

# The Divine Cure for the Ultimate Plague

Communion Service

2 Cor. 5:14-21

*For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer. Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, Namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.*

*Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (II Cor. 14-21)*

It began with one of history's earliest recorded instances of biological warfare. In 1347 a Mongol army besieging the Genoese trading post of Caffa in the Crimea (modern Ukraine) catapulted the bodies of bubonic plague victims over the town's walls. The terrified defenders fled to Italy, carrying with them the deadly plague bacteria (and the rats and fleas that spread them). Over the next three years the plague spread throughout Europe in the massive epidemic now known as the Black Death. Before the epidemic ran its course and estimated twenty million people—approximately one-third to one-half of Europe's population—perished. The coming centuries would see recurring outbreaks of the bubonic plague, which would remain a dangerous, unchecked killer until the development of antibiotics in the twentieth century.

Although the Black Death is the most infamous epidemic in history, it was not the only one. The influenza epidemic of 1918-19 killed an estimated thirty to fifty million people, and several million more died at about the same time in an outbreak of typhus in eastern Europe. Other infectious diseases, such as malaria, yellow fever, and in more recent times AIDS, have also claimed uncounted millions of victims.<sup>a</sup>

But there is a plague more widespread, more deadly than all other plagues combined; Puritan writer Ralph Venning called it the "plague of plagues." It has infected/affected every person who has ever lived – and it does more than cause physical death, it causes spiritual and eternal death as well. It is the plague of sin.

Because Adam's fall plunged the entire human race into sin, all people are sinners from birth: *"Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned." Rom. 5:12. "So then through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men . . . Rom. 5:18a. "For through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners . . ." Rom. 5:19a.*

The inevitable outcome for all those infected by the sin plague is death. But the good news of the gospel is that there is a cure for the sinner infected by the deadly sin epidemic. God, in His mercy and love, provided a remedy for sin—the sacrifice of His Son. Those who experience "redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of [their] trespasses, according to the riches of His grace" (Eph. 1:7) are cured from sin's deadly spiritual effects. As a result, they have "passed out of death into life" (John 5:24).

How God made this cure possible is the theme of 2 Cor. 5:18-20. In those three verses Paul describes the wonderful truth of reconciliation—how a severed relationship between a holy God and sin-plagued, sin-severed relationship between

unregenerate mankind and a Holy God can be restored.

“Why do we live (and think) the way we do?” (i.e., What motivates you?)

Paul's dedication seemed so foreign to the Corinthians- II Cor 5:13. Ever since New Testament times, Christians have been viewed as a peculiar breed of people-1 Pet 2:9. In Mark 3 the multitudes said that Jesus had “lost His senses” v. 21 and was “possessed” v. 22. In John 10, they said He had “a demon” and was “insane” v. 20. Consequently, it is of little surprise that they treated His disciples with the same contempt. For example, after Paul gave his testimony before King Agrippa, he was accused of being out of his mind- Acts 26:24. Imagine, your purpose to serve the Lord, and you are viewed as insane. The same will be said of you!

When questioned, Paul responded, "Here's why I serve the Lord." In II Cor. 5, he gives three reasons.

### **I. The assurance set before me (5:1-8).** His

assurance is based upon three factors:

- A. A promise of a better life (vs. 1).
  - 1. He understood the essence of this life—*“earthly house”*; *“tabernacle/tent”*; *“dissolved”*
  - 2. He understood what's beyond this life—*“We have a building of God . . .”*
- B. A guarantee from God (vs. 2-5).
  - 1. While in these bodies, tents, we groan (v. 2).
  - 2. *“grown”* = to sigh, to groan because of undesirable circumstances. The present tense verb emphasizes the continual groaning in this life).

A commentator writes: “No wonder we “groan (v.2). We groan because we are weary, rain-soaked campers longing for home (v. 2b). But when we shed this earthly tent from our shoulders, we will not be left naked and shivering (vv. 3-4). We will be clothed with immortality (1 Cor 15:53-54).” (C.S.)

- 2. To assure us of this, God puts His seal of approval upon it all by giving us His Spirit as a deposit or down payment for our eternal home (v. 5)—*“earnest”* (v. 5)  
A confidence about the future (vs. 6-8)—*“confident”* (v. 6, 8)

This ought to change our attitudes toward spiritual things and their reality.

### **II. The accountability placed upon me (5:9-13).**

A. Manifestation of our life before Christ (vs. 9-10).

- 1. Nature of that manifestation.
- 2. Results of that manifestation.

B. Manifestation of our life before others (vs. 11-13).

As mentioned above, we will be misunderstood by people (v. 13). One of the reasons we are so misunderstood is that our mission is unique. We are immersed in a live-and-let-live, postmodern (“that may be your truth, but it’s not my truth”) society. But if we believe what we say we believe, we cannot just sit by and watch while the world races headlong to hell. We should get involved. We should intervene. We should “persuade” (v. 11) people that their lives aren’t okay, that they need to be reconciled to God.

