

# “No Hope Without It!”

## A Biblical Defense of the Active Obedience of Christ

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### Introduction

- J. Gresham Machen’s dying words: “I’m so thankful for [the] active obedience of Christ. No hope without it!”<sup>1</sup>
- Heidelberg, 60: How are you righteous before God?
  - “Only by true faith in Jesus Christ; that is, although my conscience accuse me, that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, and have never kept any of them, and am still prone always to all evil; yet God, without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never committed nor had any sin, and had myself accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for me; if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart.”
- John MacArthur on Active Obedience
  - “Just as our sin was imputed to Christ so He could pay our debt in our place (1 Peter 2:24), so His righteousness—His perfect, active obedience—is imputed to us (2 Corinthians 5:21). Therefore, no other payment or reimbursement is required for us to stand justified before God.”<sup>2</sup>
  - “Theologians through the years have called this Christ’s ‘active obedience.’ In other words, Christ’s work on our behalf did not begin at the cross. All His life, He was fulfilling all righteousness in every way. At the very start of His public ministry, He insisted on being baptized because, as He told John the Baptist, ‘It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness’ (Matthew 3:15). He didn’t need baptism. John’s baptism was a symbol of repentance. But He did it to provide a perfect righteousness on behalf of

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<sup>1</sup> Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 1977), 508.

<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur, “On the Merits of Grace,” Grace to You Blog, Nov. 6, 2023: <https://www.gty.org/blogs/B231106/on-the-merits-of-christ>.

those for whom He would die (Romans 5:18–19). It’s a righteousness that encompasses even the symbol of our repentance.”<sup>3</sup>

- “Christ...perfectly kept to the law, [and] paid the penalty for our sins on the cross, so that by both His active obedience, active righteousness and His passive obedience, passive righteousness on the cross, He became the one who satisfied God. We died in Him, and we also received His righteous life imputed to us.”<sup>4</sup>
- “When God raised Jesus from the dead He demonstrated that every demand of His holy law had been met, both in what is called the active and passive obedience of Jesus: the active obedience of Jesus, His perfect life applied to us; the passive obedience of Jesus, His sacrificial death in which He paid the penalty for our sins.”<sup>5</sup>
- See John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue (eds.), *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 521–22; 615–18.
- TMSJ Spring 2021<sup>6</sup>
  - “The faculty of The Master’s Seminary object to all such attempts to do away with the principle of imputed righteousness.”
  - “We affirm that Christ ‘fulfill[ed] all righteousness’ as a man by rendering perfect obedience to the law’s commandments.”
  - “We affirm double imputation. ... The full credit of His righteousness is reckoned to our account.”
  - “We deny that ‘the imputation of Christ’s righteousness’ speaks ... [of] anything less than the full credit of perfect obedience reckoned to the account of the one who believes (Rom 5:19).”
  - “Apart from His full and active obedience, we could not be saved.”

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<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, “Heaven’s Perspective on the Cross: Submission,” Grace to You Blog, Oct. 16, 2023: <https://www.gty.org/blogs/B130923/heavens-perspective-on-the-cross-submission>.

<sup>4</sup> John MacArthur, “God’s Eternal Covenant of Promise,” (Galatians 3:15–18), Oct. 8, 2017: <https://www.gty.org/sermons/48-16/gods-eternal-covenant-of-promise>.

<sup>5</sup> John MacArthur, “The Challenges to Christian Invincibility,” (Romans 8:31–39), Jan. 27, 2002: <https://www.gty.org/sermons/80-256/the-challenges-to-christian-invincibility>.

<sup>6</sup> John MacArthur, “Editorial,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 32/1 (Spring 2021): 1–4. Jan. 27, 2002: Available here: <https://tms.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/TMSJ-32.1-rev.11.24.pdf#page=5>.

- “We teach that salvation is wholly of God by grace on the basis of the redemption of Jesus Christ—the merits both of His life of perfect righteousness and His atoning blood—and not on the basis of human merits or works.”<sup>7</sup>
- “Listen to this. This is Christianity: He [i.e., Jesus] imputes His life to the believing Christian.”<sup>8</sup>

## I. Salvation is a Matter of Righteousness

- The Most Essential Question in History: How can sinful man be right with Holy God?
- Justification is inexorably a legal matter.
  - Deuteronomy 25:1: “If there is a dispute between men and they go to court, and the judges decide their case, and they justify the righteous and condemn the wicked...”
    - See also: Exodus 23:7; 1 Kings 8:31–32, Job 9:15, Isaiah 43:9, 26, and Jeremiah 12:1.
  - Romans 8:33–34: “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.”
- The Centrality of Righteousness
  - Matthew 5:20: “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”
  - Matthew 5:48: “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”
  - Romans 1:16–17: For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it *the* righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith.’”

