

# CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Website: [www.churchredeemeraz.org](http://www.churchredeemeraz.org)

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**Pastor/Teacher**  
**Gary L. W. Johnson**

## The Gospel and the Obedience of Christ

O badiah Sedgwick, another of the great Puritan pastors and a member of the Westminster Divines, duly noted that unless there is a clear understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith alone (and all that it implies, i.e., penal substitutional atonement, imputation of Christ's righteousness), we would always be on a performance treadmill and full of doubts.<sup>1</sup> We need, therefore, to grasp the great significance of Christ's *life and death* on our behalf. He placed Himself in our stead, putting His soul in the place of our souls, His person in the place of our persons. He underwent our punishment. Why did He do this? . . . to bring us to God, to make us acceptable to God. Evangelicalism has no doubt become more preoccupied with morality and ethics, and increasingly embarrassed by its biblical and historic Protestant roots. One crucial aspect of the Reformation's doctrine of justification that we have constantly stressed, is commonly known as the *active obedience of Christ*.<sup>2</sup> "This doctrine, in short, teaches that Christ not only endured the punishment of the law on behalf of his people (his passive, or suffering obedience) but also fulfilled all of the positive obligations of the law on their behalf. God requires perfect obedience of all people who would attain eternal life, and Christ has provided what sinners could never provide for themselves. Thus, according to Reformation teaching, justification consists both of the forgiveness of believers' sins, based on Christ's passive obedience, and of the crediting or imputing of Christ's righteousness, his active obedience, to believers."<sup>3</sup> This is how the great John Owen described it. "First, by the obedience of the life of Christ you see what is intended,—his willing submission unto, and perfect, complete fulfilling of, every law of God, that any of the saints of God were obliged unto. It is true, every act almost of Christ's obedience, from the blood of his circumcision to the blood of his cross, was attended with suffering, so that his whole life might, in that regard, be called a death; but yet, looking upon his willingness and obedience in it, it is distinguished from his sufferings peculiarly so called, and termed his active righteousness. This is, then, I say, as was showed, that complete, absolutely perfect accomplishment of the whole law of God by Christ, our mediator; whereby he not only 'did no sin, neither was there guile found in his mouth,' but also most perfectly fulfilled all righteousness, as he affirmed it became him to do. Secondly, that this obedience was performed by Christ not for himself, but for us, and in our stead."<sup>4</sup> Recently, however, the doctrine has come under attack from those claiming to stand in the Reformed tradition. In particular, the so-called New Perspective on Paul adherents have made it their favorite whipping boy. One of its better known advocates, N. T. Wright, an Anglican bishop, rejects the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active obedience on the ground that it "*gives the impression of a legal transaction, a cold piece of business, almost a trick of thought performed by a God who is logical and correct but hardly one we would want to worship.*"<sup>5</sup> Norman Shepherd, one time professor at Westminster Theological Seminary has openly rejected the doctrine, as has his disciples like John Armstrong and Don Garlington. According to Shepherd, the righteousness of Christ imputed to believers is the death and resurrection of Christ, excluding his life of active, meritorious obedience. Shepherd insists that there is no concept of meritorious obedience ("works" opposed to "grace") to be found anywhere in the Bible (except by way of a Judaistic perversion of God's call to grace). In denying the imputation of the active obedience of Christ, Shepherd maintains that the ground of life and salvation is the atoning death of Christ, what reformed theologians have spoken of as the passive, in distinction from the active, obedience of Christ. Is this dispute over one (for some, narrow) point of doctrine pedantic? Not for Shepherd, and not for his critics. The heart of Reformation doctrine is at stake here. Key to Shepherd's theology is the repudiation of the Reformed doctrine of meritorious accomplishment associated with a covenant of works, the covenant which Scripture and Reformed theology teach was made with the First and second Adams in their federal (representative) capacities.<sup>6</sup> Closer to home is the so-called *Federal Vision*. They issued a document in 2007 (signed by John Barach, Randy Booth, Tim Gallant, James Jordon, Peter Leithart, Ralph Smith, Jeff Meyers, Steve Wilkins, Rich Lusk and most notably Doug Wilson) called "Joint Federal Vision Statement" in which they "deny that faithfulness to the gospel message requires any particular doctrinal formulation of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ." Rich Lusk went further, by denying that Jesus performed active obedience for us, claiming that such a notion is

unbiblical. Says Lusk, “justification requires no transfer or imputation of anything. It does not force us to reify ‘righteousness’ into something that can be shuffled around in heavenly accounting books.”<sup>7</sup>

