



The Imputation of the
Active Obedience of Christ
in the Westminster Standards

Explorations in Reformed Confessional Theology

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The Imputation of the Active Obedience of Christ in the Westminster Standards

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Series Preface

The creeds of the ancient church and the doctrinal standards of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed churches are rich theological documents. They summarize the essential teachings of Scripture, express biblical doctrines in meaningful and memorable ways, and offer pastoral guidance for the heads and hearts of God's people. Nevertheless, when twenty-first-century readers pick up these documents, certain points may be found confusing, misunderstood, or irrelevant for the church.

The Exploration in Reformed Confessional Theology series intends to clarify some of these confessional issues from four vantage points. First, it views confessional issues from the *textual* vantage point, exploring such things as variants, textual development, and the development of language within the documents themselves as well as within the context in which these documents were written. Second, this series views confessional issues from the *historical* vantage point, exploring social history and the history of ideas that shed light upon these issues. Third, this series views confessional issues from the *theological* vantage point, exploring the issues of intra- and inter-confessional theology both in the days these documents

were written as well as in our day. Fourth, this series views confessional issues from the *pastoral* vantage point, exploring the pressing pastoral needs of certain doctrines and the implications of any issues that cause difficulty in the confessions.

In exploring our vast and deep heritage in such a way, our ultimate goal is to “walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col. 1:10).

Author's Preface

"I'm so thankful for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it." These are the heralded dying words of J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937), one of the premier confessional Presbyterian theologians of the twentieth century, sent in a final telegram to his colleague at Westminster Theological Seminary, Professor John Murray (1898–1975). What thrilled him, as he reflected on recent discussions with Murray and a sermon on the radio Machen himself had given on the subject, was that Christ had fulfilled the law for His own: in His passive obedience, He not only suffered the wrath of God due us as lawbreakers but, in His active obedience, also kept the whole law for us.¹ Jesus not only died *for us* but lived *for us*, in our place.

It must have been no small comfort to the perishing defender of the faith that his hope was not in anything

1. Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (1954; repr., Willow Grove, Pa.: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2004), 450–51. See also J. Gresham Machen, "Active Obedience of Christ," in *God Transcendent and Other Selected Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 172–80.

that he had done, or could ever do, but only and entirely in what Christ had done for him in perfectly obeying the law in his place. Some have alleged that Christ's death for us gets us everything we need. In other words, although Christ died in our place, it was not necessary for Him to live in our place.² Christ's death indeed removes the debt of sin, but it is His active obedience accounted (or imputed) to us that gives us the perfect righteousness we need. We have a need not only for our sin to be paid for but also for the law to be kept for us positively.³

Some treat the requirement that sin's penalty be paid (as done in the imputation of Christ's passive obedience) and that the law's demands be fulfilled (as done in the imputation of Christ's active obedience) as a foreign idea, but it is common in our experience: we penalize a young person who fails to clean his room when he is told, and even after censuring him, we still require him to clean it. Adam, as covenant head of the human race, was required to keep the law perfectly and to pay the penalty for transgressing it. Christ came as the last Adam, the federal head of His elect, to pay the price of sin in His own body. He also perfectly obeyed the covenant that Adam failed to obey, taking the penalty for doing what Adam failed to do and actually rendering for us the obedience that Adam was bound to yield.⁴

2. See especially chaps. 1–3 and 7.

3. See chap. 1, notes 17 and 20.

4. Some have argued from passages like Hebrews 10:5–7 (citing Ps. 40:6–8) that obedience is preferable to sacrifice (cf. 1 Sam. 15:22).

Thus, the notion that active as well as passive obedience is necessary is not at all counterintuitive to our everyday experience. We often say to someone released from prison, "Your debt has been paid. Show yourself now to be a law-abiding citizen." We recognize that true change manifests itself in a new life of productive work, both in refraining from illegal activities and in pursuing that which contributes positively to the community. Christ's "whole obedience" is a unified way of speaking of the active and passive aspects of His coming to do the Father's will (Heb. 10:7). He does both, and both are imputed to us in our justification so that we have a record of having paid the debt of sin and having kept the whole law.

Some may aver that since Christ paid the debt of sin, it is up to us to provide the righteousness that follows.⁵ Indeed, those who trust in the death of Christ alone for

If God prefers obedience to sacrifice, it cannot be that Christ's perfect obedience is any less significant than His perfect sacrifice. And it is also unlikely that His obedience was solely to qualify Him to be a sacrifice for us. Rather, both His obedience and His sacrifice were *for us*; consequently, both His obedience and sacrifice are imputed to us (WCF 11; WLC 71). See David VanDrunen, "To Obey Is Better than Sacrifice: A Defense of Active Obedience of Christ the Light of Recent Criticism," in *By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification*, ed. Gary L. W. Johnson and Guy P. Waters (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2007), 127–46.