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<sup>7</sup> Grace Community Church, “What We Teach,” <https://www.gracechurch.org/about/doctrinal-statement>.  
The Master’s Seminary, “Doctrinal Statement,” <https://tms.edu/doctrinal-statement>.

<sup>8</sup> Larry King Live, “What Happens After We Die?”, aired Apr. 14, 2005, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFrgpeWh6tQ>: 20:39–20:46.

- Romans 3:21–22: “But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe.”
- Romans 10:3–4: “For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”
- 2 Corinthians 5:21: “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”
- Philippians 3:9: “...found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own which is from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God upon faith” (LSB).
- Justified by the Imputation of Our Sins to Christ
  - The Father treated Christ as if He had committed the sins of every one of the people His Father had given Him, though in fact He committed none of them. He legally charged the sins of the elect to Christ's account and exacted payment from Him.
  - Leviticus 16:21: “Then Aaron shall lay both of his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the sons of Israel and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and he shall lay them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who stands in readiness.”
  - Isaiah 53:6: “Yahweh has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.”
  - 1 Peter 2:24: “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross.”
  - Romans 3:24: “...justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.”

## **II. The Law: Penal Sanctions and Positive Precepts**

- Propitiation is Only Half the Story
  - Justification is more than “just-as-if-I'd-never-sinned.”

- God’s law requires not merely innocence, but righteousness.
  - The law of God has both (a) positive demands, and (b) penal sanctions for failure to meet those demands.
  - Jesus’ death answers the demand of the law’s penal sanctions for our disobedience. But having our penalty paid does not release us from the obligation to fulfill the positive precepts of the law.
  - Even though man was created “very good” (Gen 1:31) and morally “upright” (Ecc 7:29), even in Paradise Adam did not exist in the highest possible state of righteousness that man could attain.
    - Man in the state of innocence was able to sin (*posse peccare*), able not to sin (*posse non peccare*), and able to fall (*posse cadere*).
    - Man in the state of glory will be unable to sin (*non posse peccare*) and unable to fall (*non posse cadere*).<sup>9</sup>
    - Adam was called not merely to continue in a state of innocence but to obey the Lord’s commandment not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:15–17), and thereby to be exalted from his state of untested, fallible innocence to a state of confirmed, infallible righteousness.<sup>10</sup>
  - We are required to obey God’s commandments in a way that befits His worthiness, *and* we are required to pay the penalty of eternal punishment if we fall short of perfect obedience.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State: Of Primitive Integrity, Entire Depravity, Begun Recovery, and Consummate Happiness or Misery* (1720; repr.: Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 1964).

<sup>10</sup> For a biblical defense of this claim, see the audio and slides posted at Mike Riccardi, “The Garden and Our Guilt: Why All People Are Born Sinners,” <https://www.gracechurch.org/sermons/22529>.

<sup>11</sup> “It is also a means of articulating the holiness and infinite worth of God’s character and the positive and negative aspect that is inherently and inseparably bound up in all true obedience to his perfect will. For example, it is not enough to have no other gods before him; if one is to be acceptable before holy God, he must love him with all his heart, mind, and soul. It is not enough to refrain from committing adultery; if a husband is to be obedient to God, he must love his wife as Christ loved the church and gave his life for her. It is not enough to put off filthiness; one must also put on righteousness. Righteousness is not merely the negative lack of what is bad but also the positive fulfillment of what is good. It is this positive aspect of Christ’s obedience to the will of the Father even unto and especially unto death that Reformed theologians have termed *active*” (Gregory A. Van Court, *The Obedience of Christ* [Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2005], 6).

