

# So that we might become the righteousness and justice of God

Re-examining the gospel in 2 Cor 5:21 for the church's contribution to a better world

Dustin W. Ellington<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article interprets Paul's summary of the gospel in 2 Cor 5:21 as saying that Christ died so that believers might be transformed into God's righteousness (not only deemed as righteous by God). The article explains the powerfully generative nature of God's righteousness and then demonstrates that *dikaïosunē* also means justice. The interpretation of 2 Cor 5:21 clarifies that the gospel Christians believe for salvation also transforms them to embody God's righteousness and justice. This enlarged angle on Paul's view of the gospel serves as a basis for teaching a seamless continuity between believing in Jesus Christ and becoming a force for justice in the world.

**Keywords:** 2 Cor 5:21, Church, Gospel, Justice, Righteousness, Transformation

## 1. Introduction<sup>2</sup>

This article explores the nature of the Christian gospel in an effort to understand what the gospel may contribute toward establishing righteousness and justice in the world. Sometimes the gospel we Christians proclaim promotes escaping the reality that this world is neither righteous nor just, whether through focusing on questionable promises of health and wealth in this life (see Ellington 2014:327-342; Gbote & Kgatla 2014:1-10), concentrating on promises of the life to come (however true to the witness of Scripture), or appreciating almost exclusively the individual and personal benefits of salvation. A motivating concern for this article is that Christians may be failing to contribute as much as we could toward a better world, because we fail to recognize the resources for human transformation toward righteousness and justice which reside within the gospel. This investigation turns to Scripture for a description of the gospel that responds to the need for transformation toward both

<sup>1</sup> Dustin Ellington is a lecturer in New Testament and Greek at Justo Mwaile University and a research fellow of the Department of New Testament, University of the Free State. He can be contacted at [ellingtondustin@gmail.com](mailto:ellingtondustin@gmail.com).

<sup>2</sup> The author thanks those who gave responses to earlier versions of this paper at the Annual Meeting of the American Society of Missiology (June 2015 in Chicago) and at the conference Re-thinking Righteousness and Justice in Society, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa (Aug 2015).

personal righteousness and social justice, for the sake of the church's contribution to Africa and beyond.

Paul's letters to the Corinthians give extended attention to the relationship between the gospel and the formation of a Christian way of living in the world. This essay will focus on one of Paul's key summaries of the gospel. The apostle states in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "He (God) made him who did not know sin to be sin for our sake, in order that we might become the righteousness of God in him."<sup>3</sup> This essay concentrates mainly on the final portion of 2 Cor 5:21. Margaret Thrall states: "The traditional understanding of 'becoming God's righteousness' is that it means 'being justified by God'" (1994:442). I affirm that Paul's gospel includes the change in status from guilty to justified, but this does not do justice to the statement of the gospel in 2 Cor 5:21. While we might expect Paul to say, "He made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, in order that we might be justified", Paul actually says, "that we might become God's righteousness".<sup>4</sup> Paul's assertion that we become God's righteousness is not the same as saying that we are justified, or pronounced righteous.<sup>5</sup> This essay does not downplay justification or soteriology; it would be more accurate to say that it takes soteriology more expansively, as including the establishment of a transformed and world-restoring community through the gospel and through our union with Christ.<sup>6</sup>

When we interpret 2 Cor 5:21 in the literary context of 2 Corinthians, we can find insight into the relationship between God's righteousness and justice and believers'

<sup>3</sup> All translations are the author's own unless stated otherwise.

<sup>4</sup> Morna Hooker (2008:369) observes that most interpreters have tended to interpret *dikaïosun* (righteousness) in 2 Cor 5:21 as a genitive of origin ("righteousness from God") with the ultimate meaning of *dikai thentes* ("having been justified"), as though Paul meant that we are given the verdict that we are righteous. While this interpretation is conceivable, in light of the literary context of 2 Corinthians as a whole, it is not persuasive. Moreover, Paul chose the noun *dikaïosun*, not the participle *dikai thentes*, even as he does in 2 Cor 3:9; 6:7, 14; 9:9-10; and 11:15. In 2 Corinthians, Paul does not use the participle related to *dikaio*, though he frequently utilizes it in Romans and Galatians. We should not assume the same line of thought in 2 Corinthians as in Romans and Galatians.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Hays (1996:24) states: Paul "does not say ... 'that we might receive the righteousness of God.' Instead, the church is to become the righteousness of God". This contrasts with the positions of Harris (2005:455) and Collins (2013:126), who interpret *dikaïosun* in 2 Cor 5:21 as essentially meaning "justification". Thrall (1994:444) speaks mainly of a "change in status", though affirms that Paul has in mind more than simple imputation, on account of our being united with Christ. Thrall rightly states: "In the first half of the verse Paul has described the first element of a dual process of identification and exchange" (1994:442). I take Thrall's assertion as less than correct when she says 5:21 relates reconciliation to justification. The accent of 5:21 is upon exchange that brings transformation, which is more than justification. I commend Stegman (2011) for demonstrating that Paul's language related to *dikaïosun*, in 2 Corinthians and beyond, is not only juridical but also deeply concerned with transformation.

<sup>6</sup> This view accords with the New Perspective on Paul in recognizing the apostle's central interests in participation in Christ and ecclesiology.

own righteousness and justice.<sup>7</sup> This insight includes discovering that the gospel itself is a basis of human transformation. The article argues that, when 2 Cor 5:21 is interpreted properly, the gospel paves the way for believers' transformation toward embodying, and becoming agents of, God's righteousness and justice in this world.

## 2. Becoming God's righteousness

This first section of the essay will demonstrate that in 2 Cor 5:21, and in the context of 2 Corinthians 3-6 as a whole, Paul is concerned with the transformation of believers. The section will then briefly describe Paul's thought about how this transformation happens. Following this, it will explore transformation's goal in some detail.

