side 2: Christian Research Institute, Bible Answer Man Program.
4. Kenneth Copeland, “What Happened from the Cross to the Throne,” Audiotape #02-0017 (Fort Worth: Kenneth Copeland Ministries, 1990) side 2: Christian Research Institute, Bible Answer Man Program.
5. Benny Hinn, quoted in Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1993), 155-56.
6. Walter Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., and rev. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 521.
7. Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 383-88.
8. Ibid., 386
9. Timothy Friberg, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, in *Bible Works* software, Bible Works, LLC.
10. See Norma Geisler and Ron Rhodes, *Correcting the Cults* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 244.
11. *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown’s Commentary*, in PC Study Bible software, BibleSoft.