- We must be found not just not-guilty, but righteous; not only not transgressors of the law, but doers of the law.
- We need a Substitute who does more than pay our penalty and bring us back to a state of moral neutrality as Adam was in the garden. We need a positive record of righteousness credited to our account from One who has obeyed all the positive demands of the law on our behalf.
- Passive and Active Obedience
  - John Murray: “The law of God has both penal sanctions and positive demands. It demands not only the full discharge of its precepts but also the infliction of penalty for all infractions and shortcomings. It is this twofold demand of the law of God which is taken into account when we speak of the active and passive obedience of Christ. Christ as the vicar of his people came under the curse and condemnation due to sin and he also fulfilled the law of God in all its positive requirements. In other words, he took care of the guilt of sin and perfectly fulfilled the demands of righteousness. He perfectly met both the penal and the preceptive requirements of God’s law. The passive obedience refers to the former and the active obedience to the latter.”<sup>12</sup>

### III. Romans 5

- The guilt and condemnation of all united to Adam vs. the righteousness and justification of all united to Christ.
- Romans 5:18–19: “Therefore, as through the one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, so also through the one righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were constituted sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be constituted righteous.”
  - *Kathistēmi* – “to appoint” (Acts 6:3; Titus 1:5; Heb 5:1; 7:28; 8:3); i.e., to legally establish or constitute.

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<sup>12</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1955), 21–22.

- **Adam’s sin** provides **an actual, lived-out record of human disobedience**, which was counted to be ours through our union with him. And it became the **legal basis** upon which **God justly constituted all men guilty** (Rom 5:12ff).
- **Christ’s life of obedience** provides **the actual, lived-out record of human righteousness**, which is counted to be ours through our union with Him. And it becomes the **legal basis** upon which **God justly constitutes believers righteous** (2 Cor 5:21b; cf. Rom 5:18–19).
- No legal fiction: Adam’s actual deeds of disobedience constitute us to be sinners. So also, Christ’s actual deeds of obedience constitute us to be righteous.
  - Paul does not say, “By the one man’s disobedience the many were appointed *guilty*,” but *sinners (hamartoloi)*. Through our union with Adam, we are counted as having committed Adam’s actual deeds of lawbreaking.
  - Thus, “...through the obedience of the One the many will be appointed *righteous*” means: through our union with Christ, we are counted as having performed Christ’s actual deeds of lawkeeping.<sup>13</sup>
- Matthew 3:13–15: “Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. But John tried to prevent Him, saying, ‘I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?’ But Jesus answering said to him, ‘Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he permitted Him.”
  - John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; Acts 13:24; 19:4).
  - Not Prescribed in the Mosaic Law
    - John MacArthur: This baptism was “different from the Levitical washings, which consisted of washing the hands, feet, and head. The Essenes, a group of Jewish ascetics who lived on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, practiced a type of ceremonial washing that more nearly resembled baptism. But both the Levitical and the Essene washings were repeated, those of the Essenes as much as several times a day or even hourly. They represented repeated purification for repeated sinning. John’s washing, however, was one-time. The only one-time washing the Jews performed was for Gentiles, signifying their coming as outsiders into the true faith of Judaism. A Jew who submitted to such a rite demonstrated, in effect, that he was an outsider who sought entrance into the people of God—an amazing admission for a Jew. Members

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<sup>13</sup> John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 170–71.

of God's chosen race, descendants of Abraham, heirs of the covenant of Moses, came to John to be baptized like a Gentile! That act symbolized before the world that they realized their national and racial descent, or even their calling as God's chosen and covenant people, could not save them. They had to repent, forsake sin, and trust in the Lord for salvation."<sup>14</sup>

- Because Jesus had no sins to repent of (e.g., John 1:29), He would not have been any less righteous if He did not receive John's baptism. He would have been just as qualified, spotless, and righteous if He had never submitted to this baptism of repentance. Thus, "fulfilling all righteousness" here cannot mean doing only that which qualified Him to be a suitable sacrifice for sinners.
- This means that the righteousness He was fulfilling was not His own, but ours. He did not need to repent, but we did. His obedience is vicarious on our behalf.
- Therefore, Christ's obedience to the law of God is the stuff, or ground, of our righteousness before God.
- "In my place condemned He stood," and "In my place obedient He lived."
  - Romans 5:19: "For as through the one man's disobedience the many were constituted sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be constituted righteous."

### **Objection I. Romans 5:18: One Act of Righteousness**

- Some argue Romans 5:18 restricts the obedience of Christ which accomplished our justification to His death alone. Paul speaks of "*one act of righteousness*" through which "there resulted justification of life to all men."
- But "one act of righteousness" is not the best translation for *dikaiōma* in this place.
  - "Righteous act" seems to fit in Revelation 15:4 and 19:8, though perhaps arguments can be made to the contrary.
- Used five times in Paul (seven if you count Hebrews [9:1, 10])

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<sup>14</sup> John MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, MNTC (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 58.

- Romans 1:32: “...and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.
  - This speaks of the righteousness which God requires of men, not a single act which man performs.
  - It would not make sense to translate this, “although they know the act of righteousness of God.”
  
