EXEGESIS OF 2 CORINTHIANS 5:14–6:2

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Background and Context

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians was written around 56 or 57 AD from Macedonia (see 2:13; 7:5). He wrote it because of the good response he had gotten to his first letter to the congregation. The first letter breathes an entirely different spirit than the second one. At the time Paul wrote the first letter, the congregation had been riddled with all kinds of difficulties—factions claiming allegiance to different preachers, a case of incest within the congregation, believers taking believers to court, misunderstandings about marriage, disruptive worship caused by speaking in tongues, and numerous other issues. The first letter reads like a laundry list of problems within a congregation. By the time Paul writes 2 Corinthians many of the issues, like the infamous incest case, had been resolved. So the second letter is considerably more irenic. Still Paul has to deal with some (they appear to be a minority) who are questioning his personal integrity as well as his authority to be an apostle. So the bulk of the letter is devoted to "the ministry of reconciliation," as the NIV words the heading of the section we will study. The center of the letter (chapters 8-9) is a rather lengthy encouragement to the Corinthians to participate joyfully and generously in the collection that Paul is gathering for the poor in Jerusalem. But most of the letter (chapters 1-7 as well as 10-13) deals with the ministry of the Word.

In the section preceding the verses we will study, Paul speaks very candidly to the Corinthians about his frailty as a servant of the gospel. Chapter 4 is the famous "jars of clay" chapter. Paul confides to the Corinthians about the many hardships and persecutions he faces as a preacher of the gospel. As he transitions into chapter 5, he becomes rather contemplative and admits that he longs to be covered with the heavenly tent. But his thoughts begin to crescendo toward the middle of the chapter as he states the confidence with which he carries out his ministry. It's at this point that we delve into the Greek.

Exegesis

¹⁴ἡ γὰρ ἀγάπη τοῦ Χριστοῦ συνέχει ἡμᾶς, κρίναντας τοῦτο, ὅτι εἷς ὑπὲρ πάντων ἀπέθανεν, ἄρα οἱ πάντες ἀπέθανον·

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Translation: For the love of Christ urges us since we consider this: that one died for all, so all died.

In the phrase ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ Χριστοῦ, the genitive is clearly a subjective genitive. Though grammatically either subjective or objective genitive would be possible, wherever Paul attaches a personal genitive to ἀγάπη, he always does so to designate the person having or showing love and not to designate a person who receives love.[1] In addition the context of the entire verse emphasizes what Christ has done, not what we do. The emphasis is on "He died for all."

συνέχει is a rather generic verb and has a broad range of meanings. Clearly it's a compound of the simple Greek words for "have" or "hold" (ἔχω) and "together" (σύν). Since it is such a general term, it's not surprising that BAGD lists seven different categories of meanings for its New Testament usages. This occurrence of the word falls into the seventh category. But even then BAGD cites no less than fourteen commentators who advocate such varied meanings as "urge on, impel;" "hold within bounds, control;" and "include, embrace." Jerome in the Vulgate translates the phrase *"Caritas enim Christi urget nos"* which was perhaps determinative for its interpretation throughout the history of the Western church. Luther translates the phrase: *Denn die Liebe Christi dringet uns.*

Clearly the ὑπὲρ indicates that Christ died not just on behalf of all but in place of all. This is clear because the following phrase is introduced by ἄρα (which usually marks the apodosis of a conditional clause). Also in that following phrase Paul replaces the subject of the previous clause εἷς with πάντως and attributes the same predicate to it (ἀπέθανον). He even attaches the article of previous reference to the πάντες (οἱ πάντες). Grammatically this verse's meaning is unmistakable. When Christ died, he died for all people. The context limits the beneficiaries in no way. Christ died for all—period. Paul is teaching the same thing here as he would later in Romans. "Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people" (5:18). "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (3:23-24). There's no other conclusion that we can come to but that these inspired verses speak of a justification of all people.

¹⁵καὶ ὑπὲρ πάντων ἀπέθανεν, ἵνα οἱ ζῶντες μηκέτι ἑαυτοῖς ζῶσιν ἀλλὰ τῷ ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν ἀποθανόντι καὶ ἐγερθέντι.

Translation: And he died for all in order that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died and was raised for them.

[1] Ro 5:5; 8:35, 39; 15:30; 2 Cor 8:24; 13:13; Eph 2:4; 3:19, and many others.

