

The Auburn Avenue Theology: A Biblical Critique

Chapter 3: A Defense of the “Active Obedience” of Jesus Christ in the Justification of Sinners

[Brian Schwertley](#)

Introduction

One of the doctrinal distinctives of the Auburn Avenue theology is a repudiation of the Reformed teaching that the “active” or “preceptive” obedience of Jesus is necessary for the justification of sinners.¹ This rejection likely originated in the mind of Norman Shepherd who explicitly rejects double imputation (i.e., the teaching that not only are a believer’s sins imputed to Christ on the cross but also the Savior’s perfect righteousness [His perfect obedience to the law of God] is imputed or credited to the believer).² Shepherd argues that the Lord only achieves a pardon (the forgiveness of sins) for Christians and that the idea of the imputation of an active obedience was a later addition to Reformed theology. He even disparagingly refers to the Reformed teaching that a perfect positive righteousness is necessary for justification as the works/merit paradigm. Given the fact that the denial of the “active” or “preceptive” obedience of Christ plays an important role in the Auburn Avenue system (it logically flows from their rejection of the covenant of works and their concept of “covenant faithfulness” on *the part of the believer* for final justification.); and, the fact that the “active obedience” of Jesus is a crucial aspect of Reformed theology, a brief defense of this doctrine is in order.

As we study this doctrine we need to keep in mind that the Bible rarely makes clear cut distinctions between the Savior’s obedience in fulfilling the law as precept (active obedience) and penalty (passive obedience). God’s word simply speaks of the obedience of Christ. Although the Bible certainly emphasizes our Lord’s suffering and death, His whole life of obedience and suffering was vicarious. The entire obedience of the Messiah (which includes His preceptive and

¹ For example, see Rich Lusk, “A Response to ‘The Biblical Plan of Salvation’” in E. Calvin Beisner, ed., *The Auburn Avenue Theology Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision* (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Knox Theological Seminary, 2003), 140-41.

² In a recent lecture (Summer 2003) at the Christian Worldview Conference sponsored by The Southern California Center for Christian Studies, Norman Shepherd argued that the standard Reformed distinction between the active and passive obedience of Jesus and the necessity of the imputation of our Lord’s perfect law-keeping (i.e., His merits) were unscriptural and were a later addition to Reformed theology. In his lecture he repeatedly referred to the standard Reformed interpretation as the works/merit paradigm. He also very selectively quoted Reformed authors and theologians to give the very false impression that these men did not also teach the necessity of Christ’s bloody sacrifice (His vicarious atonement) in the justification of sinners. In order fairly to represent the position that he was attempting to refute, Professor Shepherd should have noted that in virtually all Reformed theological works that discuss the “passive” and “active” obedience of Christ, the sacrifice of our Lord is emphasized alongside “active” obedience. In other words, sinners are justified by the imputed righteousness of Christ which includes His atonement which eliminates the guilt and penalty of sin (expiation) as well as Jesus’ whole life of perfect law-keeping. The standard Reformed position is that our Lord satisfies the demands of the law both as to precept and penalty. Shepherd’s lecture gives the false impression that Reformed theologians ignore the sacrifice of our Lord in their definitions of justification. In his lecture Shepherd grossly misinterprets the teaching of the Westminster Standards on the righteousness of Christ and wrongly argues that the idea of the imputation of Jesus’ active obedience came long after the first generation of the Reformers.

penal obedience) is the basis or ground of justification. The New Testament can speak of Christians being justified by His blood or death (Rom. 3:25; 5:9) as well as His life or obedience (Rom. 5:10, 19). All the various expressions found in Scripture: “the righteousness of God” (Rom. 1:17; 3:5, 21, 22; 10:3; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9); “the righteousness of One” (Rom. 5:18); “the righteousness of Christ” (cf. Rom. 10:4); “the righteousness of faith” (Rom. 4:11, 13; 9:30; 10:6; cf. Gal. 5:5; Phil. 3:9); “the obedience of One” (Rom. 5:19); the “righteousness” God imputes apart from works” (Rom. 4:6), “are all employed with reference to the SAME RIGHTEOUSNESS,—that there is one righteousness, in which they all find their common centre, as so many distinct rays converging towards the same focus, while each retains its distinctive meaning,—and that there is no other righteousness to which they can all be applied, or in which they can find their adequate explanation.”³

Does the fact that the Bible does not always make clear-cut distinctions regarding the righteousness of Christ mean that no distinctions can or ought to be made by theologians or that the Son’s preceptive obedience has no role in justification? No, absolutely not! The important role that the Savior’s preceptive obedience has in the salvation of sinners is easy to deduce from Scripture and must never be overlooked. “The distinction becomes important only when it is denied that his moral obedience is any part of the righteousness for which the believer is justified, or that his whole work in making satisfaction consisted in expiation or bearing the penalty of the law. This is contrary to Scripture, and vitiates the doctrine of justification as presented in the Bible.”⁴

Biblical Argumentation

There are many reasons why the active or preceptive obedience of Christ must be accepted as a crucial aspect of justification.

(1) A biblical understanding of man’s responsibility under God’s law proves the necessity not only of pardon, but also of an obedience fulfilled or an active righteousness. Why is this assertion true? Because the law requires two things of a sinner. First, the penalty for sin must be paid in full. The penalty for disobedience to the law is death (Gen. 2:17; 3:3; Rom. 6:23), the curse of the law (Gal 3:10; Dt. 27:26), separation from God (Gen. 3:23; Rev. 6:15) and God’s displeasure and wrath (Rom. 1:18; 2:8). Before anyone can go to heaven the guilt of sin and sin’s curse or penalty must be removed.

Secondly, the law also requires a perfect obedience. If a person has the guilt of sin removed that person has been delivered from hell. However, if he is to enter heaven; if he is to have the reward that the law promises for perfect obedience, then he needs the righteousness or perfect law-keeping of another (i.e., a substitute). Shedd writes,

When a criminal has suffered the penalty affixed to his crime, he has done a part, but not *all* that the law requires of him. He still owes a perfect obedience to the law, in *addition* to the endurance of the penalty. The law does not say to the transgressor: “If you will suffer the penalty, you need not render the obedience.” But it says, “You must both suffer the penalty and render the obedience.” Sin is under a *double* obligation; holiness is under only a *single* one. A guilty man owes both penalty and obedience; a holy angel owes only obedience.

³ James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977 [1887]), 315.

⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:150.

Consequently, the justification of a *sinner* must not only deliver him from the penalty due to disobedience, but provide for him an equivalent to personal obedience. Whoever justifies the *ungodly* must lay a ground both for his delivery from hell, and his entrance into heaven.⁵

The doctrine that a perfect obedience or a positive righteousness is necessary is easily deduced from Scripture. Note the following observations.

