

Did Christ Become “Sin”? (4th Sunday of Lent, Year C)

2 Corinthians 5:17-21—He Made Him to Be Sin Who Knew No Sin

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:17-21)

1. New Creation: if anyone is “in Christ,” he is a “new creation” (5:17)
2. Sinless: Christ “knew no sin” (5:21)
3. Sin: yet Christ became “sin” (Greek *hamartia*) (5:21)?
3. #1 Substitution: Christ “took the place” of sinful humanity:

John Chrysostom: “God allowed his Son to suffer as if a condemned sinner, so that we might be delivered from the penalty of our sins.”¹

4. #2 Sin Offering: Christ became a “sin offering” (Greek *hamartia*) (Lev 4 LXX):

OT: Then the priest shall take some of the blood of *the sin [offering]* (Hebrew *chatta'th*; Greek *hamartia*)... [S]o the priest shall make atonement for him *for his sin* (Hebrew *chatta'th*; Greek *hamartia*), and *he shall be forgiven*. (Lev 4:25-26; cf. LXX)

Ambrosiaster: “it is not wrong for him to be said to have been made ‘sin’, because in the law the sacrifice which was offered for sins used to be called a ‘sin’.”²

5. Real Righteousness: those who are “in Christ” are *made righteous*; they are transformed so that they might be “conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom 8:29).

The Living Tradition

Thomas Aquinas: He did this, “that we might be made the justice of God in him,” i.e.,

¹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 2 Corinthians* 11.5. In Gerald Bray, ed. *1-2 Corinthians* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament VII; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1999), 252.

² Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on 2 Corinthians* 5:18-21. In Ambrosiaster, *Commentaries on Romans and 2 Corinthians* (trans. Gerald L. Bray; Ancient Christian Texts; Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2009), 227.

that we who are sinners, might be made not only just, but justice itself, i.e., that we might be justified by God... “The justice,” I say, “of God,” not ours. (Aquinas, *Commentary on 2 Corinthians* no. 202; trans. F. Larcher).

Questions for Discussion and Reflection (4th Sunday of Lent, Year C)

1. What does Paul mean when he says that Christ became “sin” for our sake? Which of the two explanations do you find more convincing, and why?

For Further Reading

1. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letters of Saint Paul to the Corinthians* (trans. F. R. Larcher, O.P.; eds. J. Mortensen and E. Alarcón; Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute, 2012).
2. Gerald Bray, ed. *1-2 Corinthians* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament VI; Downers Grove, IL.: IVP, 1999).
3. Brant Pitre, Michael P. Barber, and John Kincaid. *Paul, a New Covenant Jew: Rethinking Pauline Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2019.