

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE RESURRECTION AND CHRIST'S OBEDIENCE

James Orr, one of the most accomplished theologians of the 19th century, wrote a magnificent book on The Resurrection, in which he said: “The Resurrection is an evidential fact, and its importance in this relation is not to be minimized. But this, as a little consideration may show, after all, only touches the exterior of the subject. The core of the matter is not reached till it is perceived that the Resurrection of Jesus is not simply an external seal or evidential appendage to the Christian gospel, but enters as a *constitutive element* into the very essence of that Gospel. Its denial or removal would be the mutilation of the Christian doctrine of Redemption, of which it is an integral part. An opposite view is that of Herrmann, who lays the whole stress on the impression produced by Christ’s early life. Such a view has no means of incorporating the Resurrection into itself as a constitutive part of its Christianity. The Resurrection remains at most a deduction of faith without inner relation to salvation? It is apt to be felt, therefore, to be a superfluous appendage. In a full Scriptural presentation it is not so. It might almost be said to be a test of the adequacy of the view of Christ and His work taken by any school, whether it is able to take in the Resurrection of Christ as a constitutive part of it. In New Testament Scripture, it will not be disputed that these two things are always taken together – the Death and the Resurrection of Christ – the one as essentially connected with, and completed in, the other. *It is Christ that died*, says St. Paul, *yea, rather, that was raised from the dead. Who was delivered up for our trespasses, and was raised for our justification. Who through Him*, says St. Peter, *are believers in God, which raised Him from the dead, and gave him glory; so that your faith and hope might be in God. The God of peace, who brought again from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep, with the blood of the everlasting covenant*, we read in Hebrews. *I am the Living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore*, says the Lord in the Apocalypse. What is the nature of this connexion? The answer to this question turns on the manner in which the death of Christ itself is conceived, and on this point the teaching of the New Testament is again sufficiently explicit. The Cross is the decisive meeting-place between man’s sin and God’s grace. It is the point of reconciliation between man and God. *There* was accomplished – at least consummated – the great work of Atonement for human sin! Christ, as the Epistle to the Hebrews declares, *put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself*.¹ *Poenā Damni* is the theological Latin expression that refers to the loss of God’s favor, presence and glory. The fate of those who are designated in Scripture as “*lost*” is one of banishment to a place of torment (Matthew 25:41; Luke 16:24-29). Here they experience *poena sensus* – punishment in which is described as everlasting fire (Matthew 10:28; Luke 12:5; Revelation 20:14, 15).² This is *Damnation*.³ Sin must be judged by God. Try as we might to minimize the seriousness of our sin or to try and excuse or rationalize our sin away, we are still left standing before God guilty. Our own conscience reminds us of our guilty, and where there is real guilt, there is condemnation.⁴ This is deserved because of original sin (Romans 5:18) and our actual sins (Romans 6:23). Our guilt produces fear, and this is founded not, as so much popular psychology would have us believe, in a misguided religious upbringing or a culturally conditioned lack of self-esteem, but in the lingering but gripping sense of God’s holiness. “It is a natural truth,” wrote Thomas Manton, “that sin is displeasing to God, and maketh the sinner hateful and loathsome to Him, and worthy to be cast off and punished by Him. God’s holiness is at the bottom of all our fears.”⁵

Sin affects all of us in two regards. One has to do with sin's guilt and condemnation. Secondly, it has to do with sin's pollution and defilement. No amount of repentance on our part can remove sin's guilt and stain. No amount of effort on our part to try and earn righteousness can remove sin's guilt and stain. Ezekiel Hopkins long ago penned these words: "Either presumptuous conceits of God's mercy, or proud conceits of their own merits, or some such rotten principle or other: and, because, with these, they have worn out many storms of conscience and many powerful convictions, they will not forsake their hopes, not let go their vain confidence; but cry out peace, peace to themselves, till they and their hopes perish together."⁶ Only the blood of Christ can cleanse the guilt and stain of sin (1 John 1:7). Peter in his sermon declared that: "God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power" (Acts 2:24). Why was it impossible for Jesus to be held in the power of death? The answer to that question involves the active obedience of Christ.