The moral law of God is based on God's own nature and character (Lev. 11:44; 1 Pet. 1:16). Therefore, the law of God (i.e., the moral law) can never be abrogated, set aside, annulled or circumvented as an eternal, unchangeable *obligation* upon all men. Jehovah would have to deny Himself in order to set aside the obligation of the moral law on the rational beings that He created. God cannot deny Himself (2 Tim. 2:13). Therefore, the moral law as a rule of obedience will always be in force and enforced by the LORD. What does this eternal, unchangeable law require? A perfect, perpetual obedience on the part of man in thought, word, and deed! The law prohibits any sin; it requires sinless perfection. How does this truth relate to the doctrine of justification? It means that God must justify sinners in a manner that is consistent with His own nature. In order for sinners to be justified, the curse of the law (e.g., the guilt and liability to punishment) must be removed; but, God's requirement of obedience which is founded upon His nature must also be fulfilled. If Jehovah simply eliminated the penalty without the fulfillment of the positive obligation then He would be setting aside a crucial aspect of His own moral law. Such a thought is a theological impossibility. The biblical doctrine of justification upholds God's righteousness and His holy law in every possible manner.

To the Auburn Avenue theologians we ask the following question. If God could set aside the obligation of obedience to the law (as if the moral law were positivistic or arbitrary) in the gospel era so that a partial obedience (i.e., an obedience mixed with sin and filth) was acceptable to enter heaven, then why demand a sacrifice of infinite value to eliminate the guilt and penalty for sin? *If the moral law can be relaxed with regard to obligation, then why can it not be relaxed with regard to its curse also?* If God can relax, abrogate or modify the positive requirement of the law, then could He not also relax or modify the negative aspect of the law – i.e., the curse of the law? It is totally arbitrary and inconsistent for the Auburn Avenue teachers to proclaim a relaxation of the law for a perfect and perpetual obedience while teaching the absolute necessity of blood atonement to eliminate the curse from the same law. If obligation is removed, then how can a curse remain upon those who have broken the very same law? Clearly, then, we need both a perfect fulfillment of the obligation as well as an elimination of the curse. Further, the New Testament says that Jesus did not come to set aside or relax the law but to fulfill it (Mt. 5:17). "This is, to yield full perfect obedience unto the commands of the law, whereby they are absolutely fulfilled."⁶ "Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law" (Rom. 3:31).

(2) There are specific New Testament passages which speak of the relation of perfect obedience to justification. For example: Paul says that "the doers of the law will be justified" (Rom. 2:13). Why does the apostle say this? Is he teaching that sinful men have the ability perfectly to obey God's law?⁷ No. For, in many places, he says that not one person can or has

⁵ William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's & Sons, 1889), 2:539-540.

⁶ John Owen, "The Obedience Required by God" in *Works* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1965), 5:273.

⁷ Norman Shepherd perverts the meaning of Romans 2:13 in order to fit this passage into his justification by the instrument of faith and works paradigm. He writes, "The Pauline affirmation in *Romans* 2:13, 'The doers of the Law will be justified,' is...to be understood...in the sense that faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ will be justified" (Thesis 20 from *Thirty-four Theses on Justification in Relation to Faith, Repentance, and Good Works* [1978]). This

kept the law. All men are sinners (Rom. 3:23). No one is righteous; no, not one (Rom. 3:11). No one can be saved by attempting to forge their own righteousness (Rom. 3:20-21, 27-28; 4:2-5; Gal. 2:16, 21, 3:11). Is Paul teaching that personal law-keeping, covenant faithfulness, good works and repentance are needed in addition to faith *before* a person is finally and permanently justified? No. Definitely not! For Paul says that God justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). Even the best works of believers are tainted with sin and fall far short of the perfect obedience that God requires (Isa. 64:6; Lk. 17:10; Gal. 5:17).

In this passage (Rom. 2:13 and the next two chapters) the apostle dispenses with two common Jewish errors. First, he deals with the Jewish notion that hearing or simply possessing the law (i.e., being the privileged covenant community chosen by God) entitles one to eternal life. He does this by pointing out the biblical principle that if a person did perfectly obey God's law in thought, word and deed, he would be declared righteous by God. In other words the idea that membership in the covenant community is enough for salvation is completely wrong. But why does Paul refute this idea in terms of a perfect obedience to the law? Why not simply point the unbelieving Jews immediately to the Messiah? Because the apostle first wants to establish with overwhelming proof that the Jews cannot keep the law and need to embrace the Savior. The common doctrine of the Pharisees in Paul's day was that a perfect obedience to the law was achievable and that many Pharisees and their followers were living a life of complete obedience. We must keep in mind that the sect of the Pharisees would have agreed with the principal that the doers of the law will be justified.⁸

interpretation raises a number of important questions. First, how does a partial obedience to the law, justify? If (as God's word says) even one sin merits the eternal death penalty, a keeping of the law that is not absolutely perfect in every way cannot play a role in a sinner's justification. Second, if a believer's own righteousness contributes even a little bit to his own justification does not that person have a reason to boast before God? Third, if Christ's righteousness is infinite in value and totally adequate to justify a believing sinner, then why are the imperfect, sin-stained works of believers needed? Shepherd's view of justification destroys the biblical doctrine of Christ's righteousness as the ground of justification. Fourth, if a person's works are instrumental in a person's justification then must we not discard the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone? Fifth, if faithfulness contributes to or is an instrument of justification in any way, then is not our only hope divided between Christ's work and our own righteousness? Will this new doctrine not lead to a complete destruction of assurance? Sixth, how can Shepherd's interpretation be harmonized with the central thrust of Romans 2 and 3 which is to prove that no person can be justified by works, that all men are guilty, that no one does good and, thus, our only hope is the righteousness of Christ? Seventh, how can Shepherd harmonize his view with the many passages which teach that the only instrument that lays hold of Christ's perfect work is faith? Eighth, if Shepherd is saying that once a person is justified by faith he immediately begins a life long process of sanctification whereby he is subjectively made more and more holy, then why does he not say so? Shepherd's doctrine of justification is heretical and dangerous.

⁸ "In H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament ans Talmud and Midrasch* p. 118 we read: 'That man possesses the ability to fulfill the commandments of God perfectly was so firmly believed by the rabbis that they spoke in all seriousness of people who had kept the whole Law from A to Z. It is necessary only to refer to Paul's affirmation in Phil. 3:6, "as to the righteousness under the Law, blameless"' (as quoted in William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], 366, footnote 45).