## I. THE BIBLICAL GROUNDS FOR THE DOCTRINE

- A. In Matthew 3:15, Christ explicitly said His baptism was necessary “to fulfill all righteousness.” Those who deny Christ’s active obedience are in effect claiming that *nothing* but the absence of sin and guilt is necessary to fulfill all righteousness. Of course, Christ was completely devoid of any sin or guilt; yet He insisted on undergoing John’s baptism (symbolic of repentance) in order to “fulfill . . . righteousness.” On whose behalf did He submit to this ordinance? Clearly He did not do it for His own sake. He had no need of repentance. But He was identifying with—and substituting for—His people. That is why He rendered an obedience that was by no means obligatory for His own sake, and yet He regarded it as *necessary*.
- B. Romans 10:4 says “Christ is the end [“*telos*”—the completion or the goal and fulfillment] of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” Christ is the “termination” of the law for all who believe (by faith) that His obedience forensically justifies them eternally. The *obedientia activa* and *obedientia passiva* of Jesus Christ summarizes the *justitia Dei* used throughout the Scriptures. This phrase relates to the reflection of God’s character as seen in the perfect obedience to the commandments, or *lex moralis*. Justification is a summation of the legal declaration of God toward the sinner – the *actus forensic* – *counting* the believer righteous (through imputation) rather than *making* him righteous (misconstruing justification and sanctification). The *justitia imputata* of Christ is completed upon God’s judicial declaration. At its heart “declarative justification” involves the *justitia alienum et extra nos* (the alien righteousness not of the sinner but from Christ) imputed to the believer through faith by grace (Eph. 2:8-10). To deny the role of Christ’s active obedience is to teach that the law and Christ’s relationship to it are utterly irrelevant to the reckoning of righteousness to believers. In other words, those who deny Christ’s active obedience are teaching that redemption is accomplished by the setting aside of the law’s absolute demands, not by Christ’s perfectly fulfilling the law on our behalf. That overturns the clear teaching of Christ in Matthew 5:17; “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.”
- C. Second Corinthians 5:21 teaches that Christ’s righteousness is imputed to believers in exactly the same sense that our guilt was imputed to Him. In other words, justification involves a double imputation: Just as our violation of the law was imputed to Christ, His fulfillment of the law is imputed to us. Any other view destroys the parallelism of that verse. James Buchanan notes, “The imputation of sin and righteousness is not ‘a legal fiction,’ if by that expression be meant anything that is unreal or untrue. We make this statement with a limitation, because there are some ‘legal fictions’ so called, which are very far from being unreal. It is ‘a legal fiction’ to say, that ‘the king can do no wrong;’ for unquestionably in his private and personal capacity he can commit sin, and may even be guilty of crime; but in his public and official capacity, as the head of the State, he is held in the law of this country to be irresponsible; and the errors or crimes of the government are imputed to his constitutional advisers, who are regarded and treated, by reason of their official position, as alone answerable for them.”<sup>8</sup>
- D. Romans 5:19 clearly teaches that Christ’s obedience is the ground of our righteous legal standing. Since a single act of *disobedience* makes a person disobedient by definition and sets the full weight of the law against him (James 2:10), the “obedience” of Christ in this context must include the whole course of His lifetime of obedience to God.
- E. A host of other verses also make legal obedience (not merely forgiveness) essential to true righteousness. “And it shall be our righteousness, if we observe to do all these commandments before the LORD our God, as he hath commanded us” (Deuteronomy 6:25; cf. Psalm 15:2; 106:3; 119:172; Proverbs 12:17; Isaiah 58:2; Romans 6:16; 8:4; 10:5). The distinction often made between “active” and “passive” obedience does not nullify this point: *righteousness* and *obedience* are inextricably linked in Scripture. A perfect righteousness clearly requires something more than just the forgiveness of sin.
- F. To deny the role of Christ’s active obedience in justification is to distort what Paul meant when he described believers as “in Christ”—united with Him in such a way that our very life is hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3). We are clothed in His perfect righteousness—not *merely stripped of our guilt* (Isaiah 61:10). Indeed, Christ *is* our righteousness (Jeremiah 23:6; 1 Corinthians 1:30). Furthermore, Christ’s “righteousness” consists not merely in His sufferings, but in all his actions (1 John 2:29).