### 2.1 The Church Becoming

Scholars have traditionally argued that in 2 Corinthians Paul is concerned with himself and his own apostleship (Güttgemanns 1966:27-28; Hafemann 1990:59-71, 2000:185; Thrall 2004:105-107; Wright 1993:203-208; Gignilliat 2007: 33-35), not so much the vocation and transformation of the church.<sup>8</sup> That position, however, misses the reality that Paul ties together very closely the validation of his ministry with what the Corinthian believers have become and who they are becoming. So Paul says, "We do not need letters of recommendation to you or from you as some, do we? You are our letter... known and read by all people" (2 Cor 3:1-2).<sup>9</sup> I propose that Paul is defending not mainly himself or his apostleship – he only uses the term *apostolos* once in the first seven chapters, and only six times in 2 Corinthians as a whole.<sup>10</sup> Instead, Paul is defending, depicting, and explaining his *manner* of ministry (see also Stegman 2005:217-218; 2009:15, 23, 25-26; 2011:500), a path of serving and living by the way of the cross (cf. Hooker 2008:365). This way of life

<sup>7</sup> The focus of this essay does not allow us to deal with righteousness and justice in relation to all the varied expressions of the gospel in the New Testament, including the literature of the synoptic gospels. Moreover, the article deals with many interpretive questions related to 2 Cor 5:21, but it does not attempt to cover them all.

<sup>8</sup> The predominance of this perspective on 2 Corinthians may be weakening. Raymond Collins (2013:98) states: "The 'we' of whom he writes is himself in the first instance, but much of what he has to say pertains as well to his fellow evangelists and the believers to whom he is writing." Stegman's commentary (2009) is also more open to this perspective than scholars have generally been in the past, and his earlier work (2005:304) states strongly that Paul's true goal is for the Corinthians to appropriate "for themselves the very ethos of Jesus". Moreover, Lim's narrative approach (2009) interprets Paul as addressing the Corinthians' story even as he speaks of his own life.

<sup>9</sup> Regarding 2 Cor 3:2, see also Hooker (2008:373): "What they [the Corinthians] are validates both his ministry and his gospel." Moreover, Hays (1989:144) asserts that the Corinthians' transformation into Christ's image (3:18) clarifies Paul's claim that they are a letter from Christ (3:2).

<sup>10</sup> Paul demonstrates greater attention to ministry than to apostleship. He mentions ministry (*diakonia*) twelve times, ministers (*diakonoi*) five times (always plural), and the verb form (*diakonein*) three times in 2 Corinthians.

and service may be encapsulated by the words “power in weakness” and “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, that the life of Jesus may be manifest...” (2 Cor 4:10). I affirm with Hooker (2008:365-367) and Stegman (2005:304) that Paul believes this path belongs to the church as a whole – not just apostles (Ellington 2012:327-342). By using the self-reference “we” in 2 Corinthians instead of “I” as he usually does in 1 Corinthians, Paul is able to explain and defend his manner of ministry while also depicting a vocation for the Corinthians that befits their participation in Christ and the gospel.

While Paul’s use of the pronoun “we” refers first to himself and his immediate colleagues in ministry, he includes the word “all” at certain points to demonstrate that these pronouns tend also to include the Corinthians (2 Cor 3:18; 5:14-15). This also enables Paul to make statements about the transformation of believers’ moral character (most explicitly in 3:18; 5:15, 21), for the sake of depicting and commending a vocation to them, though scholars have usually failed to recognize that Paul has such a transformation in mind. Concerning 2 Cor 5:21, Thrall (1994:443) states: “It is doubtful whether Paul also has in mind righteousness of moral character.” Yet Paul affirms: “We all... are being transformed” into the image of Christ (3:18).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, “The love of Christ controls us... because one died for all... And he died for all, so that the ones who live might no longer live for themselves but for the one who died for them” (5:14-15). In addition to Paul’s use of “all” to demonstrate the inclusiveness of his affirmations, Paul also uses the indefinite pronoun *tis* to signify that his statements about Christ and the gospel relate not only to himself as an apostle but to Christians generally: “If *anyone* (*tis*) is in Christ, (he is) a new creation (5:17)” (see also Hooker 2008:367). In such a context, Paul says in 5:21, “He (God) made the one who did not know sin to be sin on our behalf, in order that we might become the righteousness of God in him”. The “we” in 5:21 is not just Paul and his partners, but another significant reference to the church as a whole (contra Wright 1993:203).

From the literary context of 2 Cor 5:21, we can see that Paul does have in mind the transformation of the church, even as he simultaneously describes his own gospel ministry. Richard Hays (1996:24) has observed a connection between Paul’s word “become” (*ginomai*) in 5:21 and the transformation of believers into Christ’s

---

<sup>11</sup> Litwa (2008:117) mistakenly claims that Paul’s image language in 3:18 “seems only loosely connected to the context of Paul’s argument in 2 Corinthians 3 and 4”. In reality, Paul integrally relates the *eikōn* language of 3:18 and 4:4 with his claims about embodied proclamation, the manifestation of Jesus through the lives of apostles and believers (2:14; 4:5-7, 10-11). See also Tack (2015) for 2 Cor 3:18 in the literary context of 2 Corinthians 3-4. Wright (1987:147), however, states that the image in 3:18 is not Christ’s but that of fellow believers; this is not convincing in light of Paul’s thought in 2 Corinthians 3-5 as a whole (see also Tack’s criticisms 2015:99).

image (3:18). Moreover, Paul uses the same word *ginomai* in 5:17 when he affirms of believers generally: “If anyone is in Christ, (he is) a new creation; the old things have gone, and new things have come (*become*)”.<sup>12</sup> Paul’s attention to what believers are becoming also fits other descriptions of them: God “giving us the ministry of reconciliation” (5:18), God placing the ministry of reconciliation “in us” (5:19), and God making us ambassadors of Christ (5:20).<sup>13</sup> These descriptors mark believers’ new identity and involve taking on a special sort of character. Certainly they describe Paul as an apostle, but they also invite the Corinthians to recognize and claim an identity for themselves (see also Hooker 2008:367, 375). These various traits fill out what it means to be transformed into Christ’s image (3:18), and what it means that we are becoming the righteousness of God. 2 Cor 5:21 is a statement of the gospel but also a statement about the identity and vocation toward which the church is being transformed. This article’s observations point to the truth of Gorman’s claim (2015:248): “2 Corinthians 5:21 – despite centuries of argument about its implicit doctrines of the atonement and of justification – is fundamentally a text about participation and transformation.”