"We read the following from the apocrypha: 'If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. He has placed before you fire and water; stretch out your hand for whichever you choose. Before each person are life and death, and whichever one chooses will be given' (Sir. 15, 14-17, NRSV; Vg. 14-18). To this passage Calvin responds: 'Granted that man received at this creation the capacity to obtain life or death. What if we reply on the other side that he has lost his capacity? Surely it is not my intention to contradict Solomon who declares "that God made man upright, but he has sought out many devices for himself."' But because man, in his degeneration, caused the shipwreck both of himself and of all his possessions, whatever is attributed to the original creation does not necessarily apply forthwith to his corrupt and degenerate nature. Therefore I am answering not only my opponents but also Ecclesiasticus himself, whoever he may be; If you wish to teach man to seek in himself the capacity to acquire salvation, we do not esteem your authority so highly that it may

But after stating the biblical principle about the doers of the law, what does the apostle then proceed to do? He completely destroys all the Jewish hopes of salvation by law-keeping. Paul writes, “You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? For ‘the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentles because of you’” (Rom. 2:24). “What then? Are we [the Jews] better than they [the Gentles]? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks: that they are all under sin” (Rom. 3:9). If “all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:22), and “none are righteous no not one” (Rom. 3:10) and “all the world is guilty before God” (Rom. 3:19), then where can this perfect law-keeping that results in a declaration of righteousness by God be found? The guilty sinner must look to and depend solely on Christ’s perfect righteousness. Jesus came “to fulfill all righteousness” (Mt. 3:15) for us. “God declares us righteous because we *are* legally righteous by virtue of the imputation of Christ’s perfect righteousness to our account.”⁹

The climax of Paul’s argument found in Romans 3:20 proves conclusively that the apostle was not merely refuting Jewish self-confidence (e.g., “We are saved because we are the children of Abraham” [see Mt. 3:9]), but also every attempt at self salvation (i.e., salvation by keeping the law or through human merit). “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.”

Does the fact that no man can obey the law and achieve a perfect righteousness over turn Paul’s statement of the biblical principle that a perfect perpetual obedience to the law would indeed result in a declaration of righteousness? No, certainly not. All the attempts to avoid the plain meaning of Paul’s statement or circumvent his teaching are very weak and easily refuted. Note the following examples.

a) One argument is that once a person sins the obligation of a perfect obedience is annulled. This idea is absurd for it would mean that men can exempt themselves from the government of God by committing sin. Further, if sin exempted one from the obligation, then, would it not also exempt one from the curse and judgment. This theory would amount to salvation through wickedness.

b) Another idea is that the obligation to a perfect obedience has been abrogated in the gospel era. This view suffers from the same objection made above. That is, if the obligation to obedience is no longer binding, then why is the curse for disobedience not also abrogated? Further, as noted, the obligation of the moral law is founded upon God’s nature and character. Therefore, the obligation cannot be set aside as with positivistic law.

c) A very small minority of commentators and some modern “Reformed” theologians and writers (e.g., Norman Shepard, Steve Schlissel, Andrew Sandlin) argue that Romans 2:13 is not a *hypothetical statement* about a perfect obedience leading to a declaration of righteousness. (We say hypothetical because Paul makes it very clear that no one can perfectly obey the law or be declared righteous on the basis of *personal* obedience. The apostle is setting forth the theoretical principle that if a perfect obedience was achieved a declaration of righteousness would follow). Various men argue either that Paul is mentioning the necessity of good works (i.e., sanctification) in association with a final declaration of righteousness on the day of judgment; or,

in the slightest degree raise any prejudice against the undoubted Word of God.’ (*Institutes*, 2, 5, 18, p.338) Calvin rejects this passage from the apocrypha not only because Ecclesiasticus, Sirach, is not canonical but also because it contradicts the witness of Scripture, such as Romans 3. What is interesting is that this passage from the apocrypha goes untreated by the advocates of the new perspective, yet it does not pass by the attention of either Pelgaius or Erasmus” (J. V. Fesko, “Justification, The New Perspective on Paul: Calvin and N. T. Wright” in PCANews.com).

⁹ Robert Morey, *Studies in the Atonement* (Southbridge, MA: Crown Pub., 1989), 178.

that saving faith is an obedient/repentant faith (e.g., Norman Shepard); or, that covenant faithfulness or obedience is an integral aspect or instrument of justification. There are numerous reasons for rejecting such interpretations.

First, it would be confusing and out of character for Paul in the middle of a detailed argument as to why all men are guilty and inexcusable before God (because all whether Jew or Gentile have broken the law) to have a parenthetical comment about obedient faith, faithful obedience or even the need for sanctification. It would especially be confusing to Jews who believed that *personal* obedience was necessary for justification.

Secondly, it would disturb the whole train of Paul's thought in this section which is to demonstrate that no man can gain salvation through morality or good works. The apostle's climax is that by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in the sight of God (Rom. 3:20). No person whether Jew or Gentile will be justified by observing the law.

Thirdly, it would connect a partial, imperfect and sin-mingled obedience directly with justification. The law demands a perfect, perpetual obedience, not a defective obedience. "Cursed is everyone that continueth not in *all* things which are written in the book of the law to do them" (Gal. 3:10). The idea espoused by Shepherdites that the problem with the Jews was simply that they weren't righteous enough or covenantally faithful enough to achieve final justification is false and completely ignores the whole thrust of Paul's argument.¹⁰ "The reason why no man can be justified by the law, is because no man can yield perfect obedience thereunto; for by perfect obedience the law will justify, Rom. ii:13, x 5."¹¹

Fourth, when discussing justification the Bible *excludes* all the works of believers after conversion including faithful obedience or covenant faithfulness (see Gal. 2:16; 1 Cor. 4:4; Phil. 3:9; Eph. 2:9-10, etc.); *excludes* all reasons for boasting (see Rom. 4:2; 3:27; Eph. 2:9; 1 Cor. 1:29-30); and, repeatedly attributes our justification solely to the righteousness of Christ alone (see Ac. 13:38; 26:18; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:18-21; Rom. 5:1, etc.).¹²

(3) The necessity of the active or preceptive obedience of Christ is set forth in the New Testament contrast between Adam and Christ. The first Adam was the federal head of the human race and what he did in the garden had consequences for all mankind. Before the fall when Adam

¹⁰ Part of Norman Shepherd's heretical understanding of justification can be traced to his rejection of the confessional doctrine of the covenant of works. He completely rejects the idea that if Adam had perfectly obeyed God's command then a time would come when he would be rewarded with eternal life in its most comprehensive sense (i.e., Adam would have lost the ability to sin and would have had free access to the tree of life). Because Shepherd defines faith as "faithful obedience" and gives a believer's good works a role to play in a believer's justification (i.e., works are viewed as a co-instrument of justification alongside of faith, so that gospel and law are blurred together.), the active or preceptive obedience of Christ is rejected in his theology. If (as Shepherd teaches) a person's own good works play a crucial role in his justification, why is the perfect active righteousness of Jesus needed? Shepherd uses the phrase "the righteousness of Jesus Christ" in his articles and lectures. However, for him this phrase refers *only* to our Lord's sacrificial death or passive obedience. Note how Shepherd acknowledges Christ's righteousness (i.e., Jesus sacrificial death, his penal suffering), but then substitutes the believer's own obedience for the active obedience of our Lord. In his *Thirty-four Theses* [1978] he writes, "The exclusive ground of the justification of the believer in the state of justification is the righteousness of Jesus Christ, but his [i.e., a believer's] obedience, which is simply the perseverance of the saints in the way of truth and righteousness, is necessary to his continuing in a state of justification" (*Hebrews* 3:6, 14). (Thesis 21) In its essence Shepherd's doctrine of justification has much more in common with classical Arminianism and even Romanism than it does with confessional Reformed thought. His perverted doctrine of the covenant in Eden goes hand in hand with his rejection of justification by faith alone and the need of an *active vicarious righteousness*.