Paul repeats his assertion that Christ died for all and then advances the thought with a purpose clause. As is typical in Greek purpose clauses, the verb that follows ἵνα is subjunctive (ζῶσιν). Although identical in form to the indicative, it is clearly subjunctive because it is modified by μηκέτι, a form of the negative that modifies only non-indicative verb forms. Since English has almost no subjunctive forms left, we normally have to put a helping verb before the main verb in a purpose clause. This is important to keep in mind in this instance because Reformed exegetes want to see a different group being referred to here in οἱ ζῶντες.[2] They assume that it must be referring to the regenerate. But the simple flow of the sentence doesn't require such an assumption. The term οἱ ζῶντες seems to be chosen to stand in contrast to the concept Paul has just mentioned here: "died." There really is no reason to take "the living" as referring to anybody else than those who are now alive. God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9). So why couldn't these words apply to anybody who was alive in Paul's day or who has lived since? All should live not for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised. The datives in this verse ("for themselves," "for him") are datives of advantage.[3]

> [16] Ὥστε ἡμεῖς ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν οὐδένα οἴδαμεν κατὰ σάρκα· εἰ καὶ ἐγνώκαμεν κατὰ σάρκα Χριστόν, ἀλλὰ νῦν οὐκέτι γινώσκομεν.
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> Translation: So from now on we know no one according to the flesh. Even if we knew Christ according to the flesh, but now we no longer know (him, i. e., in such a way).

Ὥστε introduces a result, and the time designation ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν indicates when this result went into effect. The previous sentence ended with a reference to Christ's death and resurrection. So the ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν would seem to indicate that what Paul is about to say is a result of Christ's death and resurrection.

It's interesting that in the first phrase οἶδα, the Greek word for knowing facts, is used and then in the second and third phrases Paul shifts to the other Greek word for knowing, the one we would expect here (γινώσκω)—the word used for knowing something through experience or knowing people intimately.

Harris says that in Hellenistic Greek and in the New Testament in particular the distinction between οἶδα and γινώσκω was not as clear cut as in classical Greek and that the two could be used more interchangeably. He suggests that perhaps Paul switches from οἴδαμεν to ἐγνώκαμεν in this verse because the former (οἶδα) has no perfect form.[4] (Though οἶδα is technically a perfect form, it was normally used in a present sense by Greek speakers.)

Note that the object of οἶδα is pulled forward in the sentence giving it emphasis: "So from now on *no one* we know according to flesh." οὐδένα has not been used so far in the chapter, and so there is nothing in the context that limits it. We are to view no one simply from a fleshly, worldly perspective. Paul and we are to view every human being (believer as well as non-believer) as a blood-bought soul.

Paul used to view Christ in a fleshly, worldly way, but that was a mistake. Paul had learned through painful experience near Damascus that he needed to view Christ in a different way. Now he wanted to make sure that his readers didn't make a similar mistake in the way they viewed any and every member of the human race. Each of them was a blood-bought soul for whom Christ had died.

> [17] ὥστε εἴ τις ἐν Χριστῷ, καινὴ κτίσις· τὰ ἀρχαῖα παρῆλθεν, ἰδοὺ γέγονεν καινά.
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> Translation: So if anyone is in Christ—new creation! The old things have passed away; behold they have become new.

Remember that in early copies of the New Testament there is no punctuation, which opens up interesting possibilities for this verse. Jerome for instance perceived no pause between Χριστῷ and καινὴ so that he saw the protasis of the conditional as continuing up through κτίσις and interpreted τὰ ἀρχαῖα παρῆλθεν as forming the apodosis: *Si qua ergo in Christo nova creatura, vetera transierunt: ecce facta sunt omnia nova.* ("If there is therefore a new creation in Christ, the old things have passed away. Behold, everything is made new.") Although this is a possibility, the statement clearly loses the punch that most of our translations preserve for it. The only other time that Paul uses the phrase καινὴ κτίσις is in Galatians 6:15 (οὔτε γὰρ περιτομή τί ἐστιν οὔτε ἀκροβυστία ἀλλὰ καινὴ κτίσις), and there too it stands alone as an independent clause.