## 2.2 The Means and Path of Transformation

Paul’s statement “that we might become the righteousness of God in him” refers to a transformation which we can more or less describe. Some might fear that the idea of people becoming God’s righteousness implies that humans make themselves righteous. The transformation, however, is the work of God, occurring through our being united with Christ, which the final two words of 2 Cor 5:21, “in him”, summarize. Our participation in Christ is the means to our transformation, even as Paul says earlier that “if anyone is *in Christ*, (he is) a new creation” (5:17).

Although the short answer to how the transformation happens is “in Christ”, Paul’s various statements about the gospel in 2 Cor 5:21 and the surrounding context begin to map the path. When Christ died, he “was made sin” in order that we might become – be transformed into – God’s righteousness. In earlier verses, Paul describes the meaning and function of Christ’s death in this way: His death was the death of all, so that the love of Christ might determine our steps (5:14). Afterward the apostle says, “He died for all, in order that those who live might live no longer

<sup>12</sup> Since Paul’s words in 2 Cor 5:17 do not include “he is” before “new creation” (translators tend to assume the words as implicit), Paul may actually be speaking of a new creation which is much broader than the term “believers”. But certainly it includes them. Aletti (2004:117) is helpful in interpreting 5:21 with the language of 5:17, and states: “Our righteousness is not a pure forensic declaration, but a real new human nature.”

<sup>13</sup> Although my work builds in a number of ways upon that of Hooker, I differ with her claim (2008:368) that Paul narrows his focus strictly to his own vocation in 2 Cor 5:18b, 19b, and 20a.

for themselves but for the one who died for them and was raised” (5:15). Christ died so that people might die to one way of life and live a different kind of life. Moreover, Paul speaks earlier of the gospel as a manifestation of Christ, who is the image of God (4:4, 6). As we perceive Christ, we are being continuously transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another (3:18). As we are united with him and his suffering, we begin to manifest his life through our own bodily life (4:10-11).<sup>14</sup> We also receive a continuous, daily renewal through the revelation of Christ to our perception (4:16, 18),<sup>15</sup> until we are finally raised with the Lord Jesus (4:14; cf. 5:1-5). While this section has not entirely explained how transformation happens, we see the contours of the path, and we recognize that transformation is not a human accomplishment. Rather, God achieves our transformation through Christ’s death, as God reveals Christ to us and unites us with him.

### 2.3 God’s Righteousness as Transformation’s Goal

For Paul, Christ’s death engenders a people who live differently, with a new purpose and vocation, as we are united with him. The means of our transformation – the gospel and our being in Christ (2 Cor 5:17, 21) – shape what we become. Both our reception of the gospel and our being “in Christ” transform us to become like Christ (3:18).<sup>16</sup> We take on the character and pattern of the gospel itself (see also Gorman 2015:249). However, when 2 Cor 5:21 speaks of transformation’s goal in a new way, by saying that Christ’s death occurred so that we might become the righteousness (*dikaiosunē*) of God, what does Paul mean?<sup>17</sup>

An obstacle to our understanding is that the apostle does not use the term *dikaiosunē* as frequently in 2 Corinthians as in some other letters; still, through the context of 2 Corinthians as a whole, we can gain a reasonably clear picture.<sup>18</sup> We begin with the recognition of God’s righteousness as meaning an absence of sin, which is implicit in the exchange which 2 Cor 5:21 describes. The first half of the verse speaks of Christ as not knowing sin (he was righteous) and yet being

<sup>14</sup> Hays (1989:144) also links 3:18 with 4:11, affirming, “Because they are being changed into the likeness of Christ, they manifest the life of Jesus in their mortal flesh (cf. 2 Cor. 4:11)”.

<sup>15</sup> The present tense verbs of 3:18 (*katoptriz* and *metamorpho*) and 4:16 (*egkake* and *anakaino*), and the present participle (*skope*) of 4:18, emphasize a continuous process.

<sup>16</sup> Hooker (2008:375) states: “What Christ is to us ..., Christians must now be to the world.”

<sup>17</sup> I am mostly persuaded by Burk (2012:346-360) that Paul’s phrase “the righteousness of God” (*dikaiosun theou*), cannot be a subjective or an objective genitive. I interpret the genitive as possessive; Paul speaks of God’s righteousness. On linguistic grounds, Burk wants to interpret *dikaiosun* as an attribute, but not an activity. However, to interpret God’s righteousness, precedence must be given to the way Paul uses the term in his own writing. For Paul, God’s righteousness is an attribute characterized by activity and power. See Käsemann 1969:173, 174.

<sup>18</sup> We should not assume that the phrase means precisely the same thing in 2 Corinthians as it means in Paul’s other letters; we must allow the immediate literary context to take precedence.

made sin, so that we might become God's righteousness.<sup>19</sup> We also find Paul's term *dikaiousunē* meaning the absence of sin in 6:14, where Paul contrasts *dikaiousunē* with lawlessness (*anomia*).<sup>20</sup>

However, the wider context fills out *dikaiousunē* as something more robust than the absence or avoidance of sin; Paul speaks in 2 Cor 3:9 of the "ministry of righteousness" (*diakonia tēs dikaiousunēs*; cf. 11:15). The apostle contrasts this ministry with the "ministry of condemnation" (also in 3:9), a parallel terminology which suggests that the ministry of righteousness brings about righteousness as a result. Yet this observation is not entirely adequate.