¹¹ John Owen, 5:284.

¹² Another objection to the standard Protestant interpretation of this passage comes from the New Perspective on Paul movement. This movement is refuted in detail in other sections of this book.

was innocent (i.e., he did not have the guilt or penalty of sin), he did not yet have eternal life. God required Adam to obey His command not to eat of the tree of good and evil for a period of time, before he would be permitted to eat from the tree of life. If Adam had rendered a perfect obedience, God would have rewarded him with glorification (i.e., all possibility of falling or committing sin would have been forever removed; Adam and his posterity would have been blessed with eternal life with God forever). Reformed theologians refer to God's arrangement with Adam as the covenant of works.¹³ Adam, however, failed this test. He sinned against God, died spiritually and was cast out of the garden. Because of the disobedience of Adam all men are guilty in him and constituted sinners.

Christ, the second Adam was born of a woman; and was placed under the law in order to render a perfect obedience to the law, to provide a perfect righteousness for His people. Where the first Adam failed the second Adam succeeded. Jesus honored the law by rendering a perfect obedience unto it.

When Jesus came to be baptized by John and the baptizer, understanding who the Lord was, said: "I need to be baptized by You, and are you coming to me"? Christ responded by saying, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt. 3:15). As our head and representative our Lord placed Himself under the law to perfectly fulfill the

¹³Louis Berkhof notes some of the elements of this covenant. He writes, "(1) Adam was constituted the representative head of the human race, so that he could act for all his descendants. (2) He was temporarily put on probation, in order to determine whether he would willingly subject his will to the will of God. (3) He was given the promise of eternal life in the way of obedience, and thus by the gracious disposition of God acquired certain conditional rights. This covenant enabled Adam to obtain eternal life for himself and for his descendants in the way of obedience." (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939], 215) Regarding the parallel between the first and second Adam, Berkhof adds: "The parallel which Paul draws between Adam and Christ in Rom. 5:12-21, in connection with the doctrine of justification, can only be explained on the assumption that Adam, like Christ, was the head of a covenant. According to Paul the essential element in justification consists in this, that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us, without any personal work on our part to merit it. And he regards this as a perfect parallel to the manner in which the guilt of Adam is imputed to us. This naturally leads to the conclusion that Adam also stood in covenant relationship to his descendants." (Ibid, 214) Thomas Boston writes, "So all men were bound in the covenant of works to yield perfect obedience; but having failed, Christ substituted himself in the room of those chosen from among them to everlasting life, and gave complete obedience to the law in their name and place; on that account they are accepted and adjudged to eternal life, and that agreeably to the law, which has got all its demands of them in their Surety. But the rest being still under the law, must perish." (*Commentary on the Shorter Catechism* [Edmonton, AB: Canada, 1993 (1853)], 1:592) Interestingly, those "Reformed" pastors who are perverting the doctrine of justification also reject the classical Reformed doctrine of the covenant of works.

To all of those men who reject the covenant of works with sophisticated arguments we ask the following questions: Would Adam have received glorification on the basis of his own obedience or upon the obedience of another? Would Adam have received glorification by a simple faith in the person and work of another *apart* from his own doing or *apart* from the works of the law (Rom 3:20; 4:4-8; Eph. 2:8-9) or did Adam need to do something in order to receive glorification? The answer to these questions is obvious. The Christian must look to the person and work of Christ (His doing and dying) while Adam had to do something himself. While God's creation of Adam was gracious; the reward offered to Adam was incredibly generous and Adam's obedience obviously required faith or belief in God and His spoken Word, nevertheless *Adam had to do something to achieve glorification*. His obedience would have been the basis of the reward. Christians are not saved because of what we do (i.e., our obedience to the law) but because of what Jesus has done. His work was substitutionary or vicarious. If one argues that everything is under the covenant of grace and there is no covenant of works, then *logically* one must make human effort whether law-keeping, covenant faithfulness, good works or perseverance a basis or co-instrument of justification. Perhaps this explains why the advocates of the Auburn theology repeatedly say that the law and the gospel are virtually the same thing.

law's demands. As the federal head of the elect Jesus' whole life was vicarious.¹⁴ One must not separate the life of obedience from the sacrifice of the cross. Both are necessary for a complete and perfect redemption.

The contrast between Adam and Jesus is also noted in the Gospel temptation narratives (Mk. 1:12-13; Mt. 4:1-11; Lk. 4:1-13). "The temptation in which the Son of Man conquered is the counterpart of the temptation in which man first fell. As the descendent and representative of a fallen race, it is His mission to vanquish in the sphere in which they had been vanquished."¹⁵ The contrasts between the first and second Adam are striking and unmistakable. The first Adam was tempted in paradise while the second was in a harsh wilderness with wild beasts (Mk. 1:13). The first Adam had abundant food while the second had fasted forty days and was in a weakened condition. Christ rendered his obedience in a fallen world. He obeyed God in a state of humiliation, weakness and suffering. Obviously these narratives want us to recognize the perfect obedience of Jesus—the second Adam—in contrast to the failure of the first Adam. "Jesus as his people's Representative, has vicariously rendered the obedience which Adam, as mankind's representative failed to render."¹⁶

The contrast between Adam and Christ and the proof that an active righteousness is needed for justification is set forth by Paul in Romans 5:18-19. "Therefore, as by the offense of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation, even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life" (KJV). These two verses serve as climax and concluding summary to a whole section (Romans 5:12-20) dealing with the covenant headship of the first and second Adam and the covenantal consequences of the one's disobedience verses the others obedience.

As there are two opinions as to what is the ground of a sinner's justification before God, there are two basic interpretations of this passage among Protestants. Some interpreters note that the phrase "the righteousness of one" can be translated "one righteous act" and thus conclude that Paul is only referring to Jesus' death on the cross. This interpretation could be used to support the common evangelical notion that justification only consists of pardon and does not

¹⁴John Owen demonstrates that our Lord's obedience was not for Himself but for us. He writes "...the human nature of Christ, by virtue of its union with the person of the Son of God, had a right unto, and might have immediately been admitted into, the highest glory whereof it was capable, without any antecedent obedience unto the law. And this is apparent from hence, in that, from the first instant of that union, the whole person of Christ, with our nature existing therein, was the object of all divine worship from angels and men; wherein consists the highest exaltation of that nature.