Note: The “fear” referred here is not the sense of being afraid of being clubbed or whipped by an angry God. Rather, it is an awesome reverence, a fear that grows out of respect. (See Proverbs 1:7; 9:10)

In verse 12, Paul makes it clear that he isn’t bragging, he isn’t trying to impress them through outward appearances. His purpose/mission in life is unique—it is from the heart, without pretense or hidden agenda. And people with such a purpose have a different approach.

This ought to change our attitudes regarding others and our quest for personal pleasure, self gratification, etc.

### **III. The accomplishments done within me (5:14-21).**

A. **Christ loved me** (vs. 14-15).

“For the love of Christ *constraineth* us” (KJV) – the verb literally means “hold together,” which occurs only twice in the Paul’s letters (here and Phil. 1:23). New Testament scholar Ralph Earle says that it means “to be claimed, totally controlled.” He cites Koester in TDNT who comments: “It is the love of Christ which ‘completely dominates’ Paul . . . so that on the basis of Christ’s death the only natural decision for him, as for all other believers, is no longer to live for self but to live for Christ”<sup>b</sup>.

B. **Christ transformed me** (vs. 16-17).

- 1. A new perspective: *“know . . . according to the flesh . . . no longer”* (5:16).

What does Paul mean? Alfred Plummer writes: “Almost certainly he is alluding to some time previous to his conversion. . . . At that time he knew

(he thought) Christ as an heretical and turbulent teacher, who was justly condemned by the Sanhedrin and crucified by the Romans” (Plummer, *2 Corinthians*, p. 177). But now he knows Him in a new way.

2. A new position. “*If anyone is in Christ, he (she) is a new creation*” (5:17a).

According to NT scholar Scott Hafeman, “Rather than still belonging to this world and its ways, all those in Christ are a ‘new creation,’ which means that they have already participated in the passing away of the old age and the arrival of the new (lit., “new things”). The ‘new things’ that have happened in Christ, however, are not private, spiritual experiences, but a new way of life . . . Becoming a “new creation” does not refer to becoming a new kind of ‘super-spiritual’ human being, but to becoming Christ-like. . . . Whatever the ‘new things’ are in 5:17, they must certainly include a new life of growing obedience to God brought about by the Spirit.”<sup>c</sup>

### C. Christ reconciled me (vs. 18-20).

The two greatest passages on reconciliation in the New Testament are here and Rom. 5:10-11. *Rom. 5:8-11—“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (8). Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him (9). For while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life (10). And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation (11).”*

The only way reconciliation can take place is if God reached out to sinners; and He did so by the sacrifice of His Son. Jesus therefore did not go to the cross because fickle people turned on Him, though they did. He did not go to the cross because demon-deceived false religious leaders platted His death, though they did. He did not go to the cross because Judas betrayed Him, though He did. He did not die because an angry mob intimidated a Roman governor into sentencing Him, though they did. Jesus went to the cross as the outworking of God’s plan to reconcile sinners to Himself. In the first sermon he ever preached (post-Pentecost event), Peter declared to the nation of Israel that Jesus was “delivered over [to death] by the

predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23).

Only God could design an atonement for sin that would satisfy the demands of His justice, propitiate His wrath, and be consistent w/His love, grace and mercy.

Only God knew what it would take to rescue sinners “from the domain of darkness, and [transfer them] to the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Col. 1:13). Only God knew how to make sinners who deserve hell acceptable in His sight and fit to spend eternity in His presence. Therefore, only God could author and execute the plan of redemption and reconcile sinners to Himself.<sup>d</sup>

In these verses (2 Cor. 5:18-21), the most theological section of the Corinthian epistle, Paul gives a comprehensive statement of how God has made this reconciliation possible.

Are you interested in doctrine? Do you have any interest in theology? (Have you read any good theology books lately?)

On the ground that Christian theology has in the past dealt with very unimportant and to many persons today irrelevant subjects or topics and that today’s world has utterly different concerns and values, some would jettison the entire present theological task. Mention is often made of the supposedly central medieval theological issue as to how many angels can stand on the point of a pin. J. J. Davis, points out the popularity of the belief “No creed but the Bible.” He writes: “Barton Stone, founder of the ‘Disciples’ or ‘Christian’ movement, was a frontier revivalist who was ordained as a Presbyterian but who soon found Presbyterian doctrines and polity unsuitable. Stone considered all denominational structures suspect and vowed to acknowledge ‘no name but Christian and no creed but the Bible.’ In his effort to clean the slate of church history Stone concluded that eighteen centuries of creeds, confessions, and theologies should be ‘consigned to the rubbish heap of human invention on which Christ was crucified.’ Stone’s New Testament Christianity’ had no use for the historic theology of the church. The same anti-theological sentiments can be found in a later representative of the American revival tradition, Dwight L. Moody. ‘My theology! I didn’t know I had any,’ Moody declared. ‘I wish you would tell me what my theology is.’ Moody saw little or no value in the study of literature, drama, or the liberal arts; the Bible alone was enough for the Christian’s

education."<sup>e</sup> Theology, however, deals rather with the ultimate and vital issues of human origins, transcendent reality, sin and punishment, evil and suffering, and life after death. These are not trivial in any human epoch or era.