- Romans 2:26: “So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?”
  - This speaks of the righteousness which God requires of men, not a single act which man performs.
  - It would not make sense to translate this, “keeps the acts of righteousness of the Law.”
  
- Romans 5:16: “...for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification.”
  - Here it is translated as “justification” as a whole—that comprehensive state of right standing in God’s sight, which stands opposed to “condemnation” (*katákrima*).
  - It would not make sense to translate this, “the judgment arose from one, resulting in condemnation, but...the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in” *a righteous act*.
  
- Romans 8:3–4: “For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the [righteous] requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”
  - This speaks of the (righteousness) requirement that God requires of men as expressed in His law, not a single act which man performs.

- It would not make sense to translate this, “so that the acts of righteousness of the Law might be fulfilled.”
- Because (a) *dikaiōma* can function in this comprehensive sense of “that righteousness which God’s Law requires,” and because (b) it is used this way in the two nearest occurrences in the context (5:16; 8:4)—it is fitting for Paul to use this term to speak of Christ’s entire life of obedience considered comprehensively.<sup>15</sup>
- If it referred to “one act of righteousness,” namely, the death of Christ, what specific act would Paul be referring to?
  - Yielding His spirit? (Matt 27:50)
  - Refusing to come down from the cross amidst mockery? (Matt 27:39–44; cf. Ps 22:6–8, 13–18)
  - Loving His enemies by asking God to forgive them? (Luke 23:34)
  - Allowing Himself to be nailed to a cross? (Luke 23:33)
  - Carrying His cross? (Luke 23:26)
  - Submitting to being beaten? (Mark 15:19)
  - Submitting to an unjust trial? (Mark 14:53–64)
  - Surrendering peacefully to the mob in Gethsemane? (John 18:1–13)
  - Setting His face like flint (Isa 50:7) to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51), in order to be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and to be handed over to the Gentiles to be killed (Mark 10:31)?

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<sup>15</sup> It also makes conceptual sense. It only takes one act of imperfection to corrupt one’s perfection. But removing imperfections from something often takes more than a single act. Consider an imperfect illustration. When a drop of iodine is dropped into a glass of clear water, the dark red liquid does not stay in a single droplet; it permeates the water. You could not scoop the red dot of iodine out with a spoon. You would have to so thoroughly permeate that mixture with some cleansing agent, like bleach, for that liquid to become clear again. Similarly, a whole life of many acts of Christ’s righteousness is required to purify the pollution of Adam’s one transgression. How fitting that *dikaiōma* can and does speak of righteousness considered in such a comprehensive sense.

- Everything Jesus did, from the moment He was conceived, He did with the cross in view. From the moment of His incarnation, He was becoming obedient unto death (*hupékoos mechri thanatou*, Phil 2:8).
- Christ’s obedience unto death spanned the entirety of His law-fulfilling life.

## Objection II. The Divine Attribute of Righteousness

- Some argue that, in the key texts about the righteousness required for justification, Paul speaks of the righteousness of God (e.g., Rom 1:17; 3:21–22; 10:3–4; 2 Cor 5:21). Therefore, we are imputed the divine attribute of righteousness which Jesus possesses by virtue of His deity, not the obedient works of Jesus by virtue of His humanity.
- Should we speak, then, of the imputed righteousness of the Father, and the imputed righteousness of the Spirit?
- 2 Peter 1:1: “...To those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”
  - Imputed righteousness is appropriated to Christ because it is constitutive of His saving work as our Mediator. But He is Mediator according to both natures, divine and human.
- The Communication of the Properties (*communicatio idiomatum*)
  - Acts 20:28: “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”
    - The blood of God ≠ the blood of Christ by virtue of His deity.
  - Luke 2:52: “And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.”
    - The growth of God ≠ the growth of Christ by virtue of His deity.
  - Luke 4:1–2: “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil.”

- The temptation of God ≠ the temptation of Christ by virtue of His deity (cf. Jas 1:13).
  - Acts 3:14–15: “But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses.”
    - The death of God ≠ the death of Christ by virtue of His deity.
  - Thus, “the righteousness of God” does not necessarily speak of the righteousness of Christ by virtue of His deity.
- This objection fundamentally misunderstands what God requires of man.
  - God’s simplicity means that each divine attribute is identical to His essence. The righteousness of God, then, is nothing other than the essence of God.
  - To be imputed the divine attribute of righteousness would be to be imputed the divine essence.
  - But God has never required man to be God, but only to be holy man.

