

THE NATURE OF THE ATONEMENT: HOW SHOULD ONE VIEW THE CROSS? Part—II

AN EVALUATION OF THE WORD OF FAITH MOVEMENT SUPPORT FROM
2 CORINTHIANS 5:21 AND JOHN 3:14

by Steve Sullivan

In my last article I briefly explained the Word of Faith Movement's understanding of the atonement of Christ. Historically, their view fits closely with a combination of the Ransom-To-Satan and Recapitulation views of the atonement (see my last article). The Word of Faith Movement (WFM) represented by Kenneth Hagin, Sr. and Kenneth Copeland believe that the nature of Jesus on the cross changed from divine to demonic. They believe that our redemption is not secured solely by the physical death of Jesus on the cross, but by the combination of His physical death on the cross and His spiritual death in hell. The torture of Jesus by the demons of hell was the ransom God paid for our sins, and it gained access for God back to the earth from which He, in major way, had been banished. Many of the WFM teachers believe that Jesus was born again the third day by the Spirit of God in hell and was resurrected physically from the grave.

One of the main texts of Scripture that the WFM teachers have used to support their doctrine of atonement is 2 Corinthian 5:21. "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." They have used this text in attempt to prove that Jesus actually or literally became sin. If Jesus literally became sin then He became a sinner, died spiritually, and was estranged from God. However, the word "sin" is used in an abstract sense, and the phrase "to become sin" should be taken as a figure of speech called a *metonymy*. The metonymy of subject "is when the subject is put for the adjunct: i.e., for some circumstance pertaining to (or joined to) the subject: e.g., as when the place, or thing *containing* it, is put for that which is contained: the *possessor* for the thing possessed." (Bullinger, *Figures of Speech*, pp. 567, 584). Second Corinthians 5:21 is an example that fits a metonymy. In this verse sin is used instead of the guilt of sin which is to be punished. Jesus Christ did not literally become sin, but the guilt and punishment of man's sins were *imputed* (set down to the account of) to Christ and Christ's righteousness was *imputed* to the believer (Rom. 4:4-8; 5:19). Philip E. Hughes (*NICNT, 2 Corinthians*) has commented on 2 Corinthians 5:21: "Not for one moment does He [Jesus] cease to be righteous, else the radical exchange envisaged by the Apostle here, whereby our sin is transferred to Him and His righteousness is transferred to us, would be no more than a fiction or an hallucination" (p. 214). Though the Savior bore the sins of sinners, it did not mean He was guilty Himself. Sin is the subject, but it is the guilt and penalty of sin for which Jesus Christ was our substitute. Even on the cross, He was the holy, guiltless, unblemished, and spotless Lamb of God. On the cross He was estranged from His father because He bore the penalty of our sins, not that He was a sinner.

An analogy for this theological concept stated by Hughes was the description of the sin offering in Leviticus 6:25-30. Two times in Leviticus 6:25-30 the sin offering was said to be "most holy." Leviticus 6:27 has stated that anyone who touches the sacrifice was consecrated. It was also interesting that the bull and the goat offerings of the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16) were sin offerings. The blood from both of these offerings were used to cleanse the altars and the temple. "Even more than the OT sacrifices, the final and sufficient sacri-

fi ce for our sins remained at every moment ‘most holy.’ As our high priest, he offered a holy sacrifice (himself) by which he makes us holy (see Hebrews 7:26-27; 10:10, 14)” (Audry, p. 9).¹ Dale Simmons has taken the argument of imputation from 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Hagin’s own theology to argue against Hagin:

[T]he statement in II Corinthians 5:21 must be understood as Jesus having sin imputed to Him on the cross—not imparted to his spirit (Louis Berkof, Systematic Theology [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941], p. 523). Indeed, Hagin’s own theology would argue in favor of imputation. As noted earlier, Hagin is adamant that God is not the source of sin and disease—Satan is. Says Hagin, “God would have to steal it from the devil to put sickness on you. Do you see how ridiculous that is?” (Kenneth E. Hagin, How to Keep Your Healing [Tulsa: Faith Library Publications, 1980], p. 31) Yet, Hagin embraces a position which he himself labeled “ridiculous” when he contends that sin and disease were imparted to Christ at His death. ²

The WFM teachers have tried to use John 3:14 (Num 21:8-9) to prove that Jesus took upon Himself a satanic nature on the cross. “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” John 3:14 is only stressing the manner (lifted up on the cross) by which Jesus would die. The WFM has packed into this verse too much of their theology which the text and context does not support.

The following verses have also demonstrated that Jesus was not united with Satan: (1) Ephesians 5:2 said that Jesus’ death was a sweet aroma to God. (2) Isaiah 53:11 said that the suffering Servant in His death was called the “Righteous One, My Servant.” (3) Luke 23:34 recorded that Jesus on the cross was praying for His enemies. This would be inconsistent with a satanic nature. (4) Luke 23:43 Jesus prayed for the one thief “today you will be with me in paradise,” not “today you will be with me in hell.”³ If Jesus suffered in hell for three days then He was not with the thief on the cross in paradise that day. (5) Luke 23:46 Jesus committed His spirit to the Father not to Satan to take to hell.

In my next article I will deal with 1 Peter 3:18-20 and Ephesians 4:7-10. If someone wants to review the biblical understanding of the substitutionary death of Christ, they may read my article on “Substitution,” written in November 1999.

Notes:

1. Dr. Arden C Autry (n.d.), professor of the School of Theology and Mission at Oral Roberts University, has written a very good article titled *The Spiritual Dimension of Jesus’ Death*. In it Autry has refuted the WFM’s view of the atonement.
2. Dale H. Simmons (1985). *A Theological and Historical Analysis of Kenneth E. Hagin’s Claim to Be a Prophet*. Unpublished master’s thesis, Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, OK., pp. 69-70.
3. Copeland takes the Greek word *semerion* (adverb) to modify *lego* (“I say”) and not *ese* (“you shall be”). In other words, Jesus was emphasizing what he said today, not where the thief would be today. Therefore, Copeland would punctuate the sentence this way: “Truly I say to you today, you shall be with Me in Paradise.” “Jesus seemed to be saying, ‘I’ll do more than remember you at some future time; I give you my word this very day that you will be with me in my kingdom” (Copeland’s correspondence to Watchman Fellowship, October 30, 1992). Darrell Bock (*Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT: Luke 9:51-24-53*) has recognized the possibility of Copeland’s interpretation but said it did not fit the theology of the Scripture. “It seems more likely that some sense of moving immediately into an intermediate state, conscious of God’s blessing, is alluded to here, that is, it is not likely that Jesus was in limbo for a few days” (p. 1857). This state of “limbo” would be the time between Jesus’ death and His resurrection on the third day.

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