While the parallel with condemnation points toward righteousness as an object, Paul also draws a parallel between the "ministry of righteousness" and the "ministry of the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:8); this points toward righteousness as a subject.<sup>21</sup> Paul identifies "the ministry of righteousness" with "the ministry of the Spirit" so closely that they are almost interchangeable terms. We must ponder the significance of this intimate link. The Spirit plays a central and highly generative role in 2 Corinthians 3;<sup>22</sup> certainly the Spirit functions more prominently than the role of condemnation in Paul's argument. The Spirit writes upon human hearts (3:3), "makes life" (3:6), produces freedom to gaze upon and reflect Christ's glory with an unveiled face (3:16-17), and engenders human transformation (3:18). The parallel terminology between the ministry of righteousness and the ministry of the Spirit points to righteousness as a power which performs ministry, even as the Spirit does. By aligning the ministry of righteousness with the ministry of the Spirit, Paul affirms the force of righteousness as a partner and agent with the Spirit in producing life and transfor-

<sup>19</sup> When Paul says that God made Christ sin (*hamartia*) in 5:21, I take *hamartia* to mean sin, not a "sin-offering" (cf. Gal 3:13). See also Collins 2013:125-126; Thrall 1994:440-441; Aletti 2004:102-109; and Hooker 2008:369. Contra Stegman 2005:186-187; 2011:502.

<sup>20</sup> Many scholars reject 6:14-7:1 as not belonging to the same source as its surrounding verses. This is plausible, but as Hooker (2008:373) observes, there is no textual evidence in support of this perspective, and the emphasis on holiness is compatible with Paul's stress on believers becoming God's righteousness.

<sup>21</sup> Grammatically, the main options for "ministry of righteousness" (*diakonia t s dikaiousunēs*) are as follows: the ministry that is done by righteousness (subjective genitive), the ministry which originates in righteousness (genitive of source, which turns out to be very similar to the preceding explanation), the ministry that produces or brings about righteousness (objective genitive), and the ministry marked by righteousness (adjectival/qualitative genitive; see Furnish 1984:204). The possibility of the subjective genitive trumps the others, including the objective genitive, because of the close link between righteousness and the Spirit in Paul's line of thought. Righteousness in 2 Corinthians 3 is more like the Spirit than it is like condemnation (or life and freedom, which are also objects and results). However, the resulting meaning of *diakonia t s dikaiousunēs* as a subjective genitive, in the case of 2 Cor 3:9, is similar to that of the objective genitive, because the ministry which righteousness (as a power and a subject) carries out leads to the same result: righteousness.

<sup>22</sup> Tack (2015:102) observes of 2 Corinthians 3: "The Spirit... is the defining characteristic of the new covenant (3,6)."

mation. This righteousness is actually God's righteousness, even as Paul speaks of God's righteousness in 2 Cor 5:21. Moreover, in light of its Greek root *dik-*, we can affirm with Hooker (2008:374) that this righteousness is "a restorative power".<sup>23</sup> The close link with the transforming power of the Spirit guides us to an ethical, not mainly a legal, reading of righteousness in 2 Cor 3:9.<sup>24</sup> The ministry of righteousness effects righteousness. It restores us to be right-acting people; it transforms us so that we embody the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21).

In 2 Cor 6:7, Paul speaks of "weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left". Paul's words, falling immediately after he mentions "the power of God" in the same verse, and the Holy Spirit in the previous verse, echo "the ministry of righteousness" and "the ministry of the Spirit" in 3:8-9. In 6:7, however, Paul calls the life of ministry a war, a difficult existence lived on behalf of others (6:10-13; cf. 10:4; Rom 6:13). Righteousness supplies and wields weapons, empowers one to be "fully equipped for battle" (Furnish 1984:346), and renders one capable of offense and defence (Seifrid 2014:281).<sup>25</sup> The terminology in 6:7 suggests that righteousness is a force sustaining believers to endure hardship and prevail in a life of Christian service.

Further afield from 2 Cor 5:21, but not unlike the joining of righteousness with the life-generating power of the Spirit in 2 Cor 3:6-9, we find in 2 Cor 9:8-10 that Paul likens righteousness to God's empowering grace. We will discuss this passage

<sup>23</sup> Therefore we can agree with Käsemann who, citing 2 Cor 3:18 and 4:6, observed that the glory deprived at the Fall "now streams into the world from within the *diakonia* [ministry] *t s dikaiosun s*".

<sup>24</sup> Stegman also affirms the ethical interpretation (2009:84). Contra Harris (2005:287), who calls *dikaosun* here "a relational rather than an ethical term, denoting a right standing before God, given by God ... the status of being 'in the right' before the court of heaven". Contra Collins (2013:84) also, who is led by Paul's contrast between righteousness and condemnation to say that the apostle is using "juridical language", and so translates *dikaosun* as "justification". It must be along the same lines that the NRSV translates *diakonia t s dikaiosun s* here as "the ministry of justification", as though Paul uses the word *dikai sis*. While the NRSV translation can suit Paul's contrast with condemnation (Thrall 1994:249), and can fit the language of reconciliation in 2 Cor 5:18-19, it does not do justice to Paul's number of statements in the context of 2 Corinthians 3-5 about the gospel and Christ leading to transformation and a different way of life for believers. We should normally translate *dikaosun* as "righteousness" (or justice), not "justification". I read Paul's language in 2 Corinthians as generally more concerned with transformative than with juridical aspects of the gospel; however, I am intrigued with Seifrid's explanation of the contrast between righteousness and condemnation. For Seifrid (2014:157), corresponding to condemnation, righteousness "expresses the concrete effect or result of the divine judgment", which Seifrid connects with "the life that the Spirit works". Seifrid (2014:158) emphasizes that the juridical aspect is not a matter of "bare decisions but of operative statements, judgments that enact what they say." I commend the investigation of how expressions may indicate both juridical and transformative aspects of the gospel.

