

**The Un-creation of Jesus Christ:  
Understanding 2 Corinthians 5:21**

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“For our sake *he made him to be sin* who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”<sup>1</sup> This dramatic statement summarizes Paul’s position on Christ’s atoning work in 2 Corinthians 5. Using similar language in his letter to the Galatians, Paul asserts, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by *becoming a curse* for us...” (Gal. 3:13). Broadly speaking, both verses imply that Christ serves as a representative or substitute on our behalf, “for us.” He somehow takes our sin, our curse, and gives to us righteousness and redemption. Most theologians agree on this general explanation, yet the precise wording of these two verses begs for closer inspection. What exactly does it mean for Christ to *be made sin* or to *become a curse*? A straightforward reading suggests an ontological change in the very being of Christ, the person of the hypostatic union. The vast majority of scholars who remark upon these passages, however, refuse to take Paul’s words literally. They offer explanations for his strong language, but those explanations serve only to explain it away. Although the history of interpretation suggests otherwise, the language of 2 Corinthians 5 and the theological issues at stake in this passage lead to the conclusion that Paul does intend a literal reading. The atoning death of Christ remains, on many levels, a mystery, and problems of comprehension occur using any interpretive lens. In light of the context and syntax of 2 Corinthians 5, however, the most satisfactory reading lies in taking Paul’s words

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:21, NRSV. All other references are to this translation and will be indicated by chapter and verse in parentheses.

as they appear—*God made Christ to be sin*—as a radical statement about the reconciling new creation of God in and through Christ, for us.

Commentators generally agree on what Paul does *not* mean in 2 Corinthians 5:21. As Jack Lewis summarizes, “It is universally agreed that in no real sense could Christ be spoken of as having done sin.”<sup>2</sup> There is too much Scriptural and theological evidence to interpret this verse to mean that Christ, the sinless one, did in fact commit acts of sin during his earthly life. Three other exegetical options also are dismissed easily. First, some scholars have suggested that Paul means here that Christ was made a “sin offering.” Victor Furnish concludes that such a reading, “would import an idea foreign to this context,”<sup>3</sup> and Frank Matera agrees: “since Paul has just spoken of ‘the one who did not know sin,’ it is more likely that *hamartian* means ‘sin’ rather than ‘an offering for sin.’”<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 5 does not employ cultic or priestly language at any other point, which makes it highly unlikely that Paul intends the word “sin” to actually mean “sin offering.” Yet another proposal suggests, “Jesus had come into close relationship with sin by doing what no other religious teachers of the day would do, by making friends of sinners . . . [T]hough He remains sinless, He felt the sins of others as though they were His own.”<sup>5</sup> But the severity of Paul’s language similarly eliminates the idea that this verse merely refers to Christ’s close relationship with sinners. A third option asserts that Paul refers to the fact that “[Christ] had a visible form like human

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<sup>2</sup> Jack P. Lewis, “Significant Issues in the Interpretation of 2 Corinthians 5:14-21,” in *Interpreting 2 Corinthians 5:14-21*, ed. Jack P. Lewis (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 60.

<sup>3</sup> Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1984), 340.

<sup>4</sup> Frank J. Matera, *II Corinthians: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 143.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis, quoting Tasker, 61.

nature which is subject to sin,”<sup>6</sup> and while this statement may be true in and of itself, it fails to account for the dramatic syntax and context of the passage.

The majority of commentators see Christ here as a representative of sinful humanity, as the one God treats like a sinner although He never actually sinned. John Calvin explains, “[Christ] suffered death not because of innocence but because of sin . . . [W]e shall behold the person of a sinner and evildoer represented in Christ, yet from his shining innocence it will at the same time be obvious that he was burdened with another’s sin rather than his own.”<sup>7</sup> Christ remains innocent, yet He bears the burden of our sin. Again, Calvin asserts, “Paul writes that sin was condemned in his flesh when he was made sin for us, that is, the force and the curse of sin were slain in his flesh when he was given as a victim.”<sup>8</sup> Although Calvin places Christ in a closer relationship to sin than those who argue that this verse refers to his association with sinners or his potential to sin, Calvin still qualifies Paul’s statements. It is not that Christ actually becomes sin, but that He appropriates the burden and force of sin through His death.