But before we shake our heads in disbelief thinking “who would ever say anything like that,” consider this comment by Michael Lawrence. He writes:

“It used to be, a century or two ago, that theology was primarily done in the church and for the church. . . . the primary audience of theology, and the primary constructors of theology, were Christians gathered in the local assembly. Somewhere along the way, however, that ceased to be the case. David Wells has even made the case that not only is theology not done in the local church, it’s increasingly not welcome there.

Instead, the church has become enamored with business practice and psychological method. Her leaders are expected to be CEO’s, not pastor-theologians. The church’s public gatherings are designed to be events that appeal to the outsider, rather than assemblies that give corporate expression to our identity as the people of God. And our habits of thought tend to be shaped more by polling data, the blogosphere, and the image-driven nature of television than by the Bible. The thoughts of God and his glory, our nobility and depravity, and this world’s value and transience—thoughts that shaped and characterized the minds of previous generations of Christians—rest lightly, if at all, on the church today.

Until we recover theological vision in the church, . . . our public worship will remain shallow and entertainment-driven. Our mission will either be indistinguishable from the methods and goals of any sales organization, or it will be co-opted by the agenda of an ultimately hostile culture. This culture will encourage us to do good things like caring for the poor, but it will only applaud us if we agree to leave Christ out of it.

If we are to faithfully give witness to Christ, the Lord of Life, in this age, then we must recover not simply the ability to think theologically, but the commitment to do so together in the life of the local church<sup>f</sup>.”

Let’s study some theology for the next 10 minutes. Then, let’s “do theology” for the 10 minutes after that: let’s have our communion service in which we actually “do our theology.”

The atoning work of Christ is a complex event

that has several effects on us. Christ’s death met four needs that we have as sinners:

1. We deserve to *die* as the penalty for sin.
2. We deserve to *bear God’s wrath* against sin.
3. We are *separated* from God by our sins.
4. We are in *bondage to sin* and to the kingdom of Satan.

These four needs are met by Christ’s death. The central meaning of the death of Christ focuses on these four basic ideas: Christ’s death was a substitution for sinners, a propitiation in relation to God, a reconciliation in relation to man, and a redemption in relation to sin. Therefore, the four words that deal with the meaning of the death of Christ are: substitution (sacrifice), propitiation, reconciliation, and redemption.

1. **A substitution for sinners.** The concept of “penal substitution” –

A. The view of Christ’s death being presented here is called the theory of “*penal substitution*.” Christ’s death was “penal” in that he bore a penalty when he died.

B. His death was also a “substitution” in that he was a substitute for us when he died. Clearly the Bible teaches that Christ’s death was not a matter of sympathy but of substitution.

C. This view of the atonement is sometimes called the theory of *vicarious atonement*. A “vicar” is someone who stands in the place of another or who represents another. Christ’s death was “vicarious” because he stood in our place and represented us. As our representative, he took the penalty that we deserve.

2. **A propitiation in relation to God.**

Propitiation means the turning away of wrath by an offering. To remove us from the wrath of God that we deserved, Christ died as a propitiation for our sins (*1 John 4:10* – “*In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*”).

3. **A reconciliation in our relationship with God.** Reconciliation means a change in relationship from hostility to harmony and peace between two parties. To overcome our separation from God, we needed someone to provide reconciliation and thereby bring us back into fellowship with God (*Rom. 5:1-11*; *2 Cor. 5:18-21*, *katallasso*; *Eph. 2:16*; *Col. 1:20*, *apokatallasso*).