5. This was Johannes Piscator's view, set forth herein, as well as that of some recent thinkers. See, e.g., Steve Lehrer and Jeff Volker, "Examining the Imputation of Active Obedience of Christ: A Study in Calvinistic Sacred Cow-ism," accessed at In-Depth Studies Audio, <http://idsaudio.org/ids/pdf/classic/imputation.pdf>.

their salvation do live grateful lives and serve the Lord, not to pay for sin but because their sin has already been paid for.⁶ Yet all such grateful obedience to the law in its third use is far from the perfect obedience that it demands. A holy God can accept nothing less than perfect holiness; the holiness that is a part of our sanctification, being partial and polluted by remaining sin, will never give us a perfect standing before a holy God.⁷ We need more than to have our debt paid for by a perfect mediator—we need that same mediator to keep the law for us perfectly. This is what Jesus did in His active obedience, imputing it and His passive obedience to us in our justification.

It was Machen's conviction, then, that the righteousness achieved in Christ's life of perfect obedience while on this earth was imputed to God's people in their justification. That the suffering of Christ to pay the penalty of sin is imputed in justification was a theological

6. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2016).

7. This is a point made well by John Calvin (1509–1564) in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (1559; repr., Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.1–10, who treats regeneration (the new birth and ongoing sanctification) before justification to demonstrate both that the Reformed are not antinomian (as Rome charged) and that all the sanctification conceivable does not yield the perfect righteousness demanded by the law and that it belongs to us only by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ in our justification. We may be as sanctified as possible, yet such an inner work is not sufficient to give us the perfect standing before God that only justification provides.

commonplace in the first generation of Reformers. The conviction that Christ also kept the whole law for His people and that it too was imputed also came to be widely held. Machen simply gave articulate expression to what many hold dear when he admitted that he was grateful for the active obedience of Christ and that he had no hope without it. Clearly, Machen meant to indicate by this admission both that the broken law needed fulfilling and that Christ was the only one who could and did fulfill it. The righteousness He earned in fulfilling it was part of what was imputed to us.

The specific question before us in this book is whether the divines at the Westminster Assembly (1643–1649) affirmed the imputation of Christ's active obedience (hereafter, "active obedience"⁸) for us in our justification. As we shall see, before and during the Assembly a minority of the divines denied active obedience in our justification. In recent years, some among the Reformed have also denied it, arguing that the Assembly did not affirm it clearly. I shall attempt herein to demonstrate that the weight of

8. Given the length of the phrase "the imputation of the active obedience of Christ," and its repeated use throughout this work, I will often have recourse to the shortened form "active obedience." It should be noted, however, that usage of such an abbreviated form should not be understood to exclude what is always meant: the active obedience of *Christ*—that is, He kept all the law and did it for His people. The imputation of such active obedience to us is also always in view. Thus, I always mean the "imputation of the active obedience of Christ" even though I use the shortened form "active obedience."

evidence favors the contention that the Westminster Assembly did affirm active obedience.

In so doing, I will briefly survey the question of the affirmation of active obedience before the Reformation, then look at the Reformation (before, during, and after the Westminster Assembly), and finally consider how the church since then has understood the question. We know that theologians in the American Presbyterian tradition, like Machen, Charles Hodge (1797–1878), and others, have affirmed it.⁹ So have theologians in the European Reformed tradition, such as Francis Turretin (1623–1687) and Herman Bavinck (1854–1921).¹⁰ But did John Calvin and other early Reformers affirm it, as John Owen (1616–1683) and later Reformers clearly did?¹¹ I will endeavor herein to answer all of these questions.

9. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and Company, 1871), 3:142.

10. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1994), 2:445–55, 646–56; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 377–81.

11. Owen's support for active obedience was manifested in his work on the Savoy Confession (1658), which explicitly affirmed active obedience, especially in 11.1, noting that God justified the elect "by imputing Christ's active obedience to the whole law, and passive obedience in his death for their whole and sole righteousness." Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 3:115.

There is, of course, a question behind the issue of active obedience: Why do we need to be justified at all? The answer to this cannot simply be taken for granted, though the treatment that we are able to give it in this work is cursory at best. Let us consider the nature and need for justification more broadly as we endeavor to see where active obedience fits. It is the conviction of the Protestant Reformation that justification is of the utmost importance; in fact, Calvin calls it “the main hinge on which religion turns.”¹²

The doctrine of justification is crucial to life. Christians rightly find the crass materialism of our society to be troubling. Is materialism an end in itself, or do those who pursue “stuff” do so ultimately for the acceptance they hope to gain by having such things? Materialism is part of a larger pursuit, not merely of the idols that material possessions may become but of the idol of acceptance. At the deepest levels of our hearts, we want more than simply stuff. We want people to accept us, and one of the ways we sometimes imagine that we will achieve acceptance is by having lots of things: an impressive résumé, beauty, fame, or power.