Modern interpreters agree with Calvin. Furnish explains, “Paul is thinking in a general way of Christ’s identification with sinful humanity.”<sup>9</sup> And Matera writes, “The sense is that God placed Christ in the sinful human condition so that humanity might experience the righteous condition that comes with God’s righteousness,”<sup>10</sup> and, “Christ is regarded and treated by God as a sinner.”<sup>11</sup> Hughes also echoes these thoughts: “God made him sin: that

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 507.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 653.

<sup>9</sup> Furnish, 340.

<sup>10</sup> Matera, 128.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 143.

is to say that God the Father made His innocent incarnate Son the object of His wrath and judgment, for our sakes, with the result that in Christ on the cross the sin of the world is judged and taken away.”<sup>12</sup> Finally, T.F. Torrance reflects on this verse with the comment, “far from sinning himself or being contaminated by what he appropriated for us, Christ triumphed.”<sup>13</sup>

All of these scholars understand Paul’s words as the language of appropriation. Christ does not actually become a sinner, nor does He actually become sin. Rather, He appropriates the weight, curse, and guilt of sin even as He remains the sinless one. The context and syntax of this passage, however, call this interpretation into question. All of these scholars place greater distance between the person of Christ and the reality of sin than Paul’s statement. Torrance most clearly demonstrates this desire to protect Christ from sin when he uses the word “contaminated.” Paul, in contrast, writes that Christ was made sin, without qualification or distance between the two words. None of the commentators quoted above explain what warrants treating this verse (and Galatians 3:13 along with it) in a metaphorical sense rather than as a statement of ontological reality. Their readings do not satisfactorily explain Paul’s language. What is more, the traditional understanding of the way in which Christ appropriates sin and imputes righteousness does not fully explain the ontological change that occurs in humanity—from sinfulness to righteousness—because it does not admit any ontological change in Christ—from righteousness to sinfulness. The syntax, context, and theological issues raised by this passage all lead to the question: What if Paul really means that Christ was made sin for us?

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<sup>12</sup> Lewis, quoting Hughes, 62.

<sup>13</sup> T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: the evangelical theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 161.

The eschatological context of 2 Corinthians 5, combined with the nature of sin, God, and humanity, suggest that Paul deliberately equates Christ with sin. Commentators agree that 2 Corinthians 5 speaks in eschatological and cosmic terms about the effects of Christ's death and resurrection. Throughout this passage, Paul wants to impress upon his readers the far-reaching scope and eternal significance of Christ's atoning work. First, he quotes a traditional credal formula, but he alters it slightly to emphasize the extent of Christ's work. The traditional credal formula would be, "Christ died *for us*," but Paul writes, "we are convinced that one has died *for all*," and then again, "he (Christ) died *for all*" (2 Cor 5:14-15). This subtle change of one word—from "us" to "all"—shifts the emphasis from the individual believer to the whole of humanity. As Furnish explains, "the eschatological and therefore universal significance of Christ's death is being stressed."<sup>14</sup> In addition to language that suggests the universal scope of Christ's work, Paul comments on the eschatological effect of that work. He writes, "From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:16-17). Matera explains, "The phrase 'from now on' refers to an event of cosmic proportions that has occurred in Christ."<sup>15</sup> The universal language of verses 14-15, combined with the emphatic proclamation of a new reality in verses 16-17 have led commentators and theologians to conclude that the only way to conceive of the new reality created in Christ is to speak in grandiose terms that still only begin to describe what Paul means by "new creation."

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<sup>14</sup> Furnish, 327.

<sup>15</sup> Matera, 136.

Commentators further assert that it is more than just humanity that is newly created in Christ. A literal translation of verse 17 reads, “So if anyone in Christ, new creation (*kaine ktisis*).” Furnish explains, “The expression *kaine ktisis* in apocalyptic Judaism suggests that something more inclusive than the new being of an individual believer is in mind.”<sup>16</sup> In fact, “the apocalyptic tradition to which Paul is clearly indebted in this passage conceives of a total replacement of the old by the new.”<sup>17</sup> Again, Paul wants his readers to understand that the death and resurrection of Christ utterly changes the nature of reality for all people and all of creation. In addition to these verses which suggest that Christ’s atoning work has a universal scope with cosmic creative effect, Paul writes, “in Christ God was reconciling the world (*kosmos*) to himself” (2 Cor. 5:19). Here again, Paul references what is literally a cosmic event. In the context of asserting this new creation of the entire cosmos through God’s reconciling work in Christ, the final verse of the chapter becomes all the more dramatic: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin.”