"It is true, there was a *peculiar* glory that he was actually to be made partaker of, with respect unto his antecedent obedience and suffering, Phil. ii. 8, 9. The actual possession of this glory was, in the ordination of God, to be consequential unto his obeying and suffering, not for himself, but for us. But as unto the right and capacity of the human nature in itself, all the glory whereof it was capable was due unto it from the instant of its union; for it was therein exalted above the condition that any creature is capable of by mere creation. And it is but a Socinian fiction, that the first foundation of the divine glory of Christ was laid in his obedience, which was only the way of his actual possession of that part of his glory which consists in his mediatory power and authority over all. The real foundation of the whole was laid in the union of his person; whence he prays that the Father would glorify him (as unto manifestation) with that glory which he had with him before the world was.

"I will grant that the Lord Christ was 'viator' whilst he was in this world, and not absolutely 'possessor;' yet I say withal, he was so, not that any such condition was necessary unto him for himself, but he took it upon him by especial dispensation for us. And, therefore, the obedience he performed in that condition was for us, and not for himself" (*Works*, 5:259).

¹⁵ Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982 [1915]), 35-36.

¹⁶ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 235.

involve a perfect fulfillment of the law or the covenant of works. The common Reformed interpretation of this passage is that the righteousness of Christ encompasses the whole life of the Savior: His perfect obedience to the law and His death on the cross. There are many reasons why our Lord's righteousness includes His perfect law-keeping.

First, it better maintains the parallelism between the first and second Adam. The first Adam was guilty of disobedience or an actual transgression of God's law. It was the breaking of God's law that brought sin and death to the human race. Over against this disobedience is set forth the obedience or righteousness of the second Adam. Since Adam was guilty of an actual transgression of God's law, Christ's righteousness must involve an active obedience to the law; otherwise the apostle's antithesis doesn't make sense. A. A. Hodge writes, "The condition of the covenant of works was perfect obedience. This covenant having failed in the hands of the first Adam must be fulfilled in the hands of the second Adam, since in the covenant of grace Christ assumed all of the undischarged obligations of his people under the covenant of works. His suffering discharges the penalty, but only his active obedience fulfills the condition."¹⁷

Second, it comports better with the meaning of righteous (*dikaïomatos*). When the Bible speaks of righteousness as it relates to obedience (*hupakoes*) it refers to the obedience of a statute, requirement, ordinance or legal claim. While Christ's obedience to the Father in going to the cross is certainly righteous, it is also quite natural to view this term as a reference to all of the Savior's vicarious righteous conduct. Further, "to declare righteous is another thing than a mere declaration of exemption from penalty, even as righteousness is another state, than that of mere exemption from suffering."¹⁸ John Dick adds, "Righteousness supposes that the whole law has been fulfilled; innocence imports only that it has not been transgressed. . . . In the case of a sinner, therefore, the imputation of righteousness is pre-supposed as the ground of his justification, which, consequently, implies something more than simple remission. . . . If he [i.e., the sinner] cannot himself fulfill the law, another, taking his place, and coming under his obligations, may fulfill it in his name; and the obedience of this surety may be placed to his account."¹⁹ This is precisely what Christ does for His people. He provides a perfect righteousness for the elect so that *judicially* the believing sinner is positionally just as righteous as Jesus in God's sight.

Third, it comports with the biblical teaching that Christ's whole life of obedience and suffering were vicarious and were part of His finished work. William S. Plumer writes,

All Christ did and all he bore was for our salvation. He suffered in obeying. He obeyed in suffering. No fair criticism can ever shew that *righteousness* in this verse or *obedience* in v. 19 means simply his sufferings, much less his obedience in the mere act of dying. His circumcision and baptism were as much in fulfillment of all righteousness as his death. His perfect love to God and his equal love to man, evinced in every way, were essential to his righteousness. There is a sense in which Christ's righteousness is one. It is a seamless robe. There is no rent in it. It is undivided. It cannot be divided. But this is a very different thing from saying that Christ wrought out his righteousness the last few hours of his life. The parallel between Adam and Christ is not intended to be preserved in the shortness of the time in which, or the ease with which ruin and recovery were wrought. No? Destruction is easy. Recovery is difficult. It is so in every thing. A rash act of one may destroy a thousand lives, but all the power of men and angels cannot restore one life. A child may in a few hours burn down a city,

¹⁷ A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972 [1860]), 500.

¹⁸ R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1985 [1871]), 624.

¹⁹ John Dick, *Lectures on Theology* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1864), 2:190.

which ten thousand men could not build in a year. In a moment Adam brought down ruin. It required the *righteousness* and *obedience* of the life of Christ and his agony in the garden and on the cross to bring us to God. Yea, to the same end he ever liveth to make intercession for us. “The truth is, the work of Christ is just the whole of his humiliation, with all that he did and all he suffered in the nature which he humbled himself to assume. That on account of which God exalted and glorified Christ, is that on account of which he justifies and glorifies sinners.”²⁰

One cannot divide the life of Christ into separate *unrelated* segments. His whole life contained humiliation and suffering. Obviously, the Savior’s suffering and humiliation was not for Himself but for His people. Further, he exercised the highest active obedience in His suffering at Golgotha. All His obedience was mixed with suffering and was a part of His vicarious work. To argue that His death was vicarious but that His obedience was only for Himself is arbitrary and irrational. Our Lord was born without original sin and was both God and man in *one person*. He most certainly did not need to merit anything for Himself. All that he did, therefore, was as the federal head of the elect. His obedience was the obedience of the mediator of the covenant. To argue that Jesus obeyed the law only for Himself is an implicit denial of the hypostatic union of the two natures of Christ (which of course immediately rendered the Savior’s human nature fit for heaven) and the covenant headship of the second Adam. Dabney’s comments on this topic are helpful. He writes,

...Christ’s sufferings contained an active obedience; and it is this which made them a righteousness: for mere pain, irrespective of the motive of voluntary endurance, is not meritorious. And Christ’s obedience to precepts was accompanied with endurance.... In many places Christ’s bearing the preceptive law is clearly implied to be for our redemption. See for instance, Gal. 4:4. By what fair interpretation can it be shown that the law under which He was made, to redeem us, included nothing but the penal threatenings? “To redeem us who were under the law.” Were we under no part of it but the threats? See, also, Rom. 5:18, 19.... Rom. 8:3, 4. What the law failed to do, through our moral impotency, that Christ has done for us. What was that? Rather our obedience than our suffering.²¹

John Owen writes, “And if *the actual sin of Adam* be imputed unto us all, who derive our nature from him, unto condemnation, though he sinned not in our circumstances and relations, is it strange that the actual obedience of Christ should be imputed unto them who derive a spiritual nature from him, unto the justification of life? Besides, both the satisfaction and obedience of Christ, as relating unto his person, were, in some sense, *infinite*, – that is, of an infinite value, – and so cannot be considered in parts, as though one part of it were imputed unto one, and another unto another, but the whole is imputed unto every one that doth believe....”²²

That the obedience of Christ must not be viewed in a simplistic or narrow manner is also taught by John Murray. He writes,

The *obedience* is that by which he is furnished so as to fulfill these roles, to conduct to salvation and to bestow it. In other words, the obedience is the accomplishment that procures salvation and ensures its bestowal. No consideration could more definitely institute the place that obedience occupies in the securing and imparting of salvation in its *all-embracing*

²⁰ William S. Plumer, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1970 [1870]), 246-247.