As Seyoon Kim has summarized Paul’s statements on reconciliation, he stresses an important point: “It is not God who needs to be reconciled to human beings, but it is human beings

who need to be reconciled to God; and it is not repentance, prayers or other good works on the part of human beings that bring about reconciliation between God and human beings, but it is by his grace that God reconciles human beings to himself.”<sup>g</sup>

4. **A redemption in relation to sin.** Redemption means liberation because of a payment made. The word *redemption* comes from the Greek word *agorazo* and means “to purchase in the marketplace.” Frequently it had to do with the sale of slaves in the marketplace. The word is used to describe the being purchased out of the slave-market of sin and set free from sin’s bondage. The purchase price for the believer’s freedom and release from sin was the death of Jesus Christ (*1 Cor. 6:20*—“*For you have been bought with a price: therefore, glorify God in your body*”; *7:23*—“*You were bought with a price; do not become slaves to men*”; *Rev. 5:9; 14:3, 4*). Application for/to us:

1. Our purpose/ministry/mission is to show that Jesus’ death on the cross appeased God’s anger toward sin and replaced it with His acceptance of sinners (v. 18-19). Human religions keep a running tab of sin. But with Christianity, Christ paid the debt and wiped the slate clean (see *Col. 2:13-14*).

2. “*We are ambassadors. . .*” What is an ambassador (v. 20)? Ambassadors spend their lives on foreign soil. They speak a different language than the people. They have different traditions, customs, cultures, and lifestyles. They always feel somewhat like a stranger. They speak on behalf of their country, conveying its ideals, its policies, its decisions. And the reputation of their country rest in their hands. For good or for bad, their country is judged by their words and their actions.

#### D. Christ made me righteous (vs. 21).

In 5:21, fifteen words in the original Greek, given in two parallel, mutually defining clauses, we have presented to us the heart of the atonement and the “how does God reconcile us?” Commentator James Denney says of this one text on the reconciliation: It is not the puzzle of the NT, but the ultimate solution of all puzzles; . . . the key-stone of the whole system of apostolic thought. . . . It is the focus in which the reconciling love of God burns with the purest and intensest flame; it is the fountain light of all day, the master light of all seeing in the Christian revelation.<sup>h</sup>  
How are we reconciled?

1. Christ made sin. (The 1<sup>st</sup> clause: “*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin*”) Christ was made a sin offering: He became sin as our substitute and sacrifice.

2. Sinners made righteous. (The 2<sup>nd</sup> clause: “*so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*”) All our sins were credited to Christ, and the spotless perfection of his righteousness was credited to us.

The benefit of God’s imputing believer’s sins to Christ and His righteousness to them is that they (we) become righteous Him. We are “found in Him, not having a righteousness of [our] own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith” (*Phil. 3:9*). Because Jesus paid the full penalty for believers’ sin, God no longer holds it against them/us.

On the cross God treated Jesus as if He had lived our lives with all our sin, so that God could then treat us as if we lived Christ’s life of pure holiness. Our iniquitous life was legally charged to Him on the cross, as if He had lived it, so that His righteous life could be credited to us, as if we had lived it. That is the doctrine of justification by imputation—the high point of the gospel. That truth, expressed so concisely and powerfully by Paul in this text, is the only cure for the sin plague.<sup>i</sup>

R. Kent Hughes writes: Living out the righteousness of God was a burning concern to Paul. In terms of Paul’s concern in this chapter it means to live our lives in the reality of the coming resurrection when we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ (cf. 5:10). It means serving God motivated by both the fear of God and the love of Christ (cf. 5:11-15). It means being done with fleshly regard for Christ and others (cf. 5:16, 17). It means, instead, regarding our brothers and sisters as new creations in Christ. It means living in the spirited-directed freedoms of the new covenant (cf. 5:17). It means embracing the ministry and message of reconciliation and preaching its astonishing mystery — “*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God*” (5:21).<sup>j</sup>

Paul’s emphasis is that this knowledge ought to change our attitude toward Jesus as our Savior, our Lord; dedication, submission, service to Him.

How much are you like Paul? How in step are you with the Lord (*1 Cor. 11:1*)? One way to test yourself is to see how out of step you are with the

world. If you think differently, if you are out of pace, and people look at you funny, don't worry. Keep on marching onward, Christian soldier. And let the words of the poet encourage you when others start calling you odd, crazy.

"If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.

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<sup>a</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur NT Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, pp. 209-10

<sup>b</sup> Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the NT*, 253

<sup>c</sup> Scott Hafeman, 2 Corinthians, in *The NIV Application Commentary*, p. 243, 244

<sup>d</sup> MacArthur, *2 Corinthians*, p. 212

<sup>e</sup> *Foundations of Evangelical Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984], p. 57.

<sup>f</sup> *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church*, Crossway Publ. 2010, pp. 109-10

<sup>g</sup> Seyoon Kim, "2 Cor. 5:11-21 and the Origin of Paul's Concept of 'Reconciliation,'" *NovT* 39 (1997): 362.

<sup>h</sup> James Denney, *The Second Epistle of the Corinthians*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll [New York: A.C. Armstrong and Sons, 1903], p. 218.

<sup>i</sup> MacArthur, *2 Cor.*, p. 216-17

<sup>j</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness* [Crossway, 2006], p. 127.