Paul’s language suggests that Christ was made equivalent with sin, and this statement comes in the context of a new cosmic reality, the reconciling activity of God for all humanity and all of creation. Is it possible Paul is suggesting that Christ himself was un-created, that he entered into the ontological reality of sin in order to eradicate fully and finally that reality within us? Commentators agree that the language of new creation is dramatic and far reaching—beyond our comprehension, even—yet they are not willing to give equally dramatic weight to what Christ did to provide the means for this new creation. Paul’s language associates Christ and sin much more closely than any of his commentators dare.

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<sup>16</sup> Furnish, 314.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 316.

And Paul echoes this shocking language in Galatians 3:13 when he writes, “[Christ] became a curse.” In both instances, Paul suggests an ontological change in the being of the God-human.

A theological consideration of the nature of sin, the nature of humanity, and the nature of the God-human clarifies the implications of reading Paul’s words literally. The Biblical witness and Christian theologians assume that sin is an uncreated reality, the antithesis of God’s creative goodness and power. Athanasius describes sin as nothingness: “for what is evil is not, but what is good is.”<sup>18</sup> Calvin defines sin as “the depravation of a nature previously good and pure.”<sup>19</sup> And Barth claims, “Sin attains its true form as opposition to the grace of God.”<sup>20</sup> Although the language employed differs across the ages, each of these theologians assumes that sin is the antithesis to God’s being. It is ontologically other than God. Sin is that which destroys, deprives, and opposes. God is the one who creates, blesses, and redeems.

These same theologians make corresponding statements about sin’s effect on humanity. Athanasius sees sin’s effect as precipitating humanity’s descent into nothingness. He writes, “the race of man was perishing; the rational man made in God’s image was disappearing, and the handiwork of God was in a process of dissolution.”<sup>21</sup> Athanasius implies that at one point, before sin began its corrupting work, man was in a position of fullness instead of nothingness, of goodness rather than sin. Calvin similarly remarks upon

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<sup>18</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word in Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), 59.

<sup>19</sup> Calvin, 246.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 374; hereafter *CD*.

<sup>21</sup> Athanasius, 60.

our “originally upright nature.”<sup>22</sup> He implies that sin has changed us into something we were not in God’s original design. Finally, Barth states, “man . . . can be understood only as the sinner who has covered his own creaturely being with shame and who cannot therefore stand before God even though he is the creature of God. . . . For what we recognize to be human nature is nothing other than the disgrace which covers his nature: his inhumanity.”<sup>23</sup> Barth goes so far as to say that humans, because of sin, are actually inhuman. The nature of humanity should be that which is created in the image of God and therefore purely good. Athanasius, Calvin, and Barth all assert that the reality of humanity is sinful humanity, men and women who have turned away from God and toward the nothingness of sin.

Because of sin, therefore, humanity is opposed to God. This reality leads Barth to claim, “the ultimate fact about our human nature is the self-contradiction of man.”<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, we remain God’s creatures. On the other, we are so enraptured by sin that we deny our creaturely reality and contradict ourselves. Barth and Calvin represent the Reformed tradition in their understanding of sin and the effects of sin on human nature. Although Barth and Calvin do not agree on every aspect of Christ’s nature, both affirm that Christ is truly human, and both assert that he is human without the taint of sin. Calvin writes, “[Christ] is true man but without fault and corruption.”<sup>25</sup> Barth echoes this point throughout his theological anthropology. He asserts, “Jesus alone is primarily and properly man”<sup>26</sup>; “in Him human nature is not concealed but revealed in its original and basic

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<sup>22</sup> Calvin, 183.

<sup>23</sup> Barth, *CD* III/2, 27.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, 481.

<sup>26</sup> Barth, *CD* III/2, 43.

form”<sup>27</sup>; and “in Him is the human nature created by God without the self-contradiction which afflicts us and without the self-deception by which we seek to escape from this our shame.”<sup>28</sup> Christ, according to Barth and Calvin, serves as the only example of true humanity. Christ is able to present true humanity to us because, like God, he is sinless, yet, like us, he has the capacity to sin. Christ never chooses to sin, unlike us, and as a result he demonstrates true humanity, that for which we were all originally created.

Human beings wrongly align themselves with sin instead of with God, and as a result they exist in a state of dissolution and self-destruction. Christ, the God-human, enters into the world of sin in the form of sinful flesh, yet he does not sin. As the sinless human, he is the true human. But Scripture proclaims that Christ not only demonstrates true humanity through his life; he also accomplishes it for us through his death and resurrection. He does not merely provide an example of what it looks like to live without sin, he eradicates sin in order to make possible a new creation, a new humanity, a humanity truly created in the image of God.