²¹ R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 626.

²² John Owen, “The Imputation of Christ’s Obedience” in *Works* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1965 [1850]), 5:270.

connotation. In other passages the obedience of Christ is set forth as the basis or medium of more specific elements in salvation. In Paul's statement 'By the obedience of the one shall many be constituted righteous' (Rom. 5:19), the obedience of Christ is brought into relation to justification as its basis or ground. In Hebrews 10:10 the obedience is viewed as that by which we are sanctified, and this sanctifying is probably conceived rather as the purification from sin derived from Christ's expiatory offering. But in Hebrews 2:10 and 5:8, 9, it is salvation inclusively considered that is derived from the obedience of Christ. *So we must say that the obedience of Christ is that which procured salvation in broadest compass*. Salvation must never be conceived of in design, accomplishment, or actual possession, apart from Christ as the Savior. And salvation is secured by the obedience of Christ, because it was by obedience that Jesus as God-man was constituted the all-sufficient and perfect Savior.²³

If, as Murray notes (and all Reformed theologians recognize), our Lord's *active obedience*, suffering and resurrection are the cause of a believer's sanctification (this doctrine being explicitly set forth by Paul in Romans 6), then why and how can Jesus' whole work not be foundational to a believing sinner's justification?

Some will object to the Reformed conception of our Lord's obedience (e.g., Norman Shepherd). They will point out that the earliest Reformed symbols do not make explicit distinctions between the penal and preceptive obedience of Christ. While the earliest Reformed statements of faith are not explicit on this matter, this observation does not necessarily mean that the early Reformed theologians rejected the necessity of our Lord's preceptive obedience or active righteousness in justification. The early symbols reflect the fact that the Scripture itself rarely makes distinctions between the active and passive obedience of Christ. The Bible usually just speaks of Jesus' obedience or righteousness. Further, the fact that salvation is so often ascribed to the cross, blood or death of Christ does not negate the role of Christ's obedience and resurrection in salvation. We know this is true because: a) God's word often speaks of our Lord's death as the principal cause of our whole salvation; which, indeed, it certainly is; and b), other portions of Scripture ascribe salvation to the resurrection of our Lord (I Pet. 1:3; 3:21) and His obedience (Rom. 5:10, 19). Passages which speak solely of being redeemed by Jesus' death need to be considered within the whole context of Scripture.

Although the early Reformed symbols are not explicit on this issue, there is irrefutable evidence that these Reformed bodies would have fully accepted the later more refined and explicit Reformed theological statements on justification. For example, John Calvin (writing before the formulation of the Heidelberg [1563] and Belgic confessions [1561]) recognized the active or preceptive obedience of Christ. Calvin speaks of the "character" and "purity" of Christ imputed to a believing sinner's account; he writes,

What is placing our righteousness in the obedience of Christ, but asserting that we are accounted righteous only because His obedience is accepted for us as if it were our own? Wherefore Ambrose appears to me to have very beautifully exemplified this righteousness in the benediction of Jacob: that as he, who had on his own account no claim to the privileges of primogeniture, being concealed in his brother's habit, and invested with his garment, which diffused a most excellent odor, insinuated himself into the favor of his father, that he might receive the benediction to his own advantage, under the character of another; so we shelter ourselves under the precious purity of Christ.²⁴

²³John Murray, "The Obedience of Christ" in *Collected Writings* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1977), 2:156-157.

²⁴John Calvin as quoted in Arthur Pink, *Election and Justification* (New Ipswich, NJ: Pitcham Pub.), 197. The misrepresentation of Calvin's position on justification by Norman Shepherd is not new. The eminent scholar

In his commentary on Corinthians, Calvin writes, "...he says that he is made unto us righteousness, by which he means that we are on his account acceptable to God, inasmuch as he expiated our sins by his death, *and his obedience is imputed to us for righteousness*. For as the righteousness of faith consists in remission of sins and a gracious acceptance, we obtain *both* through Christ."²⁵ Calvin's statement is a clear acceptance of the doctrine of double imputation. The believing sinner's guilt and liability to punishment is imputed to Jesus on the cross—expiation. Thus, the sinner is pardoned. Also, the righteousness of Christ—His obedience—is imputed to the believer. Therefore, the sinner is regarded as righteous (i.e., perfectly and perpetually obedient to the covenant of works and the law of God) because of our Lord's vicarious obedience. We are saved solely by the merits of the Savior.

It is also noteworthy that early Reformed theologians heartily agreed with the Lutheran statement on justification which clearly recognizes the negative and positive aspects of justification. The Formula of Concord (1576) reads:

That righteousness which is imputed to faith, or to believers, of mere grace, is the obedience, suffering, and resurrection of Christ, by which He satisfied the law for us, and expiated our sins. For since Christ was not only man, but truly God and man in one undivided person, He was no more subject to the law He was to suffering and death (if his person, merely, be taken into account), because He was the Lord of the law. Hence, not only that obedience to God his Father which He exhibited in his passion and death, but also that obedience which He exhibited in voluntarily subjecting Himself to the law and fulfilling it for our sakes, is imputed to us for righteousness, so that God on account of the total obedience which Christ