ἐν Χριστῷ (or ἐν ᾧ referring to Christ) occurs over 160 times in Paul's letters and is one of the most common, if not the most common motif in Paul's writings.[5] To study this little phrase in all its contexts would require a paper of its own. Let's just take a passing look at one of its pithiest occurrences, in Colossians 2:11-14. Here Paul emphasizes that we come into this blessed condition of being "in Christ" not because of anything we have done but because a circumcision has been performed on us, one not done by hands but performed through

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[2]Harris, p. 422-23.

[3]F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1962), paragraph 188.2.

[4]Harris, p. 427.

[5]Harris, p. 431.

baptism. In baptism our flesh was stripped from us. Though we were dead in our transgressions, God made us alive with Christ. He united us with the death and resurrection of Jesus and brought forth a new self in us. All of this is intimately bound up with the fact that he forgave our sins. That's how we arrive in this blessed condition of being "in Christ."

But let's go back to the word κτίσις for a moment. Greek nouns that are closely related to verbs tend to have two endings: -σις or -μα. Those that end in -σις tend to focus on the action that the related verb signifies, while those that end in -μα tend to describe the product of the action after it has been completed. In this context we might expect a noun form ending in -μα. And indeed such a form does exist in New Testament vocabulary: κτίσμα ("that which is created," "creature"). But instead we have κτίσις, which perhaps was intentionally used to emphasize God's creating rather than the thing he created. In any case, the phrase is very striking, and so I have chosen to put an exclamation point behind it ("new creation!").

Paul has already had creation language on his mind in this letter. In 4:6 he wrote, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ." This verse together with 5:17, the verse we are considering, makes it obvious that Paul is now focusing on the conversion of the individual (τις).

The passing away of the old things and the coming of the new is a common motif in the Bible. It comes up in Isaiah 43:18-19 where the prophet urges his readers to shift their focus away from God's saving acts of the past, i.e., the exodus, and to concentrate on the new salvation that is about to come (deliverance from Babylon). But this prophecy also contains overtones of the ultimate salvation that God has in store. And so the New Testament authors echo the words—Paul here in 2 Corinthians and John in Revelation. In the second last chapter of Revelation, John sees the heavenly Jerusalem and hears God say from the throne, "the old order of things has passed away . . . behold, I am making everything new!" (Rev 21:4-5). Here in 2 Corinthians 5:17 it is clear that Paul is applying this truth of God's saving activity—that he does away with the old and creates something new—to the individual (τις). It is something that comes to the individual personally in his/her conversion (2 Co 4:6).

> [18]Τὰ δὲ πάντα ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ καταλλάξαντος ἡμᾶς ἑαυτῷ διὰ Χριστοῦ καὶ δόντος ἡμῖν τὴν διακονίαν τῆς καταλλαγῆς,
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> Translation: And all these things are from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation,

From the immediate context it is clear that τὰ πάντα refers to these deep truths just expressed (Christ's death for all, the new creation that God brings forth in conversion, etc.) and not to something broader like all of creation (τὰ πάντα can mean "the universe").[6] Paul has been expressing how these things are performed by God, and now he wants to move on to describing this work of God in a new way (καταλλάξαντος). καταλλάσσω is a compound form of the simpler ἀλλάσσω, which means "to make other"[7] or "to make other than it is, change,"[8] from the adjective ἄλλος. In the compound form καταλλάσσω the concept becomes more finely focused into "reconcile." Paul is the only New Testament author to use καταλλάσσω and its various forms (thirteen times in Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Ephesians and Colossians), and he always uses it in a theological sense except in 1 Corinthians 7:11 where he speaks of a woman being reconciled to her husband.

S. E. Porter and I. H. Marshall have shown that Paul advanced the meaning of καταλλάσσω in a way that it had never been used before in Greek. Porter writes, "Paul uses καταλλάσσω in the active voice with the offended and hence angered party in a relationship (i.e., God) as (grammatical) subject taking the initiative in effecting reconciliation between himself and the offending party."[9] Marshall writes, "Whereas in popular usage 'to reconcile Y to oneself' means 'to remove Y's grounds for being offended,' Paul uses the phrase to mean 'to remove Y's offense.'"[10] What is also interesting is that whenever Paul uses any of the forms of καταλλάσσω, he never makes God the direct object of the reconciling nor does he ever make God the subject of a passive form of the verb. In other words, no one else reconciles God nor is he reconciled to others.[11] Whenever reconciliation is being described, it is always God who reconciles others to himself.