Paul’s provocative statement, “[God] made [Christ] to be sin,” must be interpreted both within its own context as well as within this broader theological understanding of the nature of sin, humanity, and Christ. Again, most commentators strongly oppose any literal reading of this text. For example, one says, “Paul was being intentionally paradoxical. Paul cannot have meant ‘he made him sin’ in any literal or ordinary sense of words.”<sup>29</sup> Another claims, “Christ takes responsibility for the sinner, not for sin. The metaphorical statement is

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>29</sup> Richard T. Mead, “Exegesis of 2 Corinthians 5:14-21” in *Interpreting 2 Corinthians 5:14-21*, ed. Jack P. Lewis (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 159.

to be taken seriously but not literally.”<sup>30</sup> Barth comes closest to a literal reading when he writes, “[Christ] has made himself a sinner for us. . . . Our sin is no longer our own. It is His sin, the sin of Jesus Christ.”<sup>31</sup> If Christ were made sin, he would both be utterly opposed to God the Father and no longer the true human. In other words, he would lose his divinity and his humanity at one and the same moment. He would become ontologically nothing. Although this possibility raises problems in terms of the eternal existence of the Triune God, it deserves attention because it takes Paul’s assertion seriously while it also upholds the integrity of the hypostatic union.

And yet it is possible to uphold the unity of the divine and human natures in the Person of the Logos by considering the full effect of sin, of nothingness, on the whole Person of Christ. This idea is both radical and nearly impossible to conceive. How could the second person of the Trinity actually die on the cross, actually become sin itself? How could God go without God? The only way such a break in the being of God would be possible is if it were a united break. That is, only if the Father, Son, and Spirit together chose their own disunity could such disunity continue to be an action that occurs in triunity. What is more, such an action could only occur if the Triune God chose that action in order to perfectly fulfill God’s own purpose, that of reconciling the world, that of being God “for us.” In other words, in the descent of Jesus Christ—in both his human and divine natures—into nothingness, into utter abandonment by God, into sin, the hypostatic union remained united as did the Trinity in the decision to suffer an act of uncreation, of all that God is not.

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<sup>30</sup> Frank Stagg, “Exegesis of 2 Corinthians 5:14-21” in *Interpreting 2 Corinthians 5:14-21*, ed. Jack P. Lewis (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 176.

<sup>31</sup> Karl Barth, *CD IV/1* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 238.

Paul's apocalyptic language is radical and far reaching. It suggests that in order for God's new creation to take effect, the created order must be un-created in Christ. The first hint we have at such radical transformation comes in verse 14, when Paul modifies the typical creedal language to say, "all have died." Here Paul employs eschatological language, suggesting that, "when Christ died on the cross, then all men died in him. In some supernatural sense the whole human race died when Christ died."<sup>32</sup> At one point Barth calls sin "that which God did not will to create."<sup>33</sup> Sin is the uncreated order, and it is into that which Christ descended. In order to eradicate sin, it was necessary to eradicate all of sinful humanity, all of what God's good creation had become. Instead of slaughtering human beings, however, God took that necessary act of destruction into Himself in the Person of Christ.

If Christ truly was made sin, then he underwent all the implications of sin, he poured himself into the ontological divide between sinful humanity and the holy goodness of God. As such, Christ underwent an ontological change from the sinless one to sin itself. T.F. Torrance writes, "for our sakes is atonement operating within the ontological depths of human being."<sup>34</sup> This ontological change begins with the cross as Christ enters into sin itself. It does not, however, end there. As Barth asserts, "the divine grace is primary and the sin of man secondary and the primary factor is more powerful. . . . We are forbidden to take sin more seriously than grace, or even as seriously as grace."<sup>35</sup> Just as God was able to create an entire cosmos, including humanity, out of nothing; once again, and once for all, His grace is

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<sup>32</sup> Lewis, quoting Hanson, 50.

<sup>33</sup> Barth, *CD* III/2, 33.

<sup>34</sup> Torrance, 190.

<sup>35</sup> Barth, *CD* III/2, 41.

powerful enough to create out of nothing. Paul alludes to God's creative activity in 2 Cor. 5 when he emphasizes God's role in reconciliation: "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself." Through the very un-creation of the Son of God, the new creation of first the Son and then the entire cosmos becomes possible. As Paul writes elsewhere, "For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ" (1 Cor. 15:21-24). In raising Christ from the dead, God confirms the new creation. God eradicates sin in Christ and then restores Christ in his unity as the God-human.