<sup>25</sup> Contra Collins (2013:132), who takes righteousness as an object ("arms used for the sake of righteousness"). I follow Käsemann (1969:173) in observing that righteousness in 2 Cor 6:7 is a subject, an active power, even as it is in 2 Cor 3:9 and 9:9-10. This interpretation also suits the possessive genitive for righteousness in 2 Cor 5:21.



more as we deal with righteousness as justice in the next major section of this article, but let us make some observations now. First, Paul roots the Corinthians' ability to do good works in God's grace: "And God is able to cause all grace to abound to you, in order that on every occasion, having all sufficiency, you may abound in every good work" (9:8; cf. 9:14-15). Then the apostle illustrates God's grace with words from Psalm 112:9, which mentions *not* grace but God's righteousness (*dikaïosunē* in the LXX). The Psalm states: "As it is written, 'He scattered abroad, he gave to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.'" God's grace is manifest as God's righteousness (cf. Rom 5:21), which is recognized in God's generosity to the poor. Then Paul affirms that God will increase "the yield" of the Corinthians' righteousness, as he speaks of what believers' righteousness *produces* on behalf of others (Hooker 2008:374). Paul views the Corinthians' righteousness as a participation in the righteousness and grace of God. As Käsemann (1969:170) states, "this gift [of God's righteousness] . . . is described as effective in us and through us." In the case of 2 Corinthians 9, the believers' righteousness produces sustenance for fellow believers who are impoverished. Righteousness, like grace, is a generative power effecting new circumstances on behalf of others.

These observations with regard to righteousness must inform how we interpret transformation's goal "that we might become God's righteousness". The wider context of 2 Corinthians suggests that God's righteousness, as a partner and agent with God's Spirit, is an active, generating power for restoration and transformation.<sup>26</sup> Righteousness as a force also sustains believers to endure and prevail in a difficult life of service (2 Cor 6:7). When Paul says that believers become God's righteousness (5:21), he means that they become an expression of this characteristic of God (see also Stegman 2011:502). This means also that believers become agents of restoration who, like God, put things right in the world. God's righteousness, in believers, generates new circumstances on behalf of others. As Hooker (2008:374-375) states, "If God's righteousness is a restorative power, bringing life and reconciliation, then those who 'become righteousness' will be the means of manifesting that power in the world." Paul is saying that, by becoming the righteousness of God, we become integral to God's restorative, rectifying, and transformative work. We grow to be righteous, but we also become integral to God's work of reconciling the world and producing God's righteousness in it.

This interpretation of our becoming the righteousness of God accords with, and must be filled out by, Paul's affirmations in the immediate context of 2 Cor 5:21. He says that God has given us the ministry of reconciliation (5:18) and has placed

<sup>26</sup> Stegman places significantly less emphasis on righteousness as a power in his interpretation, though we are in agreement that becoming God's righteousness, practically, looks like taking on the character of Jesus (2011:500-505).

his message of reconciliation “in us” (5:19).<sup>27</sup> We do not only believe the gospel; God has placed the message inside us, and this makes us able to go forth as ambassadors, so that God makes his appeal through us (5:20). Our interpretation of becoming God’s righteousness also fits, and is filled out by, Paul’s earlier statement that because Christ died, Christ’s love compels us (5:14), and we live not for ourselves but for Christ (5:15). God’s righteousness empowers believers for sacrificial service, for a life that produces a better life for others (2 Cor 9:9-10). Believers embody this transformative and reconciling righteousness of God.

Let us observe the significance of Paul including the statement that believers become the righteousness of God within a verse which summarizes the Christian gospel of Christ’s death on the cross. Christ died not only that we might be deemed righteous before God, but to make us an embodiment of God’s restorative righteousness in the world. Christ died so that God might make us, through Christ, participants in God’s activity and character. The gospel enables us to become righteous (ethical) people;<sup>28</sup> what is more, through Christ, the gospel gives us a new identity and vocation as God’s righteousness in the world. Because we are becoming the righteousness of God, Paul can speak immediately afterward in 2 Cor 6:1 of working together with Christ (Stegman 2009:148). Through Christ’s death, humans become partners, agents who work together with Christ and the Spirit to save the world and restore it, making right what is wrong (cf. Hooker 2008:375). We generate new circumstances on behalf of others. As believers become God’s righteousness, we take on the character and activity of establishing righteousness (and as we shall see later, justice).<sup>29</sup> This is who we are as Christians; the gospel tells us so.

For Paul, the gospel addresses the relationship between God’s righteousness and human righteousness. The *how* of our transformation, the gospel and our being “in

<sup>27</sup> Paul chooses the common and simple verb *tith mi* that means “put” or “place”, to say God put the message of reconciliation inside believers.

<sup>28</sup> Hooker (1985:9-10) states of believers: “if they are made ‘the righteousness of God in him,’ that implies *moral* righteousness—and when we ask Paul what behaviour is appropriate for those who are ‘in Christ,’ then he appeals to the example of Christ himself... The gospel demands conformity to Christ’s death.” Oddly, Reumann (1999:35) says he does not see righteousness and justice as having a significant role in Paul’s ethic.

<sup>29</sup> Seifrid (2014:263) observes that in Isaiah, a book which inspires much of the imagery in 2 Corinthians, the themes of righteousness and creation go together closely. In Is 42:1-9 (esp vv. 5-6), the God who creates also calls his servant in *dikaïosun*, and the servant is to establish justice (*krisis*). Isaiah 48 affirms God as creator and says that if the people had obeyed his commands, their *dikaïosun* would be as the waves of the sea (48:1, 6, 18). Seifrid says Paul “describes the new life given in Christ as ‘the righteousness of God’”. Reumann also observes that righteousness and salvation go together in Isaiah, which became important for Paul (1999:28, 32). Reumann mentions, for instance, that in Isaiah 51:5-6, 8 God’s righteousness and God’s accomplishment of salvation stand in parallel position (1999:28, 32). This is significant as we allow the recognition that God’s righteousness brings salvation to affect our reading of what believers become in 2 Cor 5:21.