In our verse the object of the reconciling is ἡμᾶς. Who are the "us?" A case could be made for it to be referring to 1) Paul (and perhaps his co-author Timothy), 2) to Paul and his readers, 3) to all believers or

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[6]Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1979), p. 633.

[7]Hermann Buechsel, "ἀλλάσσω." *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. (vol. 1, Gerhard Kittel, ed., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), p. 251.

[8]Harris, p. 453.

[9]S. E. Porter, *καταλλάσσω in Ancient Greek Literature, with Reference to the Pauline Writings*, (Cordoba: El Almendro, 1994), p. 16.

[10]I. H. Marshall, "The Meaning of Reconciliation," *Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology*, (R. A. Guelich, ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 130.

[11]Harris, p. 437.

4) to all people. Since the immediately following context (καὶ δόντος ἡμῖν τὴν διακονίαν τῆς καταλλαγῆς) says that these people possess the ministry of reconciliation, it seems clear that Paul has in view here people who already participate in the cause of the gospel. So at first we might be inclined to think that the first three possibilities listed above are more likely. However in the next verse Paul clearly broadens the scope of who is reconciled, and this makes the determining of who ἡμᾶς is a moot point.

> ¹⁹ὡς ὅτι θεὸς ἦν ἐν Χριστῷ κόσμον καταλλάσσων ἑαυτῷ, μὴ λογιζόμενος αὐτοῖς τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν καὶ θέμενος ἐν ἡμῖν τὸν λόγον τῆς καταλλαγῆς.

> Translation: that God was in Christ reconciling (the) world to himself, not reckoning to them their transgressions and having placed for himself in us the word of reconciliation.

With each verse Paul seems to want to broaden the truths he has already expressed. This verse is a continuation of the sentence begun in the previous verse. The combination of ὡς ὅτι is captured well by the NASB: "namely that." It's unlikely that ἦν and καταλλάσσων are to be taken together as a periphrastic construction, especially since both ἐν Χριστῷ and κόσμον come between the two verb forms. The main clause here seems to be θεὸς ἦν ἐν Χριστῷ while κόσμον καταλλάσσων ἑαυτῷ acts as a subordinate modifier of the main clause. Paul is clearly expanding here the assertion he made in the previous verse, that God reconciled us through Christ. It is really, Paul says, κόσμον (interestingly without the article) that God reconciles to himself.

The basic meaning of κόσμον is "world." But before we jump to the conclusion that it is a metonymy indicating the inhabitants of the world, it's important for us to consider every possibility. Could it refer to the planet or to all of the created universe? In Romans 8:19-22 Paul points out that the whole creation has suffered the effects of the fall. The fall impacted more than just the human race. And in Colossians 1:20 he speaks of God reconciling (ἀποκαταλλάξαι) all things through Christ—not just things on earth but also things in heaven. There Paul is referring to a larger work of restoration that God accomplishes through Christ. Through him he has reconciled (ἀποκαταλλάξαι) all things (τὰ πάντα).

But in our passage here there seems to be a more limited focus. In the next phrase Paul modifies the main clause with another participial clause: μὴ λογιζόμενος αὐτοῖς τὰ παραπτώματα. The αὐτοῖς and αὐτῶν are clearly pointing back to the κόσμον. Notice that these individuals have παραπτώματα (transgressions) which God is not counting against them. The κόσμος then here in 2 Corinthians 5 is referring to sinners. In Ephesians 2:16 Paul says that Christ reconciled (ἀποκαταλλάξῃ)

both Jews and Gentiles to God. In Romans 11:15 he speaks again about a reconciliation of the world (καταλλαγὴ κόσμον). Nowhere in Scripture is there an indication that this word "world" is to be limited to any subgroup of humanity.

μὴ λογιζόμενος αὐτοῖς τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν is very reminiscent of Psalm 32:2, "Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him." (μακάριος ἀνήρ, οὗ οὐ μὴ λογίσηται κύριος ἁμαρτίαν.) The psalm verse expresses in a negative way what Genesis 15:6 states in a positive way about Abram—that his faith was counted to him for righteousness (ἐπίστευσεν Αβραμ τῷ θεῷ καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην). psalm 32:2 and Genesis 15:6 express the "two sides of the coin" so strikingly that Paul quotes them in connection with one another in his great exposition of justification in Romans 4 (vs. 3 and 8). What is striking about his language here in 2 Corinthians is that whereas in the other passages God is doing this reckoning to individuals, here Paul says he does it for "them" (plural), and these plural pronouns are referring back to κόσμον.

> ²⁰Ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ οὖν πρεσβεύομεν ὡς τοῦ θεοῦ παρακαλοῦντος δι' ἡμῶν· δεόμεθα ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ, καταλλάγητε τῷ θεῷ.

> Translation: On behalf of Christ therefore we work as ambassadors in the conviction that God is appealing through us. We beg on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

πρεσβεύω means "to be an ambassador or envoy," "to travel or work as an ambassador"[12] or more broadly "to function as a representative of a ruling authority."[13] The noun πρεσβεία is used by Luke (14:32; 19:14) to describe delegations that kings and others would send out to represent them when they had official business in places where they themselves couldn't go.

Paul begins this sentence with Ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ for emphasis. Christ called Paul to be his mouthpiece, to speak on his behalf (Acts 9:15). The ὡς that introduces the following genitive absolute is not signaling a hypothetical support for Paul's assertion that he is Christ's ambassador, as the NIV makes it sound ("as though God were making his appeal through us"). Blass-Debrunner[14] discusses such uses of ὡς where they express "subjective motivation" and points out that they can, depending on their context, express mere supposition ("as though," "on the pretext that") or fact ("since," "in the conviction that"). Here the

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¹²BADG, p. 699.

¹³Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), paragraph 37.88.

¹⁴Blass-Debrunner, paragraph 425.3.

context makes it clear that Paul is expressing actual fact. Not only is he reinforcing his authority ("we are Christ's ambassadors") but he is building intensity for the appeal that he expresses in the next phrase ("We plead on Christ's behalf, 'Be reconciled to God'").

The actual plea is worded as an aorist imperative passive (καταλλάγητε), "Be reconciled to God. Recall what we said in v. 18 about καταλλάσσω. All New Testament uses of this verb and its cognates make clear that God reconciles people to himself, not vice versa. The combination of imperative and passive is striking. This is an action that only God can perform, and yet Paul pleads with the Corinthians to have it performed on themselves. Note too that it is an aorist, which usually focuses on one time action.

To whom specifically is this plea addressed? Could it be addressed to unbelievers among the Corinthian congregation? Paul spoke in his first letter to them (1 Co 14:23-24) of "some who do not understand or some unbelievers" (ἰδιῶται ἢ ἄπιστοι) who might come into their meetings. Here in the second letter, was he making this appeal to these unbelievers among them? Or is he addressing those in the congregation who were still disgruntled with him? Is he equating reconciliation to God with reconciliation to him (Paul) and to the message that he proclaimed? Or is Paul simply making the plea because it is part and parcel of the message that he as Christ's ambassador had to proclaim? Is he posing it as somewhat of a rhetorical device to make his readers mindful of the response that is required of those who have been reconciled to God?

No matter who it is that Paul is addressing in the plea to be reconciled, he follows it up with one of the most beautiful articulations of the gospel in all of Scripture. Paul believes firmly that the ministry of reconciliation (τὴν διακονίαν τῆς καταλλαγῆς, v. 18) is performed by means of the Word (τὸν λόγον τῆς καταλλαγῆς, v. 19). And so he follows up his plea to be reconciled with the only means through which one can be reconciled to God—the gospel.

²¹τὸν μὴ γνόντα ἁμαρτίαν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἁμαρτίαν ἐποίησεν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς γενώμεθα δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ.

Translation: He made him who knew not sin to be sin for us in order that we might become righteousness of God in him.

The thought provoking idea of Christ "not knowing sin" brings to mind Adam and Eve's experience in the Garden of Eden when they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As soon as they ate, they *knew* that they were naked. The Hebrew verb יָדַע clearly has the nuance of "know by experience," "have personal acquaintance with." Christ experienced none of this. He never felt the pleasure of indulging in sin nor felt the nagging guilt that comes from having indulged in it.

But even more intriguing and profound is the phrase: ἁμαρτίαν ἐποίησεν. What does it mean that God made Christ to be sin? What the NIV has in the footnote here needs to be seriously considered. The word ἁμαρτίαν can mean either "sin" or "sin offering," just as the Hebrew equivalent חַטָּאת can refer either to sin or the offering made for a sin. It is the word used for the "sin offering" (the third of the four animal sacrifices spelled out in the book of Leviticus), and the Septuagint follows the lead of the Torah by assigning the title ἁμαρτία to this particular sacrifice (in Lev 4:20 for instance). If this were the meaning Paul had in mind here, the verse would be considerably easier for us to comprehend. In that case, Paul would simply be saying that God made Christ the sacrifice for our sins. This is not foreign to what Scripture says about Christ. In Isaiah's fourth Servant Song, he points out how the LORD would make the Servant's life a guilt offering (אָשָׁם, 53:10), the fourth of the four animal sacrifices, and speaks of how the LORD laid on him the iniquity of us all (53:6). However, the context of 2 Corinthians 5:21 would seem to rule this meaning out here.

Just as the first half of the verse indicates that Christ was made sin on our behalf, so the second half of the verse indicates that in him we become the righteousness of God (ἁμαρτίαν being parallel to δικαιοσύνη). As our sin was imputed to Christ, so his righteousness in exchange is imputed to us. This is the nexus of God's entire plan of salvation—of God's great exchange. Also, if Paul had intended to speak of Christ as a sin offering, he would probably have used a different verb than (ἐποίησεν), more likely something like "offered."

But let's wrestle a little more with this concept of God making Christ to be sin for us. Notice that the NIV inserts the words "to be" before "sin." Without these two little words the phrase in English could easily be misunderstood: "[God] made [Christ] sin for us." So the "to be" is necessary. In what sense did God make Christ to be sin? Verse 19b is helpful. As God reconciled the world to himself, he did not count their sins against them (μή λογιζόμενος αὐτοῖς τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν). As we mentioned when considering that verse, Paul seems to be alluding with this phrase to Psalm 32 and is probably linking this with the imputation of Abram's faith as righteousness (Gen 15:6). Add to that Isaiah's reference to the LORD laying the iniquity of us all on Christ (53:6), and the picture becomes clearer. God was projecting our sins onto Christ. Christ was being identified with our sins. God was considering Christ to be our sin so that he could focus his wrath over sin on one person and punish this one for the sins of the world. Is it any wonder that Christ cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

But just as the first half of this verse expresses an awful truth, so the second half expresses an incredibly beautiful one. The result for us

is that we become the righteousness of God. Notice that Paul does not say that we may have the righteousness of God. He says that we *become* the righteousness of God. The divine righteousness is projected onto us as much as human sin was projected onto Christ. It becomes our identity. This is clearly a righteousness in the forensic sense, not in the ethical sense (that we *do* righteousness).

Paul clearly had Isaiah 53 in mind when he wrote this verse.

2 Corinthians 5:21	*Isaiah 53*
"God made him who knew no sin"	"He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth" (v. 9)
"to be sin for us"	"The LORD makes his life a guilt offering" (v. 10)
"so that in him we might become the righteousness of God"	"My righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities" (v. 11)

This comparison of 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Isaiah 53 brings up one more nuance about the language of justification that we must address. It's contained in the phrase from v. 11: "My righteous servant will justify *many*." Hebrew does not have a plural word for "all." The word for "every" (כֹּל) occurs only in the singular. Because Hebrew loves to express things in a collective sense, it often finds ways to use this singular word to express a plural idea. For instance, in Isaiah 53:6 כֹּל appears with the plural suffix כֻּלָּנוּ ("the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of *us all*"). However, Hebrew speakers often used their word for many (רַבִּים) as an alternate way of expressing what we would call the plural of כֹּל, especially when it had the article, as it does in Isaiah 53:11 ("will justify *the* many"). New Testament scholars have acknowledged that this use of "many" has carried over into New Testament Greek.[15] There seem to be connotations of "all" in the use of οἱ πολλοί in Romans 12:5, 1 Corinthians 10:17 and Hebrew 12:15. But the passages that directly relate to the subject are Romans 5:15 and 19.

Romans 5:15 says, "For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!" The first

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[15] Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus,* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1964), p. 179-180.

"many" by no means implies that there are some descendants of Adam who escape death. It is simply being used in contrast to "one." In v. 18 Paul uses the πάντες that is available to him in Greek: "Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people." Now, notice what he does directly after that. In v. 19 he reverts to "many:" "For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous." I wonder how many exegetes have used this passage to make a case for a limited atonement not realizing that the wording was perhaps influenced more by Paul's Semitic way of thinking than by an intention to say that not all are justified by God through Christ.

Let's finish up.

6 Συνεργοῦντες δὲ καὶ παρακαλοῦμεν μὴ εἰς κενὸν τὴν χάριν τοῦ θεοῦ δέξασθαι ὑμᾶς·

Translation: And as coworkers we also plead for you not to receive the grace of God for nothing.

Συνεργοῦντες is puzzling because Paul gives no indication of who his fellow worker is. Does he mean Timothy who is mentioned as the coauthor of the book in 1:1? Or since he just mentioned that he's Christ's ambassador and that God is making his appeal through Paul (v. 20), does he mean that he is a coworker of Christ or of God? Immediate context would seem to indicate the latter.

Notice that Paul's plea here is not just that his readers receive God's grace. As a matter of fact the aorist infinitive δέξασθαι may point to the fact that they have already received it. In any case it's the εἰς κενὸν that Paul has in focus. Notice how it stands toward the beginning of his actual plea. Paul is concerned that they have received it *for nothing*. There needs to be some benefit that comes from receiving it. They shouldn't just take God's grace for granted. It needs to produce a response in their lives. Recall that from both Corinthian letters it is clear that there is luke-warmness in the congregation, immaturity in the faith, and lack of understanding about the things of God. Many of the members of the congregation have opposed Paul and questioned his right to be an apostle. Though the situation had clearly become better by the time that he writes this second letter, the fact that Paul continues to write extensively about his right to be an apostle seems to indicate that he still has concerns about their spiritual condition.

Perhaps this verse helps us in understanding his plea in v. 20 that they be reconciled to God. Perhaps there were those in the congregation who had backslid. Perhaps there were some among them who still

didn't know Christ. Perhaps there were some who still had not acknowledged certain sins and had some repenting to do.

The next verse makes clear that God's grace is not something to be taken for granted. It is not something to be put off. No one should fail to act on it.

> ²λέγει γάρ· καιρῷ δεκτῷ ἐπήκουσά σου καὶ ἐν ἡμέρᾳ σωτηρίας ἐβοήθησά σοι. ἰδοὺ νῦν καιρὸς εὐπρόσδεκτος, ἰδοὺ νῦν ἡμέρα σωτηρίας.

Translation: For he says, "At the acceptable time I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

No subject is stated for λέγει, but the immediate context (v. 1, θεοῦ) makes it obvious that the assumed subject is God. The citation is a direct quote from the Septuagint version of Isaiah 49:8. It's the LORD's response to the second Servant Song (49:1-7). In this song the Servant laments his rejection by the people. The LORD responds to him by pointing out that at just the right time he stepped in and rescued his Servant. Paul uses this as a springboard for his final, urgent plea to his readers: Now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation. Now is the time to act on God's grace. Don't put it off. For those who don't yet believe, now is the time to be reconciled. For those who have wandered from the faith, now is the time to be restored. For those who are weak in the faith, now is the time for the Word to work its strengthening.

Conclusion

Paul in this section is not just presenting the gospel to his readers and saying, "Now it all depends on whether you will accept it or reject it." That would not be grace. Grace is God doing everything for man's salvation. Grace is not just providing the sacrifice for sin and setting it before the sinner saying, "Now it's up to you." Grace includes the *organon leptikon*, the hand of faith which God creates in us to reach out and lay hold of God's gift of salvation. That's what Paul is striving to awaken in his hearers. He has given them the message that is necessary to awaken and activate that hand—the gospel.

The phrase that this pericope ends with is a very important one. It is used again and again by the Old Testament prophets to point ahead to the Messianic age. What is "the day of salvation?" "The day of salvation" was when Christ died for all (v. 14). It took place when God reconciled the world to himself in Christ (v. 19). It happened when God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that we became the righteousness of God (v. 21). But the day of salvation happened too individually for each of us. The day of salvation arrived when God made you a new creation (v. 17). That day dawned when he created

your *organon leptikon* and empowered it to respond to the plea, "Be reconciled to God." It happens today and every day when he "helps" you (v. 2) so that you overpower your old Adam.

Truly *now* is the day of salvation. We live in the Messianic age. And there is only one response to be made to God's plea to be reconciled: "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."

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The translations of 2 Corinthians 5:14–6:2 are those of the author.