

Practical Hermeneutics: JAPH323

## HOW WAS JESUS "MADE" SIN?

by Ron Rhodes

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A verse commonly misinterpreted by cultists 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, emphasis added). Based on this verse, for example, the Christadelphians argue that Jesus had to engage in *self*-redemption before seeking to redeem the rest of humanity: “He himself required a sin offering”;<sup>1</sup> He “saved himself in order to save us.”<sup>2</sup>

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”<sup>3</sup> and “accepted the sin nature of Satan.”<sup>4</sup> Benny Hinn likewise declares that Jesus “did not take my sin; He became my sin....He became one with the nature of Satan.”<sup>5</sup>

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.”<sup>6</sup> 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 Cor. 5:14–15](#)). 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 ([Exod. 12:21](#)) was a “type” of Christ, who is Himself the Lamb of God ([John 1:29, 36](#)).

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” ([Exod. 12:5](#); [Lev. 4:3, 23, 32](#)). At the time of the sacrifice, a hand would be laid on the unblemished sacrificial animal to symbolize a transfer of guilt ([Lev. 4:4, 24, 33](#)). 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 Pet. 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.

**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., [Deut. 24:16](#); [Isa. 43:3–4](#)), and in the papyri (e.g., Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 1281.11–12; Tebtunis Papyrus 380.43–44).<sup>7</sup> 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, 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. Wallace thus concludes that “this evidence is overwhelming in favor of treating *huper* as bearing a substitutionary force in the NT era.”<sup>8</sup> *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.*”<sup>9</sup>

Christ’s death, as the Lamb of God, was “for” (*huper*) us in the sense that it was *on our behalf* ([2 Cor. 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 thus exults that “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died *for* us” ([Rom. 5:8](#); see also [Gal. 3:13](#); [1 Tim. 2:6](#); [Heb. 2:9](#)). 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 Pet. 3:18](#); see also 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 one alone: the *immutability* of Christ. Scripture reveals that Christ, *as God*, is unchanging and unchangeable (cf. [Mal. 3:6](#); [James 1:17](#)). In [Hebrews 1:12](#) the Father—drawing a contrast between the universe that ages and is passing away, and Jesus who is untouched by the passing of time—says of Jesus, “*You are the same, and your years will not come to an end*” (emphasis added). We are assured of the divine Savior: “Jesus Christ is *the same* yesterday and today and forever” ([Heb. 13:8](#), emphasis added). 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*” ([Heb. 4:15](#)). Jesus was “*holy, innocent, [and] undefiled*” ([Heb. 7:26](#)). He was One “who *committed no sin*, nor was any deceit found in his mouth” ([1 Pet. 2:22](#)). Jesus’ betrayer was remorseful, saying, “I have sinned by betraying *innocent blood*” ([Matt. 27:4](#)). A hardened Roman soldier cried out, “Certainly this man was *innocent*” ([Luke 23:47](#)). The apostle Peter affirmed that we are redeemed not “with perishable things like silver or gold...but with precious blood, as of a lamb *unblemished and spotless*, the blood of Christ” ([1 Pet. 1:18–19](#)). John said, “You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and *in Him there is no sin*” ([1 John 3:5](#)). 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 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*.<sup>10</sup> Just as the *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*.”<sup>11</sup>

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—the unblemished Lamb of God—paid the penalty for our sins and thereby canceled the debt of sin against us, thus wondrously making possible our reconciliation with God. The redeemed of God can only respond in exultation and praise: “To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood...to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever” ([Rev. 1:5–6](#)).

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#### notes

1 Frank Jannaway, ed., *Christadelphian Answers* (Houston: Herald Press, 1920), 24.

2 *Ibid.*, 24.

3 Kenneth Copeland, “The Incarnation,” Audiotape #01-0402 (Fort Worth: Kenneth Copeland Ministries, 1985), side 2.

4 Kenneth Copeland, “What Happened from the Cross to the Throne,” Audiotape #02-0017 (Fort Worth: Kenneth Copeland Ministries, 1990), side 2.

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., 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 BibleWorks software, BibleWorks, LLC.

10 See Norman 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.