Christ”, shapes what we become; we become like Christ, and like the gospel. We also become the righteousness of God, a force which restores righteousness in the world. We embody, and act as agents of, this kind of righteousness. Thus we begin to see the gospel as a key to transformation toward righteousness, thereby enabling believers to contribute to a better world. In the next section we must fill out this righteousness yet more – as justice.

### 3. Righteousness Is also Justice

This section looks at the broad linguistic relationship between righteousness and justice. Then it examines evidence of cohesion between righteousness and justice in Isaiah, which as we will demonstrate, informed Paul’s writing of 2 Corinthians. Finally, the section will demonstrate the link between righteousness and justice within the literary context of 2 Corinthians as a whole. Recognizing that Paul implies justice when he uses the Greek word for righteousness (*dikaiosunē*) will help us steer away from a privatistic interpretation of righteousness in Paul. The resulting explanation of 2 Cor 5:21 clarifies that the gospel Christians believe and preach for salvation is also a vital basis for just action and for holistic transformation toward justice.

#### 3.1 The linguistic relationship between righteousness and justice

The Greek noun for righteousness, *dikaiosunē*, is part of a family of words with connotations of both righteousness and justice. So in Acts 17:31, some translations say God will judge the world “in righteousness” (NRSV), while others say “in justice” (NIV). In Malachi 2:17, the people of Israel say, “Where is the God of justice?”, and the Septuagint (LXX) says, “Where is the God of *dikaiosunē*?” – translating the Hebrew word  *mishpat*  with the Greek term for righteousness. Heb 11:33 speaks of people who by faith “performed acts of righteousness”, as one translation says (NASB), but others say “enforced justice” (ESV), or “administered justice” (NIV, NRSV). James Dunn (1994:21; see also Gorman 2011:27) has argued for translating the phrase “the righteousness of God” as “the justice of God”, at least sometimes, because it would avoid what he calls “the fatal disjunction of terminology which has been the consequence of English having to translate what in Hebrew and Greek are integrated concepts – justify, righteous, righteousness, justice”. These words are all closely related, though English tends to hide this reality by splitting this one family of Greek words into two word families: righteousness and justice. For example, in 1 Cor 6:1-11, Paul uses a play on the words “unjust” (*adikos*), “do injustice” (*adikeō*) and “justify” (*dikaioō*) which tends to be obscured in translation. The apostle repeats the same stem from all of these words to describe acts of injustice, only to make a statement at the end about the power of justification to

create righteous or just people (see also Gorman 2011:32-34). Awareness of this Greek word family, and the shared meaning between the various terms, can help us to recognize a greater concern for justice in Paul's writing.

### 3.2 The cohesion between righteousness and justice in Isaiah

We find not only a linguistic connection between righteousness and justice in Paul's Greek, but also a deep connection between these terms in the Scriptures which shaped him, and to which he almost constantly alludes.<sup>30</sup> Observing the way that *dikaioσunē* holds both righteousness and justice together in the Septuagint can help us understand what meaning the apostle Paul tends to assume when he uses the word.<sup>31</sup>

Isaiah is particularly visible in Paul's thoughts and language as he writes 2 Corinthians 4-6.<sup>32</sup> Isaiah's frequent images of light and glory seem to shape Paul's thought in 2 Corinthians 3 and 4 (cf. Gignilliat 2007:37). Paul's symbol of the tent for the human body in chapter 5 probably comes from Is 38:12. Paul's reference to old things passing away, and new things appearing (5:17), reflects Is 43:18-19. The apostle's statement that believers become the righteousness of God, in a context emphasizing witness and proclamation, may reflect Isaiah's statement that "the nations will see your righteousness (*dikaioσunē*)" in the LXX of Is 62:2. Paul quotes Isaiah 49:8 when he speaks of the day of salvation in 2 Cor 6:2. Isaiah 59:17 likely stands behind Paul's idea of weapons of righteousness in 2 Cor 6:7 (Furnish 1984:346). As we can see, Isaiah figures prominently in Paul's mind as he writes to the Corinthians.

So how does Isaiah speak of righteousness, and does Isaiah hold righteousness and justice very close together? One of the first things to surface is that Isaiah tends to join words for righteousness and justice as a parallel pair. We find many such examples: Is 1:21, 27; 5:16; 9:7; 16:5; 32:1, 16; 56:1; 58:2; 59:9, 14. So we

<sup>30</sup> The inclusion of justice in the term *dikaioσunē* is indicative of the Old Testament and Judaism as a whole, as Hooker (2008:370) states: "In Jewish thought, God's righteousness is his integrity, his faithfulness to the covenant, his justice; it is demonstrated in putting things right, and is therefore revealed in both salvation and judgment." See also Stuhlmacher (2001:19), as quoted by Burk (2012:353): "'God's righteousness' in the Old Testament and early Judaism means, above all, the activity of the one God to create welfare and salvation in the creation, in the history of Israel, and in the situation of the (end-time) judgment." The "creation of welfare" fits the definition of biblical justice which I use in this article.

<sup>31</sup> In dealing with his congregations, Paul would also have encountered conceptions of justice from the wider Greco-Roman world. See Reumann's exploration (1999:27, 35-45).

<sup>32</sup> Gignilliat (2007) has closely researched the relationship between 2 Corinthians 5:14-6:10 and Isaiah 40-66, focusing on Paul's theological reading of Isaiah's Servant. Gignilliat argues that Paul's own sense of vocation is shaped by the "servants of the Servant" in Isaiah 53-66. See also Lim (2009:131) for Isaiah's influence on 2 Corinthians.

read: “How the faithful city has become a whore, she who was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers” (Is 1:21, NRSV). This statement, that *dikaiosunē* (LXX) dwelled in the city which was full of justice, apparently identifies righteousness as the people of God, as does 2 Cor 5:21.<sup>33</sup> We also find: “He [the LORD] expected justice (*krisis*), but saw bloodshed; righteousness (*dikaiosunē*), but heard a cry” (Is 5:7, NRSV). The parallel suggests that righteousness and justice go together in meaning, even as “bloodshed” and “a cry” unite in describing the absence of justice and righteousness. Yet another example: “Keep justice (*krisis*), and do righteousness (*dikaiosunē*), for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed” (Is 56:1, ESV). Righteousness as *dikaiosunē* can also appear by itself in Isaiah, yet with connotations of social justice: “The works of righteousness will be peace” in the land (LXX, Is 32:17a).