Acceptance, like comfort, security, control, power, and other felt needs, is one of those things we fully enjoyed before the fall but lost as a result of our sin. Either we come to Christ, and in Him discover the fullness that was lost with paradise, or we make idols of all those things that

12. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.1.

we were made to have as part of creation but now lack. Ultimately we should come to Christ and walk with Him because we are called to glorify God, not merely because we want to have our needs met. We are to come to Him while enjoying Him, and part of our enjoyment of God is the wonderful satisfaction we get as we seek to glorify Him in our lives.

Outside of Christ, we do not enjoy God; instead, with restless hearts, we spend the whole of our lives trying to fill up the absence of God with the presence of everything around us.¹³ In particular, many make an idol of acceptance and seem willing to do almost anything to gain it. Because the sinful heart suppresses the truth in unrighteousness, it twists and perverts what we really need. We need acceptance, to be sure, but we need it chiefly from God.

For thirsty souls who have found no acceptance and who have come to realize that our lack of a sense of acceptance stems from being sinners who have no acceptance with a holy God, the gospel—that we have acceptance “in the Beloved”—is truly good news. Nothing compares with knowing that we have acceptance—not because of who we are or what we have done but rather despite who we are and what we have done—because of who Jesus is and what He has done. We have an acceptance greater than Adam had in his period of probation because we are fully confirmed by Christ’s active and passive obedience

13. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1.1; Pascal, *Pensées*, #425.

and are now as accepted by God as we ever will be (in heaven we will be more happy but not more secure).

The fact that those who are in Christ have acceptance should not simply be taken for granted. When we say we are in Christ, we are speaking of union with Him, which means enjoying by the work of the Holy Spirit all that Christ achieved for us.¹⁴ In His life and death, Christ did all that He did *for us*, and it all becomes ours through union with Him, effectuated by faith. Faith itself is a gift of the Spirit that enables us to “lay hold of” or “believe in” Jesus Christ as He is offered in the gospel. When we exercise faith, the Holy Spirit accounts (or imputes) to us the righteousness Christ achieved by both His active and passive obedience.

This acceptance is a result of our justification, God's great gift to His people. In fact, justification is about how a holy and righteous God can accept sinful men and women. This is a wonderful truth: a pure God, who remains pure, can justly declare wicked men and women, who as a result of sin deserve judgment and condemnation, to be righteous in Christ and thus accepted in the Beloved. Justification is the wonderful reality that, although we remain sinners here below, all those who trust

14. A significant bibliography is located at <http://philgons.com/resources/bible/bibliographies/union-with-christ/>. Of those listed, the more helpful works on union with Christ are those by Todd Billings, John Fesko, Richard Gaffin, Robert Letham, and John Murray; Beeke and Jones are helpful on the period of the Westminster Assembly as they treat the Puritans' views on union with Christ.

in Christ alone have, here and now, perfect acceptance with God, both now and forever. The basis of this acceptance is the active and passive obedience of Christ. Our focus here is how the Westminster Assembly in particular dealt with the question of the imputation of Christ's active obedience in our justification.



An Initial Approach to the Westminster Assembly's Understanding of Christ's Active Obedience

In recent years there has been vigorous debate between those who affirm the imputation of the active obedience of Christ in our justification and those who deny it.¹ No

1. I heartily affirm active obedience and appreciate the arguments for it adduced by, among others, R. Scott Clark, "Do This and Live: Christ's Active Obedience as the Ground of Justification," in *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry: Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California*, ed. R. Scott Clark (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2007), 229–65; and VanDrunen, "To Obey Is Better than Sacrifice," 127–46. Arguing against active obedience, among others, is Norman Shepherd, "Justification by Works in Reformed Theology," in *Backbone of the Bible: Covenant in Contemporary Perspective*, ed. P. Andrew Sandlin (Nacogdoches, Tex.: Covenant Media Press, 2004), 103–20; Norman Shepherd, "The Imputation of Active Obedience," in *A Faith That Is Never Alone: A Response to Westminster Seminary California*, ed. P. Andrew Sandlin (LaGrange, Calif.: Kerygma Press, 2007), 249–78; Daniel Kirk, "The Sufficiency of the Cross (I): The Crucifixion as Jesus' Act of Obedience," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 36–64; and Daniel Kirk, "The Sufficiency of the Cross (II): The Law, the Cross, and Justification," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 24, no. 2 (Autumn 2006): 133–54. Both Shepherd and Kirk affirm that Jesus was sinless, but only to qualify Him to make atonement, not also *pro nobis* (as our substitute in life as well as death). Both give a tendentious and thin reading of the relevant biblical passages and historical literature.