- G. Philippians 2:8 suggests that Christ's obedience only *culminated* in His death. The full scope of the obedience He rendered on our behalf was manifest in His whole life, not merely in His dying. See also Romans 8:3-4.
- H. Christ became man for us, not for Himself (2 Corinthians 8:9); and therefore the obedience He owed to the law was for us, not for Himself (Galatians 4:4). Here is how Jonathan Edwards put it, "There is the very same need of Christ's obeying the law in our stead, in order to the reward, as of his suffering the penalty of the law in our stead, in order to our escaping the penalty, and the same reason why one should be accepted on our account, as the other. There is the same need of one as the other, that the law of God might be answered: one was as requisite to answer the law as the other. It is certain, that was the reason why there was need that Christ should suffer the penalty for us, even that the law might be answered. For this the Scripture plainly teaches. This is given as the reason why Christ was made a curse for us, that the law threatened a curse to us, Gal. 3:10, 13. But the same law that fixes the curse of God as the consequence of not continuing in all things written in the law to do them (verse 10) has as much fixed doing those things as an antecedent of living in them (as verse 12). There is as much connection established in one case as in the other. There is therefore exactly the same need, from the law, of perfect obedience being fulfilled in order to our obtaining the reward, as there is of death being suffered in order to our escaping the punishment, or the same necessity by the law, of perfect obedience preceding life, as there is of disobedience being succeeded by death. The law is, without doubt, as much of an established rule in one case as in the other."<sup>9</sup>
- I. Scripture teaches that God's own righteousness involves numerous *positive* elements—His goodness, His love, His mercy, and so on. So God's righteousness (Romans 10:3) is certainly something more than merely the absence of guilt.
- J. The law's promise of life to those who obey would seem to be pointless if Christ somehow obtained life for us without obeying the law on our behalf. Why else would the law promise life for obedience (Leviticus 18:5; Ezekiel 20:11; Luke 10:28)? Note that the law promises life not to the one who suffers, but to the one who obeys. If Christ's active obedience has no relevance to our justification, those promises would add up to nothing but an empty, pointless bluff.
- K. The context of Philippians 3:9 makes clear that the ground of the believer's justification is an alien righteousness, not any degree of righteousness we obtain for ourselves. To deny that this is the righteousness of Christ is to diminish His unique role as our proxy, our mediator, and our substitute.

## II. THE THEOLOGICAL GROUNDS FOR THE DOCTRINE

- A. Denying Christ's active obedience sets one on a course that inevitably leads to a minimalist, downgraded view of justification. That is why so many of the leading critics of "active obedience" have concluded (quite logically, given the arguments they employ) that *nothing* positive is imputed to believers at justification. They teach instead that justification is nothing more than the forgiveness of sins, period. That kind of justification would leave believers with no better standing than Adam had before the fall.
- B. To portray justification as forgiveness only without any positive imputation is to undermine the biblical doctrine of the atonement. That view actually contains an echo of the Socinian argument, by claiming that merit is unnecessary where you have satisfaction.
- C. Some who deny the vicarious efficacy of Christ's active obedience have embraced a principle that is inherently antinomian. The law of God did not need to be fulfilled on our behalf, they say. It was simply overturned and abolished. Thus they relegate the law of God to complete irrelevancy as far as redemption is concerned. Others who deny the vicarious efficacy of Christ's active obedience teach a kind of neonomianism. They make the believer's own legal obedience a condition of final justification. This is a form of works salvation.
- D. Justification is a richer, fuller concept than forgiveness. (Christ Himself was "justified in the Spirit"—1 Timothy 3:16.) Justification is a declaration that God regards the believer as fully righteous, perfectly faithful, wholly acceptable to Him. It is not merely an edict that the believer is free from the penalty of sin. To eliminate the declaration of righteousness from our concept of justification (or to tone it down by redefining it as a pronouncement of forgiveness only) is to miss the profoundest aspect of the biblical doctrine of justification (Romans 3:22; 4:6, 11, 22-25; 1 Corinthians 6:11; see also Isaiah 54:17; Daniel 9:24). In effect, any denial of the efficacy of Christ's active obedience renounces the very heart and soul of Reformation theology.<sup>10</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** J. Gresham Machen, as he lay dying of pneumonia, sent a telegraph to John Murray which read, "so thankful for the active obedience of Christ – no hope without it." Machen had written about the subject in one of his books, saying, "Suppose Christ had done for us merely what we said last Sunday afternoon that He did. Suppose