The reality that Isaiah influenced Paul’s writing of 2 Corinthians, and that Isaiah in the LXX closely associates *dikaiosunē* with justice, suggests that Paul also thought of justice when he used the term. Paul was no stranger to Isaiah’s ways of thinking. The light from the larger canonical context, from the intertextual links with 2 Corinthians, suggests that Paul would have understood righteousness as including justice.

### 3.3 Righteousness as justice in 2 Corinthians

We also find evidence within the literary context of 2 Cor 5:21 that, for Paul, *dikaiosunē* includes justice. His mention of “weapons of righteousness” (6:7) connotes the strong and interventionist nature of *dikaiosunē* for Paul. While we do not find more instances of the term *dikaiosunē* in the immediate context of 5:21, other statements help us to recognize that this robust quality compels believers to act for the sake of others. 2 Cor 5:14-15 affirms a way of life for believers resulting from the death of Jesus: The love of Christ controls us, and Christ died for all so that we who live will no longer live for ourselves. The statement that Christ died for all helps us to understand that Christ’s compelling love directs us toward love for all. The statements of 5:14-15, since they occur in the immediate context of 5:21, should inform the interpretation of our key verse. Christ’s death redirects the social plane. Becoming the righteousness of God means transformation to live on behalf of others.

In the wider context of 2 Corinthians, Paul makes significant statements in 9:8-10 about God’s *dikaiosunē* as justice which empowers believers themselves to act with *dikaiosunē* as social justice. First, Paul grounds what he will urge the Corin-

<sup>33</sup> Grieb (2006:73) mentions this and other references in Isaiah, including Is 1:26 and 60:21, where, as in 2 Cor 5:21, righteousness refers to the people of God, and implies the just character of the people.

thians to do in the notion of God's grace; their sufficiency to abound in any good work is an expression of their reception of grace and participation in it (9:8; cf. 8:9). As mentioned earlier, Paul then identifies God's grace with God's *dikaiosunē*, quoting Psalm 112:9 in 2 Cor 9:9: "He has scattered (seed), he has given to the poor, his righteousness (*dikaiosunē*) endures forever."<sup>34</sup> In this verse, God's righteousness is a manifestation of his grace, and is generosity – economic justice – on behalf of the poor (see also Grieb 2006:59, 74).<sup>35</sup> In 9:10, Paul goes on to tell the Corinthians, God will "increase the yield of your *dikaiosunē*", while encouraging them to be generous toward the impoverished believers in Jerusalem. We can easily translate *dikaiosunē* in 9:9-10 as justice, so that Paul speaks of both God's justice and that of the Corinthians, with the former enabling the latter. God's generous justice generates a harvest of the Corinthian believers' justice.<sup>36</sup> In 2 Cor 9:9-10, believers' *dikaiosunē* is socioeconomic justice – generosity as an expression of participation in God's generous justice.

#### 4. Conclusion

This essay began by contemplating how the gospel might speak into a world that is not right and just, a world in which Christians too often describe the gospel in ways which fail to take account of its potential as a resource for transformative justice and righteousness. The focus then turned to the nature of the gospel as stated by Paul in 2 Cor 5:21. The study has been motivated by a desire to identify links between the gospel of Christ's death and the church's contribution to righteousness and justice in this world.

##### 4.1 Our investigation has led us to recognize the following:

The gospel in 2 Cor 5:21, interpreted in its own literary context, affirms that the church is being transformed to embody God's righteousness. The means to this transformation is our being "in Christ", and Paul's various statements about the gospel in 2 Corinthians map the path and goal of transformation.

Righteousness for Paul is the avoidance of sin, but it is also more creative and robust than this. Paul identifies righteousness very closely with the Spirit and grace.

<sup>34</sup> As tends to be the case elsewhere, the Hebrew word *tsedek* lies behind the Greek word *dikaiosunē* in Ps 112:9.

<sup>35</sup> Reumann, similarly, says that righteousness in 2 Cor 9:9-10 is "benevolence" (1999:36). We should also notice Paul's use of *isotēs* in 2 Cor 8:13-14 as he says his goal is that there should be economic fairness among believers in different localities.

<sup>36</sup> See also Grieb 2006: 59, 74. Gorman (2015:252) recognizes, as I do, a relationship between 2 Cor 9:9-10, 5:21, and the self-giving of Christ in 8:9, stating: "Paul calls the Corinthians, as beneficiaries of this greatest gift, to participate in it more fully and responsibly...by sharing in the grace of Christ, which is summarized in 8:9, and the justice of God, which is summarized in 9:9-10."

God's righteousness is God's character and activity to create righteousness in humans. God works through the gospel to transform human existence into God's own righteousness, so that believers become righteous themselves, and also God's agents and partners who generate righteousness. Believers embody, and become integral to, God's own reconciling, restorative righteousness in the world.

For Paul, righteousness also means justice. We see this in light of the following: the linguistic links between the two words, the connection between righteousness and justice in writings which influenced Paul, and in the literary context of 2 Corinthians as a whole, where God's righteousness includes God's generous, grace-inspired justice.

The gospel itself grants believers an identity as people who are agents of God's justice. Invitations to faith in Jesus Christ need also to be invitations to become a force for God's generous justice – for restoring the world, for making right what is wrong. Christian preaching and education must imbue believers with this identity. A better understanding of the gospel can help Christians to be transformed to embody, and become agents of, God's righteousness and justice.