small part of the debate has been about the role of the Westminster Assembly of Divines and the documents produced by that body.² Several sources have historically averred that the Assembly did not affirm active obedience, and more recent sources have repeated that assertion.³ Others, however, have argued that while the Assembly may never have explicitly affirmed active obedience in what it finally adopted, nonetheless, the Westminster documents, taken as a whole, tend to affirm it.⁴ It might be thought that little remains to be added to this discussion.⁵

2. The Westminster Assembly of Divines produced a body of documents addressing, among other topics, church government, worship and liturgy, and discipline. The documents that chiefly concern us in this book and that are often called collectively the Westminster Standards (though this sometimes refers to all the products of the Assembly) are the three doctrinal works composed in 1646–1647: the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), the Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC), and the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC).

3. It is outside the scope of this study to make a full biblical and theological defense of active obedience. My modest aim is simply to seek to demonstrate that the Westminster Assembly did affirm the imputation of the active obedience of Christ and to look at related historical and theological matters.

4. Jeffrey Jue argues this position well in “Active Obedience of Christ and the Theology of the Westminster Standards: A Historical Investigation,” in *Justified in Christ: God’s Plan for Us in Justification*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2007), 99–130. The assertion that the Westminster Standards tend to affirm active obedience is also made in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church’s *Report of the Committee to Study the Doctrine of Justification* (Willow Grove, Pa.: Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2007), 144–45. More recently, this position has been set forth and defended particularly well in John Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards: Historical Context and Theological Insights* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2014), 206–28.

5. Much of the following is drawn from my “The Affirmation of

It is my contention, however, that a few lacunae remain which, when examined, will fill in the picture and permit us to see more clearly that the Assembly affirmed active obedience when it specifically addressed the issue. Although the final language of the Assembly's documents may not have reflected it as some other formulations do (such as the Savoy Declaration of 1658), they reflect a two-covenant structure that affirms (indeed, that entails and requires, especially as seen in chapter 7 of this work) the doctrine of active obedience. Furthermore, I will argue that the original intent of the Westminster divines favors active obedience, as does the interpretation and application of those standards over the years of those churches that have adopted them (in other words, the *animus imponentis* favors such an affirmation). Moreover, the Assembly's constitution as a body to give advice to Parliament rather than as a ruling body of the church materially affected how it did its work; consideration of this is relevant in a variety of controversies, including the question of whether the Assembly affirmed active obedience.⁶

the Imputation of the Active Obedience of Christ at the Westminster Assembly of Divines," *The Confessional Presbyterian* 4 (2008): 194–209, 311; and "The Imputation of the Active Obedience of Christ at the Westminster Assembly," in *Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin and Mark Jones (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 31–51.

6. Two works are particularly helpful in understanding the nature of the Westminster Assembly as a body erected to give doctrinal and ecclesiastical advice to the British Parliament: Robert S. Paul, *The Assembly of the Lord: Politics and Religion in the Westminster Assembly and the "Grand Debate"* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985); and S. W. Carruthers,

The Claims That the Assembly Did Not Affirm Active Obedience

The allegation that the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) more specifically, or all the Westminster Standards more broadly, does not teach active obedience, or that it at least accommodated those who objected to it, is of some ancient lineage. Mitchell and Struthers treated it in their edition of the Assembly's minutes. They speculated that the alleged omission of explicit language affirming active obedience in WCF 11 was probably to appease prominent Westminster divine Thomas Gataker and others who objected to it. Mitchell and Struthers acknowledged that although most of the divines at the Assembly "favoured the views of [Bishop James] Ussher and [Daniel] Featley," theologians distinctly and vigorously supportive of active obedience (and expressive of such originally), those same divines were later willing to forgo a clear affirmation of active obedience and thus to "abstain from further controversy about the matter."⁷

The Everyday Work of the Westminster Assembly, ed. J. Ligon Duncan III (repr., Greenville, S.C.: Reformed Academic Press, 1994). For a work on the people at the Assembly, see William Barker, *Puritan Profiles: 54 Puritan Personalities Drawn Together by the Westminster Assembly* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 1996). Regarding the ecclesiastical circumstances and theological positions of the divines, see Robert Letham, *Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2009); with respect to justification and the affirmation of active obedience, Letham tends to see the debate as inconclusive, retaining ambiguity (see 250–64).

7. Alex F. Mitchell and John Struthers, *Minutes of the Sessions of the Assembly of Divines* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons,