

On Becoming the Righteousness of God

2 Corinthians 5:21

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM

2 CORINTHIANS 5:21 poses several problems for the interpreter; I shall here focus on one in particular. What does Paul mean when he says “that we might become the righteousness of God”? The text reads as follows:

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

The NRSV translates this as follows:

For our sake he [God] made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Many discussions of the verse assume one particular meaning for δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ here and work backwards to discuss what they see as the real problem, namely, the meaning τὸν μὴ γνόντα ἁμαρτίαν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἁμαρτίαν ἐποίησεν. I wish to examine, instead, the precise meaning, in this context, of the key final phrase.

The Regular Usage

There are two related reasons why this is problematic: the first to do with the regular meaning of the phrase in Paul, the second with the meaning of 2 Corinthians 5:21 in its context.

First, I regard it as an increasingly firm conclusion that Paul’s other uses of the phrase (all in Romans) treat θεοῦ as referring to a δικαιοσύνη that is God’s own, rather than a δικαιοσύνη that he gives, reckons, imparts, or imputes to human beings. The debate has often been muddled, not least by misleading labeling of alternative views, but the following summary may help to clarify matters. The first question to be addressed concerning δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ is: Is the “righteousness” in question God’s own, or is it a status or quality which, though relating to God in some way, is predicated of humans? Each possible answer divides into two further alternatives, (i) If the righteousness is, and remains, God’s own, the genitive (θεοῦ) could then be seen as either possessive or subjective, depending on the meaning attached to δικαιοσύνη. If this “righteousness” is in some sense or other a quality or *attribute* of God, the genitive θεοῦ would be possessive, but if the “righteousness” is in some sense or other an *activity*, the genitive would be subjective. (This is often misunderstood, but it should be clear that a “subjective” genitive implies that the noun governed carries a verbal sense, without which the genitive lapses into its more regular possessive sense.) (ii) If the righteousness

is, eventually at least, a status or quality attributed to humans, then the genitive θεου could be seen either as objective or as a genitive of origin, depending once more on the sense attached to δικαιοσύνη. If the “righteousness” is something about humans (say, their faith) which somehow commends them before God, then the genitive is “objective,” “a righteousness which counts before God,” but if the righteousness is, rather, simply the human status which results from God’s gracious action, the genitive is a genitive of origin, being equivalent to ἡ ἐκ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνη, as in Phil 3:9. (This too is often misunderstood, with the phrase “objective genitive” sometimes being used to designate the genitive of origin. Again, it should be clear that the phrase “objective genitive,” strictly speaking, denotes a genitive which functions as the object of the verb implied in the noun which it governs.)¹

Within the debate all four basic positions have been espoused. Luther’s starting point was (what he saw as) the medieval view that the righteousness in question was God’s *iustitia distributiva*, his even-handed rewarding of virtue and punishing of vice. Luther’s classic response to this (which, he says, he subsequently discovered to have been Augustine’s view as well) was that the righteousness of God was not a righteousness with which he himself is righteous, but rather a righteousness with which he makes others righteous. This, in other words, was a shift from *possessive* reading of the genitive, and a “quality” understanding of δικαιοσύνη, to a grammatically complex double reading: it combined (a) the subjective/activity reading of the whole phrase (the “righteousness” remains God’s, and denotes the activity whereby God reckons humans to be righteous), and (b) the genitive of origin/human status reading of the whole phrase (Luther could sometimes, not least with 2 Corinthians 5:21 in mind, refer to δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ as the status which humans have as a result of this reckoning).

The modern debate has reflected Luther’s wrestling in several ways. The majority position until comparatively recently, expounded classically by R. Bultmann, H. Conzelmann, and C. E. B. Cranfield, was that the genitive denoted the origin of the status which humans then possessed as the result of God’s gracious action in Christ.² E. Käsemann, on the other hand, pioneered the “subjective genitive” position in his paper “The ‘Righteousness of God’ in Paul,” subsequently published in his *New Testament Questions of Today*;³ for him, clearly, δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ was to be understood as an activity, namely, God’s “salvation-creating power” by which he defeated the rebellious cosmos. This has become increasingly popular with scholars, though it is not well represented in modern English translations.⁴

My own view, suggested in various places and to be expanded elsewhere,⁵ is that Käsemann is right in his critique of the prevailing reading (though even he does not see that Phil 3:9 should be excluded from the discussion), but wrong in his precise proposal. The righteousness does indeed remain God’s; but this “righteousness” never leaves behind the all-important sense of *covenant faithfulness*. Nor does it need to, as Käsemann imagined, thinking thereby to defend Paul against the possibility of retaining any sense of Jewish particularism. Paul’s contention, supremely in Romans, is that in Christ Israel’s God has indeed been faithful to the covenant made with Abraham, but precisely not in the nationalistic way which Israel imagined. A significant part of his

whole argument in that letter is, I believe, that the nonethnic people of God in Christ really is, despite initial appearances, the family promised to Abraham. Into this picture fit, comfortably, not only the explicit references to δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ as such (1:17; 3:5, 21, 22; 10:3) but also the many other passages which attribute δικαιοσύνη to God in one way or another, or which discuss such attribution (3:25, 26; 9:6-29; etc.). There is thus, I contend, an excellent case to be made out for reading the phrase as a clear Pauline technical term meaning “the covenant-faithfulness of [Israel’s] God.”

To this apparently clear case 2 Cor 5:21 offers an apparently clear exception. The phrase is the same as that in Romans—that is, δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ itself—but the reference seems to be, unambiguously, to a status of δικαιοσύνη which is credited to “us,” that is, Paul himself and, perhaps, his co-workers. Is this, then, the correct reading? If so, does it perhaps raise a question as to whether the emerging consensus on the usage in Romans is wrong, suggesting that we should after all read δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ there as a human status bestowed by God (the “genitive of origin”) or perhaps a human status which counts before God (the “objective genitive”)?

2 Corinthians 5:21 in Context

This would not itself, perhaps, be a very serious problem. It is important to stress that Paul is quite capable of using what seem to us technical terms in subtly different ways, as anyone who has studied his use of σάρξ (“flesh”), for instance, knows only too well. I would not, for my own part, go to any lengths to overturn the usual reading of 2 Cor 5:21, merely because of a search for a spurious harmony—which simply does not exist, at a terminological level, in the Pauline letters. But the second reason forces the question upon us. The verse has traditionally been read as a somewhat detached statement of atonement theology: we are sinners; God is righteous, but in Christ what Luther called a “wondrous exchange” takes place, in which Christ takes our sin and we his “righteousness.”⁶ And the difficulty with this, despite its being enshrined in a good many hymns and liturgies, as well as in popular devotion, is (a) that once again Paul never actually says this anywhere else;⁷ (b) that here it is God’s righteousness, not Christ’s, that “we” apparently “become”; (c) that there seems to be no good reason why he suddenly inserts this statement into a discussion whose thrust is quite different, namely, a consideration of the paradoxical apostolic ministry in which Christ is portrayed in and through the humiliating weakness of the apostle (4:7-6:13); and (d) the verse, read in this way, seems to fall off the end of the preceding argument, so much so that some commentators have suggested that the real break in the thought comes not between 5:21 and 6:1 but between 5:19 and 5:20.⁸

II. PROPOSAL: COVENANT AND APOSTLESHIP

I suggest that these issues can be addressed simultaneously, and the problems resolved, by a consideration of the wider context within which the passage falls. From 2:14 on, Paul has been addressing the question of his own apostleship, and in chap. 3 in particular he has done so in relation to the *new covenant* which God has established in Christ and by the Spirit. I have argued elsewhere for a particular way of reading this

chapter; the detail of this argument is incidental to my present purpose, since the overall drift, which is the important thing here, is less controversial.⁹ Paul's argument, in a nutshell, is that he, as an apostle, is a minister of the new covenant (3:6) and that this ministry is not impugned by the fact that he suffers but is rather thereby enhanced (4:7-18), since Christ is in this way revealed the more clearly. This, he explains, is why he can use great "boldness" (παρρησία) (3:12-18).

The discussion of Paul's covenantal ministry then continues into chap. 5 (a fact sometimes obscured because much study of 5:1-5 has concentrated on it as an isolated fragment about personal eschatology, rather than as part of the sustained argument). It should be clear from the οὖν ("therefore") in v. 11 that vv. 1-10 contribute, as far as Paul is concerned, to the thrust of what follows: since all will appear before the judgment seat of Christ, with the prospect, for those who are Christ's, of receiving the "further clothing" of the glorious resurrection body, the apostle is spurred on to do the work of "persuading human beings." The link between 5:12 ("We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us") and 3:1; 4:2; and 6:4¹⁰ makes it clear that we are still in the same ongoing argument: Paul is not "commending himself" in an unacceptable fashion, but merely explaining what it is that apostleship involves. Specifically, he is unpacking what it means, as he said in chap. 3, to be a "minister of the new covenant." The statements of 5:14-15, on the one hand, and 5:16-17, on the other, are not to be detached from this argument and treated as mere snippets of traditional soteriology. Both contribute directly to the statement of vv.18-19; this is what gives Paul's whole activity its specific focus:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

Here, then, is the focal point to which the long argument has been building up. Paul, having himself been reconciled to God by the death of Christ, has now been entrusted by God with the task of ministering to others that which he has himself received, in other words, reconciliation. Verse 20 then follows from this as a dramatic double statement of his conception of the task: "So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." That is to say, when Paul preaches, his hearers ought to hear a voice from God, a voice which speaks on behalf of the Christ in whom God was reconciling the world. Astonishingly, the voice of the suffering apostle is to be regarded as the voice of God himself, the God who in Christ has established the new covenant, and who now desires to extend its reconciling work into all the world. The second half of the verse should not, I think, be taken as an address to the Corinthians specifically, but as a short and pithy statement of Paul's whole vocation: "On behalf of Christ, we make this appeal: 'Be reconciled to God!'"

In the light of this exegesis of chaps. 3-5, and this reading of 5:11-20 in particular, the thrust of 5:21 emerges into the light. It is not an aside, a soteriological statement thrown

in here for good measure as though to explain how it is that people can in fact thus be reconciled. It is a climactic statement of the whole argument so far. The “earthen vessel” that Paul knows himself to be (4:7) has found the problem of his own earthiness dealt with, and has found itself filled, paradoxically, with treasure indeed: “for our sake God made Christ, who did not know sin, to be a sin-offering for us, *so that in him we might become God’s covenant-faithfulness.*” The “righteousness of God” in this verse is not a human status in virtue of which the one who has “become” it stands righteous” before God, as in Lutheran soteriology. It is the covenant faithfulness of the one true God, now active through the paradoxical Christ-shaped ministry of Paul, reaching out with the offer of reconciliation to all who hear his bold preaching.

What the whole passage involves, then, is the idea of the covenant ambassador, who represents the one for whom he speaks in such a full and thorough way that he actually *becomes* the living embodiment of his sovereign — or perhaps, in the light of 4:7-18 and 6:1-10, we should equally say the *dying* embodiment. Once this is grasped as the meaning of 5:21, it appears that this meaning fits very well with the graphic language of those other passages, especially 4:10-12. This in turn should play back into our understanding of chap. 3: the paradoxical boldness which Paul displays in addressing the Corinthians is organically related to his self-understanding as the “minister of the new covenant,” the one who has “become the righteousness of God.” Indeed, we can now suggest that those two phrases are mutually interpretative ways of saying substantially the same thing.

III. CONCLUSION

This conclusion may initially appear striking, even startling. However one must insist that Paul has himself prepared the way for 5:21 with his metaphor of “ambassador” in the preceding verse. The whole point of the ambassadorial system, in the ancient as in the modern world, is that the sovereign himself (or herself) speaks through the agent. Paul stresses this: “God is making his appeal through us.” It should therefore be no surprise that in his summing-up he should refer to himself as “becoming” the “righteousness,” that is, the “covenant faithfulness,” of God. If that covenant faithfulness was revealed climactically in the death of Jesus Christ, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 it is natural that the work of one who speaks “on behalf of Christ” (5-20 [bis]) should also be such a revelation, especially when the one so speaking is also acting out, in his own physical body, that same death (4:10, etc). If Paul as an ambassador has any inadequacies, they are dealt with in the death of Christ; if he has a message to deliver, it is because he has become, by the Spirit the incarnation of the covenant faithfulness of God. Indeed, it is Paul’s strong pneumatology, coming on top of his strong *theologia crucis*, that rescues this striking idea from being in any way triumphalistic, except in the (highly paradoxical) sense of 2:14.¹¹

This way of reading the verse, I submit, makes excellent sense of the overall context, answering the second of our original puzzles by showing that the verse is not an extra, added comment about something other than the subject of the previous paragraph. It also, by linking the discussion directly with that in chap. 3, actually emphasizes the meaning “the covenant faithfulness of God” for the key phrase δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ. This

means that, so far from the verse proving to be a counterexample to the emerging consensus on the meaning of the phrase in Romans, it firmly supports the possessive or subjective reading of the genitive θεοῦ and suggests that δικαιοσύνη itself firmly retains its Jewish and covenantal associations. The “righteousness of God” is the divine covenant faithfulness, which is both a quality upon which God’s people may rely and something visible in action in the great covenant-fulfilling actions of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit.

It should again be emphasized that this does not collapse Pauline theology into a “Jewish Christianity” of the sort from which E. Käsemann sought to free Paul when he argued that the phrase had lost its covenantal overtones and had become a technical term denoting God’s “salvation-creating power,” his victory over the cosmos. Rather, Paul’s covenantal theology was thought through at every point, not least in our present passage, in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, which revealed that God’s covenant faithfulness was precisely the ground of the salvation of the whole world. As Romans 3 leads eventually to Romans 8, and to the renewal of all creation, so 2 Corinthians 3 (the new covenant) leads to 2 Cor 5:17 (καινή κτίσις, “new creation”). The two are, actually, inseparable: it was through the covenant with Abraham and his seed that God always intended to reconcile the world to himself, and in Christ that plan is now complete.¹² All that remains is for the apostolic ministry to be put into effect, through which this divine covenant faithfulness can become effective for any and all who will listen to the message.

Three final reflections. First, this way of reading the second half of the crucial verse *may* perhaps provide an additional reason for taking the second occurrence of ἁμαρτία in the verse as a reference not just to “sin” in general but to the “sin-offering.”¹³ I have argued elsewhere for this meaning for καὶ περὶ ἁμαρτίας in Rom 8:3, and I think it is likely, granted the more context-specific reading of the verse which I am proposing, that Paul would intend it here too.¹⁴ This, if correct, would not water down the striking impression of the first half of the verse, as is sometimes suggested, but would rather give it more specific direction. The verse is not an abstract, detached statement of atonement theology (Paul nowhere offers us such a thing); rather, it focuses very specifically on his own strange apostolic ministry. Insofar as this ministry is a thing of shame and dishonor, it is so despite Paul’s intention, and the sin-offering is the right means of dealing with such a problem. Insofar as it is the means of the divine covenant faithfulness being held out to the world, it is because, in Christ, Paul has “become” the δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ (“righteousness of God”). This is only a suggestion, which could perhaps be taken up in subsequent discussion.

Second, some will no doubt object that I have missed the point entirely. Paul, it will be suggested, was here simply drawing on a traditional formula, only loosely integrated into his own flow of thought. In reply, I think it is certainly possible that behind our verse there lies a regular early Christian way of expressing something about Jesus’ death and its effect. Almost all things are possible within the very shadowy world of pre-Pauline early Christian history. But I do not think it is very likely. The verse as I have read it fits so closely into Paul’s argument, and employs such characteristic language in a

characteristic way, that I think it far more probable that we have here an instance of something which scholars, even those who spend their lives in his company, are singularly slow to grant that Paul may have possessed: the ability to produce a pithy phrase on his own account and to draw together a complex line of thought in a telling and memorable epigram. We scholars, so often preferring learned obscurity to pungent clarity, sometimes project this image, among others, on to the apostle. It is not only the Corinthian church that tries to insist on the apostle's coming up to its ill-conceived expectations.

Third, this reading of 5:21 has tied it in quite tightly, I think, to the whole argument of chaps. 3-5. This suggests to me that, although of course the first half of chap. 6 grows organically out of just this conclusion, it is misleading to treat 5:19 as though it were the conclusion of the long preceding argument and 5:20 as though it were the start of the new one. When it is read in the way I have suggested, 5:20-21 forms the natural climax to the entire argument of the preceding three chapters, with 6:1 being the point where Paul turns to address a specific appeal to the Corinthians. They have, after all, already been reconciled to God (5:20);¹⁵ now they need to be urged not to receive this grace in vain (6:1). Moreover, they now have a significant new motive to heed this appeal: the one who speaks is not simply an odd, shabby, battle-scarred jailbird, but one who, however surprisingly, is a revelation in person of the covenant faithfulness of God.

¹ On these and other genitives, see BDF §§89-100.

² For the debate, see C. Müller, *Gottes Gerechtigkeit und Gottes Volk: Eine Untersuchung zu Römer 9-11* (FRLANT 86; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) 5-27; P. Stuhlmacher, *Gerechtigkeit Gottes bei Paulus* (FRLANT 87; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966) 11-73; Manfred T. Brauch, "Perspectives on 'God's Righteousness' in Recent German Discussion," in E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 523-42; U. Wilckens, *Die Briefe an die Römer* (EKKNT 6; Cologne: Benziger; Neukirchener-Verlag, 1978) 1. 202-33; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975) 1. 92-99. The true "objective genitive" is rarely held today; an example is J. C. O'Neill, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) 38-39, 72, etc.

³ E. Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today* (London: SCM, 1969) 168-82; see too his *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 23-30.

⁴ The New International Version (NIV) persists in a most confusing rendering of Rom 3:21-26, in which δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ is rendered "a righteousness from God" in vv. 21-22, while v. 26 still clearly refers to God's own righteousness ("justice").

⁵ See N. T. Wright, "The Messiah and the People of God" (D.Phil., Oxford, 1980) 57-85; idem, "Romans and the Theology of Paul," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1992 Seminar Papers* (ed. E. Levering; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992); for the Jewish background, see N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 271f, showing that though the phrase was in some sense a technical term in biblical and postbiblical Judaism, it never left behind (pace Käsemann) its sense of "covenant faithfulness." For δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ in Romans 9-11, see N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 234-46. I intend to offer a fuller version of these discussions in a forthcoming volume on Paul.

⁶ See, e.g., R. Bultmann, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) 165 (commenting on this passage); also C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: A. & C. Black, 1973) 180-81; M. D. Hooker, *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul* (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 1990) frequently, e.g., 17, 181. Victor Paul Furnish seems to accept this reading (*II Corinthians* [AB 32A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984] 351-53).

⁷ 1 Cor 1:30 is sometimes suggested as an exception, but there Paul sees not only δικαιοσύνη (“righteousness”) but also σοφία (“wisdom”—the controlling category), ἁγιασμός (“sanctification”), and ἀπολύτρωσις (“redemption”) as attributed to those “in Christ”; and, most importantly, the δικαιοσύνη in question is not spoken of as the δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ (“righteousness of God”).

⁸ E.g., Furnish, *II Corinthians*, ad loc.

⁹ Wright, *Climax*, chap. 9.

¹⁰ 3:1: “Are we beginning to commend (συνιστάνειν) ourselves again?” 4:2: “We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God’s word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend (συνιστάνοντες) ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.” 6:4: “But as servants of God we have commended (συνίσταντες) ourselves in every way.”

¹¹ See C. F. D. Moule. “Reflections on So-Called ‘Triumphalism’” in *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament: Studies in Christology in Memory of George Bradford Caird* (ed. L. D. Hurst and N. T. Wright; Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) 219-27.

¹² See now Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, chap. 9, esp. 259-79.

¹³ Against, e.g., Barrett, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 180; Hooker, *From Adam*, 13-14.

¹⁴ ἁμαρτία is of course a regular LXX way of rendering the various phrases for “sin-offering”; see, e.g., Lev 4:8, 20, 24, etc.; see Wright, *Climax*, 221 n. 10, and, for the general argument, chap. 11.

¹⁵ It is wrong to import “you” into the translation as the object of δεόμεθα (“we appeal”). The point Paul is making is general: “this is the appeal we make.” See above.