- I. ***THE NECESSITY OF CHRIST'S ACTIVE OBEDIENCE FOR OUR SALVATION.*** Robert Letham provides us with this helpful analysis: "*The dual aspect of Christ's obedience.* Christ's obedience has been considered in twofold form. His *active obedience* was his complete conformity to the law of God throughout his life. This went beyond sinlessness; not only was he without sin, but he also rendered complete, positive, faithful, and intentional obedience to God (Rom. 5:12-21; Heb. 4:14-16; 7:25-26; 10:1-5) from day one. When he was an infant, all the requirements of the law were performed regarding him (Luke 2:21-39). Throughout his life he obeyed his Father. (Heb. 10:5-10). Not one of his vehement opponents could convict him of sin (John 8:46). There was also his *passive obedience*. This does not denote passivity in the contemporary sense of inactivity, being acted upon from without, limp and ineffective. The term *passive* derives from the Latin verb *pator* (*passus, passa, passum*), meaning *suffer*. It entailed Jesus's suffering the consequences of our having broken the law of God. *The wages of sin is death* (Rom. 6:23); we earned what we deserved, being delivered up for our offenses (Rom. 4:25). He learned obedience through what he suffered (Heb. 5:7-10). He emptied himself, becoming obedient to death, even the death of the cross (Phil. 2:7-8). He did so with tears and agony (Luke 22:39-46; Heb. 5:7-8). On the cross, he uttered the cry of dereliction (Matt. 27:46). Active and passive obedience are not two sets of obedience but one obedience with two dimensions. There is an inextricable connection between atonement and justification; he was *delivered up for our trespasses* [atonement for sin] *and raised for our justification* [vindication] (Rom. 4:25). Christ's obedience is the indispensable backcloth for the atonement as it qualified him as our Priest and representative; only a sinless and obedient second Adam could receive the life that was to come in the vindication of resurrection. It is the necessary ground for our justification."⁷ Please note the critical importance of Christ's obedience for our justification. Thomas Goodwin (1600-1680), a member of both the Westminster Assembly and the Savoy Declaration, devoted three lengthy chapters on the importance of Christ's active obedience in his work *Of Christ The Mediator*, declaring, "There be three parts of justification. *First*, the taking away of actual sin; this is handled in ch. iii. ver. 24, *All have sinned*, etc. His passive obedience takes away the guilt of actual sin. But, *secondly*, we ought to have an actual righteousness reckoned to us. This is handled in Rom. v. 18, *As by the offence of one, judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one, the free gift came upon all unto justification of life*. The active obedience of Jesus Christ made many righteous. Justification lies not only in pardon of sin, but in the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and imputed to us as Adam's sin was. But the law is not fulfilled yet; for we have corruption of nature in us. The apostle therefore in this Rom. viii. 4, he brings in the *third* part of justification, vis., That Christ came into the world in our nature, and fulfilled the righteousness of the law, in having that nature perfectly holy. And now the righteousness of the law is fulfilled in all parts of it; here is a perfect justification, and we desire no more."⁸

II. **CHRIST AND THE LAW.** As everything that Christ has done in perfectly keeping the law; as the stipulation of the covenant to which the promise of eternal life was tied.

- a) Active obedience consists in an actively assertive act, the object of which is the law of God. Passive obedience consists in an actively receptive act in which the law – that is, the punitive righteousness of God – is also at work. In passive obedience, the law acts on Christ with its curse; in active obedience, Christ acts on the law.
- b) Here the law is not kept insofar as it is the natural demand of God's holy nature on all moral creatures. If Christ had taken away that demand by substitution, then it would follow that believers no longer stand under the requirement to keep God's law and do His will. That would be antinomianism. A rational being can never be free of this moral duty regardless of what state he is in. What Christ has kept is the law as a covenantal requirement – that is, as the means, sovereignly ordained by God, for obtaining eternal life that cannot be lost.
- c) Accordingly, one must distinguish three kinds of relationships in which man stands to the law:
 - 1. The natural relationship of a rational being. No due possession can be earned from God by this relationship. Even if a person in this relationship does all that is demanded from him, he is still an unprofitable servant [Luke 17:10].
 - 2. The covenant relationship. God can, out of voluntary favor, enter into a covenant with man and make the keeping of the law, under specific conditions, a means to obtain eternal life. This second relationship does not annul the first just mentioned but gives it a specific character for a period of time. When it ceases, the first still remains, regardless of the cause of the cessation – be it the fulfillment of the covenant or its breaking. The natural demands of the law come both to believers as well as those who are lost.
 - 3. The penal relationship. Man enters into this relationship as soon as he breaks the law. This brings to an end the covenant relationship but not the natural relationship. God still demands of a transgressor that he keep the whole law, but He is no longer obligated to tie that demand to the promise of eternal life that cannot be lost.
 - 4. Passive obedience. Note carefully that this does not mean that Christ, in His passive obedience, would have been merely receptive (passive) and did nothing Himself. His suffering included in itself an activity that was voluntary. Here *passive* should be understood as *pain-enduring*. Thus by the passive obedience of Christ we designate all those experiences in which He, according to His humanity, endured pain to satisfy the punitive righteousness of God. This stands out even more clearly when one bears in mind that those who are in Christ do not only receive acquittal from guilt and punishment but also the right to eternal life. Concerning this acquisition of eternal life, the following four possibilities may be considered:
 - a. God makes an essential change in the way in which He grants eternal life to His creatures. At one time, as far as we know, this always happened by a test in which obedience had to be demonstrated. Now He does this otherwise by simply clearing away the ruins of the overturned law, without reestablishing the law itself in all its beauty. This is what it comes down to when we only assume a passive obedience.
 - b. If God does not change His conditions, then the possibility can be considered that we are only freed from punishment but remain forever destitute of the blessings of life, that we are not sanctified and glorified but are brought into an in-between state – one that lies between salvation and its opposite but is neither of the two.