William Cunningham was familiar with other similar misrepresentations going back to the seventeenth century. Cunningham's explanation as to why Calvin was so easily misrepresented is helpful and applies to Norman Shepherd and his followers. He writes, "It may be proper, however, before leaving this topic, to advert to a misrepresentation that has been often given of the views of the Reformers, and especially of Calvin, upon this particular point [i.e., the imputed righteousness of Christ]. When Protestant divines began, in the seventeenth century, to corrupt the scriptural doctrine of justification, and to deviate from the doctrinal orthodoxy of the Reformation, they thought it of importance to show that justification meant merely the remission or forgiveness of sin, or guilt, to the exclusion of, or without comprehending, what is usually called the acceptance of men's person, or their positive admission into God's favor,—or their receiving from God, not only the pardon of their sins, or immunity from punishment, but *also a right or title to heaven and eternal life*. And in support of this view, these men appealed to the authority of the Reformers, and especially of Calvin. Now it is quite true, that Calvin has asserted again and again that justification comprehends only, or consists in, the remission or forgiveness of sin or guilt. But I have no doubt that a careful and deliberate examination of all that Calvin has written upon this point, will fully establish these two positions,—first, that when Calvin asserted that justification consisted only in the remission of sin, he meant this simply as a denial of the Popish doctrine, that it is not only the remission of sin, but also the sanctification or renovation of the inner man,—this being the main and, indeed, the only error upon the point which he was called upon formally to oppose; and, secondly, that Calvin has at least as frequently and as explicitly described justification as comprehending, not only remission of sin in the strict and literal sense, but *also positive acceptance or admission into the enjoyment of God's favour,—'gratuita Dei acceptio,'* as he often calls it,—including the whole of the change effected upon men's state or legal condition in God's sight, as distinguished from the change effected upon their character. This is one of the numerous instances, constantly occurring, that illustrate how unfair it is to adduce the authority of eminent writers on disputed questions which had never really been presented to them,—which they had never entertained or decided; and how necessary it often is, in order to forming a correct estimate of some particular statements of an author, to examine with care and deliberation all that he has written upon the subject to which they refer, and also to be intelligently acquainted with the way and manner in which the whole subject was discussed *on both sides*" (*Historical Theology* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, (1862) 1960] 2:14-15, emphasis added).

²⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 1:93.

accomplished (*praestitit*) for our sake before his heavenly Father, both in acting and in suffering, in life and in death, may remit our sins to us, regard us as good and righteous, and give us eternal salvation.²⁶

The idea (recently espoused in a lecture by Norman Shepherd) that the imputation of the active obedience of Christ was a later unbiblical innovation among Reformed theologians is simply untrue. One must never confuse theological development and clarification with human invention and declension.

(4) The doctrine of the preceptive obedience of Christ is taught by Paul in other passages. In Galatians 4:4-5 the apostle writes, “But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.” When Paul speaks of the human race being “under the law” or of Jesus being “born under the law,” can this phrase refer *only* to being under the curse of the law? No, definitely not! Being under law in this context refers not simply to the law’s penalty but also to the personal obligation to obey the law. Our Lord was born both to obey and to endure the penalty. Lenski writes, “...Paul says that the Son bought us by this active obedience. It was thus just as much substitutionary as his passive obedience. In fact, the two cannot be separated. Even in death the Son gave himself (active) and so was slain (passive). The two were indissolubly united during all of his life. We should never stress the one against the other because the passive obedience is more frequently mentioned in Scripture than the active.”²⁷

That Paul has more in mind than simply eliminating the curse of the law, is evident from the immediate context which speaks of a believer’s adoption (“that we might receive the adoption as sons,” v. 5). Jesus was “born under the law” not only that the elect might be delivered from the consequences of sin but also that they may receive the greatest reward possible. They are made members of God’s own family. With the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, they are given a new legal status and receive the reward that can only be founded upon the merits of God’s Son. They are taken far beyond what Adam had in the garden because they are clothed with the righteousness of the Mediator. What a comprehensive and amazing salvation! Our Lord takes us light years beyond a simple pardon. “Christ achieved the purpose of redeeming those under law by bearing the full obligation of the law in life as well as the curse of the law in death (3:13).”²⁸ John Owen writes,

It is excepted, with more colour of sobriety, that he was made under the law only as to the curse of it. But it is plain in the text that Christ was made under the law as we are under it. He was “made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law.” And if he was not made so as we are, there is no consequence from his being made under it unto our redemption from it. But we were so under the law, as not only to be obnoxious unto the curse, but so as to be obliged unto all the obedience that it required; as hath been proved. And if the Lord Christ hath redeemed us only from the curse of it by undergoing it, leaving us in ourselves to answer its obligation unto obedience, we are not freed nor delivered. And the expression of “under the

²⁶ As quoted in Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:149. See *The Formula of Concord*, “Of the Righteousness of Faith Before God,” Article III, “Statement of the Controversy” and “Affirmative” I, II (“For he bestows and imputes to us the righteousness of the obedience of Christ; for the sake of that righteousness we are received by God into favor and accounted righteous”), III and VII, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes* [Grand Rapids: Baker (1931) 1983], 3:114-118).

²⁷ R. C. H. Lenski, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Galatians, Ephesians and Philippians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. 1961 [1937]), 203.

²⁸ Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 182.

law” doth in the first place, and properly, signify being under the obligation of it unto obedience, and consequentially only with a respect unto the curse. Gal. iv. 21, “Tell me, ye that desire to be “under the law.” They did not desire to be under the curse of the law, but only its obligation unto obedience; which, in all usage of speech, is the first proper sense of that expression. Wherefore, the Lord Christ being made under the law for us, he yielded perfect obedience unto it for us; which is therefore imputed unto us. For that what he did was done for us, depends solely on imputation.²⁹

Another passage which teaches the necessity of Christ’s righteousness is 1 Corinthians 1:30: “But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—that, as it is written, ‘He who glories, let him glory in the LORD.’” Union with Christ means that all that Jesus accomplished is ours. Salvation in the most comprehensive sense has been accomplished in history through Christ Jesus. His obedience is our obedience. His death is our death. His resurrection is our resurrection. If we are united to Christ, He is not only our justification; but, also our sanctification, and even our final redemption. We cannot receive only parts of the Savior. He is a whole Mediator, a complete and perfect Redeemer. His work is a seamless garment. And if we are truly united to Him, all of His benefits are ours. Even though Christians are still sinners (and even “ungodly,” see Rom. 4:5) they are regarded by God as perfectly righteous because in Christ they are accounted or reckoned as righteous. Charles Hodge writes, “He is our righteousness, because by his obedience and death he has fully satisfied the demands of justice, so that we are ‘the righteousness of God in him,’ 2 Cor. 5, 21. When we stand before the judgment-seat of God, Christ is our righteousness. He answers for us; he presents his own infinite merit as the all-sufficient reason for our justification. Rom. 3, 21. 22. 5, 19. Phil. 3, 9.”³⁰ A. A. Hodge writes, “He makes the righteousness of Christ ours (that is, the legal right to reward, by the gracious covenant conditioned on righteousness), and then treats us as persons legally invested with those rights... ‘For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth’ – Rom. X. 4; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. V. 21; Phil. 111:9.”³¹ Jesus, indeed, is “the LORD our righteousness” (Jer. 23:6).