### **Objection III. Incompatible with Dispensationalism**

- Some argue that the imputation of the active obedience of Christ is somehow incompatible with Dispensationalism. This is relevant because, (a) sadly, at some point in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Dispensationalism did become associated with a rejection of active obedience; and (b) John MacArthur has affirmed key Dispensationalist distinctives (such as a distinction between Israel and the church and a future restoration of national Israel).
- In fact, active obedience is not mutually exclusive of Dispensationalism.
  - Many Dispensationalists affirm active obedience, whether directly by name or only in substance.
    - Chafer: “If the distinction between that which Christ wrought in His life and that which He wrought in His death—and many are apparently not awake to it—is not observed, only confusion of doctrine will result.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology: Soteriology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 3:42. Micah McCormick observes that, as Chafer distinguishes between the sweet savor and non-sweet savor offerings in

- Pentecost: “In the third great act of imputation, God set down on the positive side of our ledger all the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Thus we might have a positive standing before God. Had imputation stopped with this second step, we would have been left with a record that was clean because the debit side had been removed; but there would still be no basis upon which God could receive us into His presence, for we did not possess a positive righteousness. But when the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us, a positive standing is given to us. This entry on the credit side of the ledger gives us the right to come into the presence of God.”<sup>17</sup>
  
- McCune: “Christ fulfilled all the demands of God’s law and the rewardableness or merit of His obedience is imputed or credited to the believing sinner’s account. On that basis, God accepts the sinner as perfectly righteous and restored to His favor. ... Any view of the atonement that cannot grant the merit of obedience as well as the just satisfaction of God’s outraged holiness is deficient. It calls into question, however minimally or inadvertently, the necessary, complete, and absolute ethical basis of one’s salvation.”<sup>18</sup>
  
- Snoeberger, Aloisi, and Doran (DBTS)
  - Snoeberger: “While some dispensationalists have surely objected to the prevailing Protestant view of justification, this is by no

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the Old Testament, he writes, “The sweet savor offerings represent Christ offering himself without spot to God (Heb 9:14), and that this is substitutionary to the extent that, as the sinner is wholly void of merit before God (Rom 3:9; Gal 3:22), Christ has released and made available upon grounds of perfect equity his own merit as the basis of the believer's acceptance and standing before God. On the other hand, it should be remembered that the non-sweet savor offerings represent Christ as a sacrifice for sin.” Lewis Sperry Chafer, “Soteriology: The Savior-Things Accomplished by Christ in His Sufferings and Death,” *BSac* 104/413 (1947): 18. McCormick comments, “While not explicit, Chafer does appear to suggest that the two different types of OT sacrifices represent two different aspects of Christ's work—one the sacrificial aspect of payment for sin, and the other the positive merits of Christ's work as the ground of full acceptance before God.” Micah J. McCormick, *The Active Obedience of Christ*, PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (Louisville, KY, 2010), 90.

<sup>17</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things which Become Sound Doctrine: Doctrinal Studies of Fourteen Crucial Words of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 45.

<sup>18</sup> Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity, Volume 2: The Doctrines of Man, Sin, Christ, and the Holy Spirit*, (Detroit, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary), 201. See the entire section (2:198–203), in which McCune affirms an “original probation in Eden,” the distinction between the law’s “positive demands” and “penal sanctions,” that active obedience is “the basis of the believing sinner’s being accepted by God as righteous and being given restoration to favor,” that “pardon and forgiveness alone would not qualify anyone to go to heaven,” that “one who has been released from the penalty of the law is not on the same plane as one who has perfectly kept the law,” and that “imputation of merit is necessary” for salvation.

means a dispensational sine qua non. And, for the record, we at DBTS represent a tribe of dispensationalist that unanimously affirms the representative headship of Adam and the active obedience of Christ as wholly compatible with dispensational theology.”<sup>19</sup>

- Aloisi: “Many ‘Bible-believing Baptists’ have affirmed the traditional view concerning the active obedience of Christ. The traditional view is not something foreign to Baptist theology. Rather, it is a doctrine that has been embraced by many of our Baptist forebears and included in many of their confessions of faith. ... While it is true that the Baptists cited above did not embrace dispensationalism, a number of dispensationalists have held the traditional view of Christ’s active obedience as well.”<sup>20</sup>
- John MacArthur (and The Master’s Seminary)
  - See pages 1–3 above.
- Nothing essential to Dispensationalism is inimical to active obedience.
  - MacArthur: “Dispensationalism shapes one’s *eschatology* and *ecclesiology*. That is the extent of it. ... True dispensationalism makes no relevant contribution to *soteriology*.... In other words, nothing in a legitimate dispensational approach to Scripture mandates that we define the gospel in any unique or different way.”<sup>21</sup>
  - Vlach’s Six Essentials<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Snoeberger, “The Active Obedience of Christ and Dispensational Theology: A Follow-Up,” DBTS Blog, Aug. 8, 2012: <https://dbts.edu/2012/08/31/the-active-obedience-of-christ-and-dispensational-theology-a-follow-up>.

