

Question: In 2 Corinthians 5:21 Paul writes, “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” Yet other verses tell us that Jesus was “without sin” (Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 3:18). How do we reconcile such verses?

Answer: To begin, let me emphasize that Christ as God is immutable (Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8), and cannot change in His divine nature. In Hebrews 1:12 the Father says of Jesus, “But You are the same, and Your years will not come to an end.” Regarding Jesus being “made to be sin,” Jesus was always without sin *actually*, but He was made to be sin for us *judicially*. That is, by His death on the cross, He paid the penalty for our sins and thereby canceled the debt of sin against us. So, while Jesus never committed a sin *personally*, He was made to be sin for us *substitutionally*.

One must also keep in mind the Old Testament backdrop of the concept of substitution. The sacrificial victim had to be “without defect” (Leviticus 4:3, 23, 32). A hand would be laid on the unblemished sacrificial animal as a way of symbolizing a transfer of guilt (4:4, 24, 33). The sacrificial animal did not thereby actually *become* sinful by nature; rather, sin was *imputed* to the animal and the animal acted as a sacrificial substitute. In like manner, Christ the Lamb of God was utterly unblemished (1 Peter 1:19), but our sin was imputed to Him and He was our sacrificial substitute on the cross. Simply because our sin was imputed to Him does not mean He changed in nature. Christ was not sinful personally; He was made to be sin substitutionally.