In Philippians 3:8-9 Paul contrasts two kinds of righteousness. He writes, “Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.” There is self-righteousness which is based on human attempts to obey the law and thus build a tower of merit to heaven. There also is the righteousness which is found solely in Jesus Christ. Paul acknowledges that the sum of all human attainments that are intended to establish a claim upon God are nothing more than filthy rags. Once the apostle understood what his so called good works were in the eyes of God, he counted them as dung and placed his trust in the Mediator. If a person wants to be right with God he must be found in Christ and must lay hold of the Lord’s righteousness. In Adam and because of our own sins we are unfaithful, guilty and damned. But in Christ we obtain His faithfulness. His perfect obedience to the law and his propitiatory sufferings and death become ours. They are appropriated by the instrumental means of faith. The parallel between human attempts at merit, at righteousness by keeping the law and the merits of

²⁹ John Owen, *Works*, 5:272-273.

³⁰ Charles Hodge, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 27.

³¹ A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 501.

Christ or His perfect righteousness clearly involves Jesus' own faithfulness, moral perfections or law-keeping as well as His sufferings. Robert Johnstone's comments on this passage are most helpful. He writes,

The claim of the divine law is, that man should render to God perfect obedience, or suffer death as the penalty of disobedience. Our whole race has sinned, and thus become liable to the penalty. But the Son of God, freely given by His Father, freely giving Himself, has assumed our nature, and as our Substitute—accepted as such by His Father, who in the scheme of redemption sustains the majesty of the Godhead—has fulfilled all the law's requirements,—living a true human life of holy obedience, as we were bound to do, and dying the death of pain and shame which we deserve to suffer. To all who believe the gospel, and are thus led to place their confidence in Christ, God, of His infinite mercy, imputes this perfect righteousness of the Savior—reckons it as theirs—treats them as if they had themselves been righteous, like their Representative. This is the great doctrine of justification by faith. You see how humbling it is to man. The faith through which we obtain justification involves an acknowledgement of the reality and exceeding evil of our sin, and of our own utter helplessness. We come to God confessing that the robe of our personal character is but 'filthy rags,' in which we dare not stand in His sight; and we receive from Him the ample, stainless, fragrant robe of the Redeemer's righteousness.³²

(5) Zechariah 3:3-4 teaches the necessity of both elements of justification. Note that God removes the filthy garments (the negative aspect) and then provides new garments (the positive aspect). "Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and was standing before the Angel. Then He answered and spoke to those who stood before Him, saying, 'Take away the filthy garments from him.' And to him He said, 'See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes.'" In this fourth vision of Zechariah we encounter Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the LORD (the second person of the trinity) in the throne room of heaven. Satan is standing at Joshua's right hand to oppose him. Joshua and Israel (the people he represents) have a serious problem. They have been restored to the promised land, but they are still guilty and stained before God because of their iniquity. Their sin is represented by the filthy garment on Joshua. (The word translated "filthy" is very strong and was used to designate human excrement.) God shows His amazing love and mercy for His people by rebuking Satan (v.2), removing the guilt of their sins, and then clothing them with righteousness. Leupold writes, "Verse 2 had indicated God's readiness to show mercy unto Joshua and thus unto the people. Verse 4 now shows God actually bestowing this mercy. The act that follows is symbolical of the forgiveness of sins. As completely as a man whose filthy garments disfigure him is cleansed by their removal, so completely does God's pardon remove the guilt of sin. As the bestowing of garments of beauty makes a man presentable, so does the garment of imputed righteousness make him worthy to appear before God and man, only, however, by virtue of the "rich apparel" that God has granted him."³³ John Owen's comments on this passage and justification are noteworthy. He writes,

It hath been generally granted that we have here a representative of the justification of a sinner before God. And the taking away of filthy garments is expounded by the passing away of iniquity. When a man's filthy garments are taken away, he is no more defiled with them; but he

³² Robert Johnstone, *Lectures on the Book of Philippians* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1977 [1875]), 246.

³³ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Zechariah* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971 [1956]), 70.

is not thereby clothed. This is an additional grace and favour thereunto,—namely, to be clothed with change of garments. And what this raiment is, is declared, Isa. lxi. 10, “He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness;” which the apostle alludes unto. Phil iii. 9. Wherefore these things are distinct,—namely, the taking away of the filthy garments, and the clothing of us with change of raiment; or, the pardon of sin, and the robe of righteousness. By the one are we freed from condemnation; by the other have we right unto salvation. And the same is in like manner represented, Ezek. xvi. 6-12.³⁴

Christ achieved it all. He not only pardons our sins but also clothes us with His righteousness. All the undeserved benefits we receive: justification, adoption, the reward of glorification and heaven are due to Jesus’ obedience. If we take our eyes off of the Lord’s person and work and instead focus our attention on our own partial, imperfect obedience then we will sink into hopelessness and despair. Let us count our own works as rubbish and cast our crowns at the pierced feet of the Savior.

Conclusion

The Protestant Reformation has spoken with one voice on the doctrine of justification. The Reformers, whether Lutheran or Calvinistic, whether in the British Isles or on the Continent, were united on this all-important doctrine. While minor differences can be found on certain peripheral points and differences can be found on the exegesis of a few difficult portions of Scripture, all parties were united in their belief in justification by faith alone *apart* from the works of the law. The early creedal statements of the Lutherans as well as all the Reformed creedal statements from both the first and second Reformation periods testify to the unity of Protestants regarding the righteousness of Christ and justification. Although it is true that the later Reformed theologians are more detailed and specific on certain aspects of justification, their writings are in perfect agreement with all the earlier creedal statements and Reformed theologians. It is very important that as Reformed believers we recognize that justification is not an unresolved doctrine of the church. Perhaps no other doctrine has received as much attention, analysis, debate and reflection as justification. This historical reality probably accounts for the fact that the Protestant doctrine of *sola fide* has not changed or been improved upon for over 450 years. It is a settled doctrine just like the hypostatic union of the two natures of Christ.

The fact that the orthodox understanding of justification is in complete accord with Scripture and has already been biblically dealt with by Christ’s church does not mean that it has not been attacked from a variety of sources (e.g., the Roman Catholic counter-reformation, Socinianism, Arminianism, neo-nominianism, the “New Perspective on Paul” school of thought, Norman Shepherd and his step children: the Auburn Four, etc.). Sadly, today the attacks on the doctrine are coming from men within the pale of the conservative Reformed tradition. These men have been spreading Romanizing germs throughout the body of Christ.

Given the current attacks on justification by faith alone we must stand up, proclaim and defend the imputed righteousness of Christ with every fiber of our being. For, if this precious doctrine is lost, *all is lost*. If the Reformed churches adopt the new perversions regarding justification and the covenant, they will usher in an age of declension and darkness. May God enable us by His grace to defend our covenanted Reformation. Help us, O LORD to trust in Christ’s righteousness alone. The more we behold the righteousness of your dear Son, the more

³⁴ John Owen, *Works*, 5:268.

our hearts adore You. Preserve us, LORD, that we may wipe the pierced feet of Your Son with tears of gratitude and joy.

Copyright © Brian Schwertley, 2005

[HOME PAGE](#)