<sup>20</sup> John Aloisi, “The Active Obedience of Christ: A Brief Reply,” DBTS Blog, Aug. 26, 2012: <https://dbts.edu/2012/08/26/the-active-obedience-of-christ-a-brief-reply>. Also see Aloisi’s later post, “The Active Obedience of Christ: An Intrusion into Baptist Life?”, DBTS Blog, Sept. 30, 2024: <https://dbts.edu/2024/09/30/the-active-obedience-of-christ-an-intrusion-into-baptist-life>, and a helpful podcast at DBTS featuring Snoeberger and others: <https://dbts.edu/2024/09/19/is-active-obedience-anti-dispensational>.

<sup>21</sup> John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to the Apostles: The Role of Works in a Life of Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 206.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Vlach, *Dispensationalism: Essential Beliefs and Common Myths*, revised and updated (Los Angeles, CA: Theological Studies Press, 2017), 23–50.

- 1. The primary meaning of any Bible passage is found in that passage. The New Testament does not reinterpret or transcend Old Testament passages in a way that overrides or cancels the original authorial intent of the Old Testament writers.
  - 2. Types exist but national Israel is not an inferior type that is superseded by the church.
  - 3. Israel and the church are distinct; thus, the church cannot be identified as the new and/or true Israel.
  - 4. Spiritual unity in salvation between Jews and Gentiles is compatible with a future functional role for Israel as a nation.
  - 5. The nation Israel will be both saved and restored with a unique functional role in a future earthly millennial kingdom.
  - 6. There are multiple senses of “seed of Abraham,” thus the church’s identification as “seed of Abraham” does not cancel God’s promises to the believing Jewish “seed of Abraham.”
- ➔ None of these essentials is undermined by belief in the imputation of the active obedience of Christ.
- Some argue that active obedience entails belief in the Covenant of Works, which, they claim, is incompatible with Dispensationalism.
    - The above positive presentation does not depend upon the Covenant of Works.
    - Many Dispensationalists have affirmed a covenant in the Garden, calling it the “Edenic Covenant,” the “Covenant of Life,” the “Covenant of Creation,” the “Adamic Covenant,” and some even “the Covenant of Works.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See Merrill F. Unger, *Merrill’s Commentary on the Old Testament in Two Volumes* (Chicago, Moody Press), 1:13, 18; Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006), 240–41; Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1989), 34; Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Volume 4: Church and Last Things* (Minneapolis: Bethany House), 501.

- Scofield names “The Edenic Covenant” as “the first of the eight great covenants of Scripture which condition life and salvation.”<sup>24</sup>
- Chafer speaks of “the covenant with man in Eden (Genesis 1:26–31; 2:16–17),” in which “God entered into a conditional covenant with Adam in which life and blessing or death and cursing were made to depend on the faithfulness of Adam.”<sup>25</sup>
- Fruchtenbaum identifies the “Edenic Covenant” as containing a “test [that] was for the probationary period only. Man was created perfect and holy; but at this point, his holiness was not tested. Theologically, this means that man was created in a state of unconfirmed, creaturely holiness; and he was given the ability of contrary choice, meaning he had the ability to choose contrary to his nature in that he was created perfect and holy, but he had the ability to make an unholy and imperfect choice. Man, on his own, must choose to love and obey God. ... This testing was for a temporary duration. Had man passed the test, his holiness would have been confirmed; and he would not have the ability to commit sin, just as will be true with the resurrection body. At the time of the resurrection, the believer’s holiness will be confirmed; and he or she will no longer have the capacity to sin. If Adam had passed the test during the probationary period, he would have been confirmed in his holiness and no longer would have the capacity to commit sin.”<sup>26</sup>
- Many Dispensationalists acknowledge that belief in or rejection of the theological covenants is not a key point of contention between Dispensationalists and Covenantalists.
  - Ryrie, in the middle of critiquing the covenantalist system, nevertheless says, “the ideas and concepts contained in the covenants of works and grace are not unscriptural.”<sup>27</sup> He quotes

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<sup>24</sup> C. I. Scofield (ed.), *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), notes on Genesis 1:26–28; 2:8–17.