He had merely paid the just penalty of the law that was resting upon us for our sin, and had done nothing more than that; where would we then be? Well, I think we can say – if indeed it is legitimate to separate one part of the work of Christ even in thought from the rest – that if Christ had merely paid the penalty of sin for us and had done nothing more we should be at best back in the situation in which Adam found himself when God placed him under the covenant of works. That covenant of works was a probation. If Adam kept the law of God for a certain period, he was to have eternal life. If he disobeyed he was to have death. Well, he disobeyed, and the penalty of death was inflicted upon him and his posterity. Then Christ by His death on the cross paid that penalty for those whom God had chosen. Well and good. But if that were all that Christ did for us, do you not see that we should be back in just the situation in which Adam was before he sinned? The penalty of his sinning would have been removed from us because it had all been paid by Christ. But for the future the attainment of eternal life would have been dependent upon our perfect obedience to the law of God. We should simply have been back in the probation again. Moreover, we should have been back in that probation in a very much less hopeful way than that in which Adam was originally placed in it. Everything was in Adam's favour when he was placed in the probation. He had been created in knowledge, righteousness and holiness. He had been created positively good. Yet despite all that, he fell. How much more likely would we be to fall – nay, how certain to fall – if all that Christ had done for us were merely to remove from us the guilt of past sin, leaving it then to our own efforts to win the reward which God has pronounced upon perfect obedience!"<sup>11</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Obadiah Sedgwick, The Doubting Believer (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), pp. 109-122.

<sup>2</sup> The doctrine of the active obedience of Christ has been extensively developed over the centuries. Richard Muller summarizes, *obedientia Christi: obedience of Christ*; viz., Christ's obedient work as the Mediator; performed for our redemption, it was distinguished by the scholastics into *obedientia activa* and *obedientia passiva*, active and passive obedience. The *obedientia activa* describes the life of Christ from his birth to his passion, and particularly his ministry, during which Christ acted sinlessly and in perfect obedience to the will of God. The *obedientia passiva* refers to Christ's passion, during which he accepted passively, without any resistance, the suffering and cross to which he was subjected for the satisfaction of sin. According to the medieval scholastics, following Anselm, the *obedientia activa* was not of a vicarious or substitutionary nature, but rather was Christ's own necessary obedience under the law, the ground of Christ's own merit and therefore of his aptitude for the work of satisfaction. Had the Mediator *not* been meritorious before God, the payment of the *obedientia passiva* would have been exacted of him for his own disobedience and could not have been applied to believers. This view of his obedience relates directly to the medieval theory of penance and to the distinction between punishment and guilt (*culpa*). *Poenae* accrues to anyone who is not actively obedient, while *culpa* is the result, qualitatively speaking, of sin. Since Christ's *obedientia passiva* accomplished the remission of sin (*remissio peccatorum*), those saved by grace through Christ have their *culpa* removed, but since Christ's *obedientia activa* was accomplished in order to constitute Christ as the worthy Mediator and not applied to sinners, the *poena* of sin remains and must be suffered temporally through the sacrament of penance. Following Luther, the Protestant scholastics, Lutheran and Reformed alike, argued that both the *obedientia activa* and the *obedientia passiva* were accomplished in the place and on behalf of believers and together constituted the one saving work of Christ, satisfying for both the *poena* and *culpa* of sin. Christ's obedience, then, according to the Protestant scholastics, remits sin in such a way as to make unnecessary the sacrament of penance. Note that this view of Christ's obedience conforms to the doctrine of justification *sola fide*, apart from the works of the law. Since the Protestant scholastics are adamant that the *obedientia Christi* was totally soteriological in purpose, they often refer to it as a single obedience with two aspects rather than as an *obedientia activa* and an *obedientia passiva*. Thus the *obedientia Christi* is both an *actio passiva*, a passive action, and a *passio activa*, an active passion. *Actio passiva* refers to Christ's subjection to the law, while *passio activa* refers to the real obedience of his life and death. Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms (Baker, 1981) p. 205.

<sup>3</sup> David Van Drunen, "To Obey Is Better Than Sacrifice: A Defense of the Active Obedience of Christ in the Light of Recent Criticism" in By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification, eds. G.L.W. Johnson & G.P. Waters (Crossway, 2006), p. 127.

<sup>4</sup> The Works of John Owen III (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1976) p. 204.

<sup>5</sup> N. T. Wright, What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity? (Eerdmans, 1996) p. 110.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Mark Karlbert, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3803/is\\_200504/ai\\_n13643151/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3803/is_200504/ai_n13643151/)

<sup>7</sup> R. Lusk, "Response to 'the Biblical Plan of Salvation'" in The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision (ed. Calvin Beisner, 2004) p. 140.

<sup>8</sup> James Buchanan, The Doctrine of Justification (rpt. Baker, 1974) p. 91.

<sup>9</sup> The Works of Jonathan Edwards II (rpt. The Banner of Truth, 1976) p. 704.

<sup>10</sup> I owe the substance of this outline analysis to Phil Johnson, cf. his post, "Active Obedience Revisited," Sept. 14, 2009. <http://teampyro.blogspot.com/>

<sup>11</sup> J. G. Machen, God transcendent and other sermons (rpt. Eerdmans, 1949) p. 173.