- c. The possibility also exists that the passive obedience of Christ only removes legal obstacles, and it is now left to us to carry out what is lacking, to earn eternal life by our own strength. Then we would be accountable for achieving active obedience.
- d. The fourth and final possibility is that Christ not only restores the violated justice in its majesty by suffering but also by obedience earns all the benefits of eternal life for those who are His.

Now it is immediately apparent that the first two possibilities are purely abstract possibilities that cannot be taken into consideration in reality. God cannot grant to fallen sinners, worthy of damnation, what He refused to the holy Adam – namely entrance into eternal life without perfect keeping of the law. This would be an unparalleled violation of the majesty of His law, a relaxation in the bad sense of the word. The second, that the redeemed would remain in an in-between state, is totally unthinkable. Our choice, therefore, remains only between the third and fourth possibilities. And then it is immediately apparent where the rejection of the active obedience of the Mediator ends up: in nothing other than that the covenant of grace is again made into a covenant of works for the sinner, in which he has to earn salvation for himself.⁹

CONCLUSION: Doug Kelly, one of my former professors, shows that Christ’s sonship is at the heart of what he did for our salvation. “In this active obedience of sanctification and reconciliation, Christ lives out the life of filial sonship which neither Adam nor Israel ever did. Hence, in addition to the biblical concept of *substitution*, one must add the biblical concept of *representation*. That is what we find in the theology of the Apostle Paul, especially in Romans 5 and 6, which explicate in detail the union of believers with Christ, their covenant head and representative. This means that as our substitute and representative, as the Last Adam, Christ turns back our humanity from saying with Adam, *My will be done* (as he succumbed to the temptation of Satan to be as God), to saying *Thy will be done*. Christ represents us in his true and full humanity by restoring us to God-centeredness. He, in our room and stead, can truly say: *I do always those things which please him* (John 8:29). He does so especially in his life of prayer. What Mark 1:35 notes of him was, no doubt, typical: *And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed*. In his perfect faith in the Father, in his obedient response to all of God’s holy law (cf. Matt. 5:17), he represents us as *our worship leader* (to quote John Calvin’s comments on Christ’s priesthood in Hebrews). Thus, through his holy, loving life, we who believe in him are lifted up into the heavenlies, for in him, through union in the Holy Spirit, we have *access to God* (Eph. 2:18). He takes our humanity with him into heaven in his ascension, so that *we are seated with him in heavenly places* (Eph. 2:6).”¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ James Orr, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1980), p. 274.

² This punishment is also *gradus poenarum infernalium*, that is, according to the quality and measure of sins committed (Revelation 21:12). There are degrees of punishment.

³ The curse word *Damn* (commonly heard today) comes from the Latin *damnātre*, “to condemn,” and *damnation*, “loss, fine, penalty.” *Damnatio* is the theological expression for the consignment to eternal punishment which takes place at the final judgment. People are judged for their sins (unforgiven). All who stand outside of Christ are so judged (2 Thessalonians 1:8, 9; Acts 4:12).

⁴ *Reatus Poenae* refers to the liability to punishment because we have incurred guilt by transgressing the Law of God. We are *culpable* (from the Latin *culpa*, “guilt, fault, crime”). Sinners are subject to both guilt and punishment.

⁵ *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton* XII (rpt. Maranatha, 1973), p. 360.

⁶ *The Works of Ezekiel Hopkins* II (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), p. 387.

⁷ R. Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Crossway, 2019), p. 553.

⁸ *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (rpt. Tanski Publication, 1996), p. 352.

⁹ This section is adopted from Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics: Christology* III (Lexham Press, 2014), pp. 128-130.

¹⁰ D. Kelly, *Systematic Theology* II (Mentor, 2014), p. 334.