<sup>25</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Major Bible Themes: 52 Vital Doctrines of Scripture Simplified*, rev. John Walvoord (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 142.

<sup>26</sup> Arnold J. Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Genesis*, Ariel’s Bible Commentary, (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2009), 78–82.

Chafer as saying, though the covenant of redemption, for example, “rests upon but slight revelation,” nevertheless, “It is rather sustained largely by the fact that it seems both reasonable and inevitable” (*ST*, 1:42). And he quotes Walvoord as advocating a distinction between the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace, concepts which he seems to accept, saying, “The covenant of redemption involves the promise that Christ would redeem many by his death on the cross, and the covenant of grace provides that God will extend grace on the basis of this sacrifice to those who trust in Christ as their Savior.”<sup>28</sup>

- On the next page, Ryrie says, “The point of this [i.e., critique of covenantalism] is not to conclude that these covenants are *unscriptural*, but simply to show that they’re *deductions*, not inductions, from Scripture,” and that therefore the dispensationalist is no more guilty than the covenantalist is when the dispensationalist speaks of three or four or seven or eight dispensations.<sup>29</sup>
- Vlach: “The covenants of Covenant Theology are not what’s most important. Traditionally, three covenants have been affirmed in Covenant Theology—(1) Covenant of Redemption; (2) Covenant of Works; and (3) Covenant of Grace. Yet Covenantalists themselves have not agreed on these covenants, some rejecting one or two of these. ... Also, some Dispensationalists have affirmed one or all three of these covenants while remaining dispensationalists. So I don’t believe the covenants of Covenant Theology are the main issues separating the two systems. So if dispensations and the covenants of Covenant Theology are not at the heart of the differences between the two camps, what are the main differences? The answer, in my opinion, comes down to two matters—hermeneutics and storyline.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 220.

<sup>28</sup> John F. Walvoord, “The New Covenant,” in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands*, ed. Charles H. Dyer and Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 198.

<sup>29</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 221.

<sup>30</sup> Michael J. Vlach, “What Are the Most Important Differences between Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology?”, Mike Vlach Blog, Jan. 10, 2017: <https://mikevlach.blogspot.com/2017/01/what-are-most-important-differences.html>.

- ➔ Dispensationalism isn't about dispensations and Covenantalism isn't about covenants. Both systems are about hermeneutics. The fundamental disagreement isn't over whether the theological covenants exist, but whether those covenants ought to be used as theological constructs by which to identify Israel with the church, and to interpret promises to Israel in a *spiritual* sense, such that those promises may not be fulfilled in a restored eschatological nation.
- Several theologians have quibbled with and even outright rejected the Covenant of Works while still embracing active obedience.
  - Formula of Concord: “[Christ’s] obedience, not only in suffering and dying, but also in this, that he in our stead was voluntarily made under the Law, and fulfilled it by this obedience, is imputed to us for righteousness, so that, on account of this complete obedience, which he rendered his heavenly Father for us, by doing and suffering, in living and dying, God forgives our sins, regards us as godly and righteous, and eternally saves us.”<sup>31</sup>
  - John Murray, “The Adamic Administration,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray, Volume 2: Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009), 47–59.
  - Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 117ff; and *Saved By Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 181ff.
- “It disagrees with my theological system” is not a good reason for rejecting any proposed interpretation or doctrine.
- Even so, we have found that no essential tenet of Dispensationalism is undermined by a belief in the imputation of the active obedience of Christ.

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<sup>31</sup> McCormick comments, “Lutherans appear to be able to affirm active obedience without showing any special affinity to the covenant of works position. See the [Formula of Concord], where no mention is made of a covenant of works with Adam, but the substance of an active obedience position is affirmed in the ‘Righteousness of Faith’ section, point 10” (McCormick, “Active Obedience,” 23n72). He also references Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 242; George Park Fisher, *History of Christian Doctrine* (Norwood, MA: Norwood, 1896), 348 n. 1; and Jeong Koo Jeon, *Covenant Theology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999), 81.