Teaching this approach to the gospel is vital for the worldwide church. In an era of tense Christian-Muslim relations, with attendant pressure from wars and forced immigration, it is critical that the church be filled with Christians who live not for themselves but instead are being transformed into the righteousness and justice of God. Moreover, this teaching in regard to the gospel may be especially important in sub-Saharan Africa, where in many countries the gospel has spread with rapidity, to an extent that the church has expanded to include most of the population. Yet, in these same places, the gospel is still a relatively new idea, and is in a state of flux in terms of how believers describe it.<sup>37</sup> If new converts and all believers come to know without reservation that we are being "saved" in order to become agents of righteousness and justice in the world, that self-understanding will shape our way of life in society. It will deepen the Christian life we live, it will strengthen our witness as we embody the gospel, and it will expand the difference we make toward a better world.

## References

- Aletti, J.-P. 2004. God Made Christ to Be Sin: Reflections on a Pauline Paradox, in *The Redemption: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on Christ as Redeemer*, edited by S.T. Davis, D. Kendall, and G. O'Collins. New York: Oxford:101-120.

---

<sup>37</sup> The spread of the "prosperity gospel" in Africa has especially led to varying concepts with respect to the gospel. See Golo (2013:366-369), Kroesbergen (2014), and Togarasei (2011).

- Burk, D. 2012. The Righteousness of God (*Dikaioσunē Theou*) and Verbal Genitives: A Grammatical Clarification. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 34(4):346-360.
- Collins, R.F. 2013. *Second Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Dunn, J.D.G. 1998. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Dunn, J.D.G. and Suggate, A.M. 1994. *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Eastman, S. 2010. Philippians 2:6-11: Incarnation as Mimetic Participation. *Journal for the Study of Paul and his Letters* 1(1):1-22.
- Ellington, D.W. 2012. Not Applicable to Believers?: The Aims and Basis of Paul's "I in 2 Corinthians 10-13. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131(2):327-342.
- Ellington, D.W. 2013. Is the Prosperity Gospel Biblical? A Critique in Light of Literary Context and Union with Christ, in *In Search of Health and Wealth: The Prosperity Gospel in African, Reformed Perspective*, edited by H. Kroesbergen. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock:36-51.
- Furnish, V.P. 1984. *II Corinthians (The Anchor Bible)*. New York: Doubleday.
- Gbote, E.Z.M. and Kgalta, S.T. 2014. Prosperity gospel: A missiological assessment, *HTS Theological Studies* 70(1), Art. #2105, 10 pages. [http:// dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2105](http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2105).
- Gignilliat, M. 2007. *Paul and Isaiah's Servants: Paul's Theological Reading of Isaiah 40-66 in 2 Corinthians 5:14-6:10*. London: T & T Clark.
- Golo, B.-W.K. 2013. Africa's Poverty and Its Neo-Pentecostal "Liberators": An Ecotheological Assessment of Africa's Prosperity Gospellers. *Pneuma* 35:366-384.
- Gorman, M. 2011. Justification and Justice in Paul, *Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters* 1(1):23-40.
- Gorman, M. 2015. *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Grieb, A.K. 2006. "So That in Him We Might Become the Righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21): Some Theological Reflections on the Church Becoming Justice. *Ex Auditu* 22:58-80.
- Güttgemanns, E. 1966. *Der leidende Apostel und sein Herr: Studien zur paulinischen Christologie*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht (FRLANT, 90).
- Hafemann, S. 1990. *Suffering and Ministry in the Spirit: Paul's Defense of His Ministry in 2 Corinthians 2:14-3:3*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Hafemann, S. 2000. *The NIV Life Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Harris, M. 2005. *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (NIGTC).
- Hays, R.B. 1989. *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*. New Haven: Yale.
- Hays, R.B. 1996. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. San Francisco: Harper.
- Hooker, M.D. 1985. Interchange in Christ and Ethics. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 25:3-17.
- Hooker, M.D. 2008. On Becoming the Righteousness of God: Another Look at 2 Cor 5:21. *Novum Testamentum* 50(4):358-375.



- Käsemann, E. 1969. *New Testament Questions of Today*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- Kroesbergen, H. (ed.) 2014. *In Search of Health and Wealth: The Prosperity Gospel in African, Reformed Perspective*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock.
- Lim, K.-Y. 2009. "The Sufferings of Christ Are Abundant in Us": A Narrative Dynamics Investigation of Paul's Suffering in 2 Corinthians. London: T & T Clark.
- Litwa, M.D. 2008. 2 Corinthians 3:18 and Its Implications for Theosis. *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2(1):117-133.
- Reumann, J. 1999. Justification and Justice in the New Testament. *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 21:26-45.
- Seifrid, M. 2014. *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Stegman, T.D. 2005. *The Character of Jesus: The Linchpin to Paul's Argument in 2 Corinthians*. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute.
- Stegman, T.D. 2009. *Second Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Stegman, T.D. 2011. Paul's Use of *dikaio*- Terminology: Moving Beyond N.T. Wright's Forensic Interpretation. *Theological Studies* 72:496-524.
- Tack, L. 2015. A Face Reflecting Glory. 2 Cor 3,18 in its Literary Context (2 Cor 3,1-4,15). *Biblica* 96:85-112.
- Thrall, M.E. 2004. *2 Corinthians 1-7*. London: T & T Clark.
- Togarasei, L. 2011. The Pentecostal Gospel of Prosperity in African Contexts of Poverty: An Appraisal. *Exchange* 40:336-350.
- Wright, N.T. 1987. Reflected Glory: 2 Corinthians 3:18, in *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament: Studies in Christology in Memory of George Bradford Caird*, edited by L.D. Hurst and N.T. Wright. Oxford: Clarendon Press:139-150.
- Wright, N.T. 1993. On Becoming the Righteousness of God, in *Pauline Theology: Volume II: 1 & 2 Corinthians*, edited by D.M. Hay. Minneapolis: Fortress Press:200-208.