This resurrected Christ has experienced full incarnational reality, including both sin and death. Not only so, but this Christ also experienced the grace of God. According to Barth, "God is now not only the electing Creator, but the elect creature. He is not only the giver, but also the recipient of grace."<sup>36</sup> Christ's experience of sin and grace allows for a new definition of humanity. Instead of humanity being ontologically sinless in and of themselves, writes Barth, "The real man is the sinner who participates in the grace of God."<sup>37</sup> This participation in the grace of God gives to them an ontological sinlessness based upon the eradication of sin through the death of Christ. Again, Barth writes, "for the reconciliation of man with God nothing more nor less was needed than the death of the Son of God, and for the manifestation of this reconciliation nothing more nor less than the resurrection of the Son of Man."<sup>38</sup> The gospel message is a message of sin and grace, and Barth highlights the depth of human sin and the richness of God's grace in reminding us that only through death

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<sup>36</sup> Barth, *CD IV/1*, 170.

<sup>37</sup> Barth, *CD III/2*, 32.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

and resurrection—cosmic, world-altering, unique events—can sin truly be overcome and grace truly be victorious. Paul uses such strong language in 2 Corinthians 5 in order to underline the depths of the reality of human sin, and the even greater reality of God’s new creation through His reconciling work in Christ. As a result, Paul claims, “God has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18). Just as God entrusted the care of creation to Adam and Eve in the Garden long ago, so too he entrusts the proclamation of this new creation to those who have received that reconciling word. As Furnish remarks, the ministry of reconciliation is “not regarded merely as responsive to or a consequence of the eschatological event, but as a constitutive part of the event itself.”<sup>39</sup> The new creation is not an abstract reality, but a reality in which we participate, one which Paul instructs the Corinthians to announce to the entire world. God’s creation is one of relationship between Creator and creature (again, in parallel to Adam and Eve), whereby the creature plays a significant role in the creative activity of God.

The history of interpretation of 2 Corinthians 5 claims that Paul could not have meant what he wrote. Rather, most commentators and theologians assume Paul meant that God treated Christ as a sinner, and, in exchange, treats us like righteous ones. The problem with this line of interpretation lies in the fact that it does not take the eschatological context of the entire pericope into consideration, nor does it offer any explanation as to why Paul would use such strong language unless he intended to underline the jarring reality of what it cost Christ to take sin upon himself. In conclusion, commentators who interpret Paul’s words to mean that Christ represents sinners, rather than actually becoming sin, have not

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<sup>39</sup> Furnish, 336.

adequately defended their position in light of the context and syntax of 2 Corinthians 5:21, or in light of the tendency of that interpretation to divide the human and divine natures of Christ. A metaphorical reading attempts to dissociate Christ from sin, to protect Christ from human sinfulness. Although a literal reading poses problems related to the being of God as Triune, it allows for God's united choice to dis-unite; it maintains the integrity of the hypostatic union; and it treats Paul's words with the force and weight they deserve.

A literal reading suggests that for there to be a truly new creation in Christ, there must also be an un-creation. This also implies that the new creation is, like the first creation, creation *ex nihilo*. This cycle of creation, destruction, and new creation might seem to repeat endlessly. The difference between the creation in Genesis, however, and the new creation in Christ comes from the unique and eternal significance of Christ's work for us. As Torrance writes, "If the soteriological exchange takes place within the constitution of the incarnate person of the Mediator, then it is as eternal as Jesus Christ himself, the eternal Son."<sup>40</sup> The new creation is eternally real and effective. Christ's work is once and for all. What is more, this cosmic and dramatic activity on the part of God has a particular purpose in mind. In both 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Galatians 3:13, Paul provides the same explanation as to why Christ was made sin, became a curse. In both, Paul writes, it was "*hyper hemon*," "for us." None of this activity was abstract or for any purpose other than including all of creation in the reality of life with God. Barth states our new reality in simple terms: "Basically and comprehensively, therefore, to be a man is to be with God."<sup>41</sup> Jesus Christ, Immanuel, God

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<sup>40</sup> Torrance, 183-4.

<sup>41</sup> Barth, *CD* III/2, 135.

with us, went without God in order that we might become men and women with God.

Truly, God made Christ to be sin, for one reason alone: for us.