#### IV. Salvation by Works

- Some argue that belief in active obedience makes justification to be in principle by works, which contradicts Paul’s comments that saving righteousness comes, “apart from the Law” (Rom 3:21; cf. Gal 2:16; 3:21).
- But Paul is speaking of the law as it confronts *sinful* humanity. Though the law cannot justify sinners (cf. Rom 7:8, 12), the law is not deficient to justify those who obey.
  - Romans 7:9–10: “...when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died; and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me.”
  - Deuteronomy 6:25: “It will be righteousness for us if we are careful to observe all this commandment before Yahweh our God, just as He commanded us.”
  - Matthew 19:17: “If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.”
  - Romans 10:5: “For Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness.”
    - Leviticus 18:5: “So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them.”
- Sinful men don’t keep God’s commandments, but perfect obedience to the law would result in eternal life. If someone unstained by the original sin of Adam did obey all the commands of God’s law, He would merit righteousness on the basis of His obedience.
- This is what Jesus did, who came to fulfill all righteousness (Matt 3:15). Through our union with Him by faith, His righteousness is counted to be ours.
- John Flavel: “Grace to us, and satisfaction to justice, are not so inconsistent as the Socinian adversaries would make them. What was debt to Christ is grace to us.”<sup>32</sup>
  - The grace of the Gospel does not overturn the law, as if the exercise of divine grace means that divine justice does not have to be satisfied. Gospel grace is what it is precisely because it satisfies the legal demands of the law. Legal righteousness credited as a gift is not “legalistic.” It is God being both just and justifier of the believer in Jesus.

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<sup>32</sup> John Flavel, *The Fountain of Life Opened: A Display of Christ in His Essential and Mediatorial Glory* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1968), 1:60.

- The law does not save, but it does justify the doer of the law. No sinner has ever been a doer of the law, but One who was never a sinner has.
- Besides all that, even the death of Christ was the work of Christ. Thus, if Christ's death saves us, we are saved by the work of Christ, and no one charges that that is "salvation by works." There is no reason that would change if the work of Christ included the work in His life as well as His death.

## **V. Denigrating Christ's Death**

- Some argue that insisting on the necessity of Christ's vicarious life denigrates the sufficiency of His vicarious death.
- When Paul insists that Christ's resurrection is absolutely necessary for our justification (Rom 4:25) and says that without the resurrection of Christ our salvation is vain (1 Cor 15:14, 17), he is not contradicting his comment that we are justified by Christ's blood (Rom 5:9).
- To suppose that the prior work of Christ's obedient life makes the later work of the death of Christ insufficient is like saying the prior work of the Father's election makes the later work of the Son's atonement insufficient. But it does not.
- The existence of more than one work does not imply that any of the others are deficient or unnecessary.
- It is impossible to separate the death of Christ from His life, and vice versa. The whole obedience of Christ, from His birth through to death, is like one seamless garment.

## **Conclusion**

- Galatians 3:27: "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."
- Isaiah 61:10: "I will rejoice greatly in Yahweh, My soul will exult in my God; For He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."

- Zechariah 3:1–5: “Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of Yahweh, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. Yahweh said to Satan, ‘Yahweh rebuke you, Satan! Indeed, Yahweh who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?’ Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments and standing before the angel. He spoke and said to those who were standing before him, saying, ‘Remove the filthy garments from him.’ Again he said to him, ‘See, I have taken your iniquity away from you and will clothe you with festal robes.’ Then I said, ‘Let them put a clean turban on his head.’ So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments, while the angel of Yahweh was standing by.”
- Epistle to Diognetus (9:5): “O the sweet exchange, O the incomprehensible work of God, O the unexpected blessings, that the sinfulness of many should be hidden in one righteous man, while the righteousness of one should justify many sinners!”<sup>33</sup>
- Richard Hooker: “Let it be counted folly or frenzy or fury or whatever. It is our wisdom and our comfort; we care for no knowledge in the world but this: that man hath sinned and God hath suffered; that God hath made himself the sin of men, and that men are made the righteousness of God!”<sup>34</sup>

*His robes for mine: O wonderful exchange!  
Clothed in my sin, Christ suffered 'neath God's rage.  
Draped in His righteousness, I'm justified.  
In Christ I live, for in my place He died.*

– Chris Anderson –

*Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness  
My beauty are, my glorious dress:  
'Midst flaming worlds in these arrayed,  
With joy shall I lift up my head.*

– Nikolaus von Zinzendorf

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<sup>33</sup> The Epistle to Diognetus, in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Text and English Translations*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. and trans. by Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 711 (9:5).

<sup>34</sup> Richard Hooker, *A Learned Discourse upon Justification, Works, and How the Foundation is Overthrown in Modern English*, eds. Bradford Littlejohn, Rhys Laverly, and Ken Cook (Davenant Institute, 2022), xxx.

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