

Faith Pulpit

The Active Obedience of Christ

Many Bible-believing Baptists today are influenced by groups which identify themselves as centered on the gospel but in reality are teaching a Reformed view that the imputed righteousness of Christ is the result of His active obedience to the law. This article considers two important questions: What is meant by “the active obedience of Christ” and is it Scriptural?

What Is Meant by “Active Obedience”?

Some people hold that the term “active obedience” refers to the fact that Christ kept the law in order to demonstrate His sinlessness, a Lamb without spot or blemish. This position is expressed in Article VIII, “Salvation,” in the GARBC Articles of Faith.

We believe that the salvation of sinners is divinely initiated and wholly of grace through the mediatorial offices of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Who, by the appointment of the Father, voluntarily took upon Himself our nature, yet without sin, and honored the divine law by His personal obedience, thus qualifying Himself to be our Savior [emphasis added]; that by the shedding of His blood in His death He fully satisfied the just demands of a holy and righteous God regarding sin; that His sacrifice consisted not in setting us an example by His death as a martyr, but was a voluntary substitution of Himself in the sinner’s place, the Just dying for the unjust, Christ the Lord bearing our sins in His own body on the tree; that having risen from the dead He is now enthroned in Heaven, and uniting in His wonderful person the tenderest sympathies with divine perfection, He is in every way qualified to be a suitable, a compassionate and an all-sufficient Savior.¹

Many Reformed writers, however, hold to a different meaning of the “active obedience of Christ.” Their definition views the atoning work of Christ as a substitute for the elect not only by His suffering and death (His passive obedience) but also by His keeping of the law (His active obedience). These

Reformed writers believe both Christ's active and passive obedience were part of the atonement. The Bible teaches that justification is a two-fold change in God's records wherein all of our sins are blotted out (Rom. 4:8) and the righteousness of Christ is credited to us (Rom. 4:6; 2 Cor. 5:21). These Reformed writers believe our sins are blotted out because of Christ's suffering and death, but the righteousness of Christ that is credited to us was His keeping of the law as our substitute.

Is It Scriptural?

I do not believe the view that Christ's obedience to the law is part of His substitutionary atoning work for the following reasons:

1. The gospel does not focus on our Lord's sinless life but upon His death and resurrection. Paul stated, "Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:1–4).
2. We are justified by Christ's death rather than His sinless life. In Romans 5:6–10 Paul wrote, "For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life." In Romans 4:23–25 Paul made it clear that Christ's "life" refers to His resurrection, not His obedience to the law. "Now it was not written for his [Abraham's] sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification."
3. Justification comes through Christ's righteous act—a singular act rather than plural acts of righteousness. In Romans 5:18 and 19 Paul said, "Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous."
4. Christ's sinless life qualified Him to be our sacrifice, but His death is the basis of our justification. "By that will [i.e., God's will] we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Heb. 10:10).

5. The ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper relate to His death, not His sinless acts. Water baptism points to a believer's union with Christ in His death and resurrection as the basis of salvation (Rom. 6:1–5), and the Lord's Supper focuses on a believer's communion with Christ based on His wounded body and shed blood (1 Cor. 11:23–26). We “proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.”

6. Justification is a change in God's records whereby our sins are blotted out (Rom.4:8) and the righteousness of Christ is credited to us. In Romans 4:6 we read, “just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works.” In 2 Corinthians 5:21 Paul stated, “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” Note carefully that what is imputed to us is not the obedience of Christ but the righteousness of God! Our Lord Jesus Christ possessed this righteousness by virtue of His deity. His obedience to the will of God is the result of that righteousness, not the basis of it!

7. In Philippians 2:6–8 the focus of Christ's obedience was not His honoring the law but His willingness to die. “Who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation [lit. “emptied Himself”], taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.”

8. Not all Reformed theologians affirm the active obedience of Christ as part of His atoning work. Alexander F. Mitchell, in his history of the Westminster Assembly, which created the Westminster Confession of Faith and catechisms, wrote: “The main question on which the long debates on the Article of Justification turned was whether the merit of the obedience of Christ as well as the merit of his sufferings was imputed to the believer for his justification. Several of the most distinguished members of the Assembly, including Twisse the Prolocutor, Mr. Gataker, and Mr. Vines maintained . . . that it was the sufferings or passive obedience only of Christ which was imputed to the believer.”²

The Importance of This Issue

Two well-known organizations today hold the view that the active obedience of Christ was part of His substitutionary atonement. The Gospel Coalition, in its Confessional Statement #8, “The Justification of Sinners,” declares, “By his perfect obedience he satisfied the just demands of God on our behalf, since by faith alone that perfect obedience is credited to all who trust in Christ alone for their acceptance with God. Inasmuch as Christ was given by the Father for us, and his obedience and punishment were accepted in place of our own, freely and not for anything in us, this justification is solely of free grace, in order that both the exact justice and the rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners.”³

Together for the Gospel, another organization that focuses on the gospel, has a section on its website titled, “Today in Christian History.” The January 1, 2009, edition had the following entry:

J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937) Died

On January 1, 1937, J. Gresham Machen, founder of Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia, and formidable defender of biblical Christianity, died in the hospital, having developed pneumonia while preaching in the cold of December in North Dakota. His famous last telegram to his dear friend and colleague John Murray: “Thank God for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it.”⁴

We grant that this organization does not specifically teach this idea in its doctrinal affirmations and denials. It is, nevertheless, found on their website, which is supposed to focus on the gospel.

From my perspective, this view of the active obedience of Christ is not consistent with Scripture and even distorts the truth of justification. Pastors and church leaders today need to understand this matter clearly and communicate the gospel accurately in their speaking and writing.

Works Cited

1. http://www.garbc.org/?page_id=31 (accessed June 29, 2012).
2. Alexander F. Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly: Its History and Standards* (1883; repr., Edmonton, Alberta: Still Waters Revival Books, 1992), 149.
3. <http://thegospelcoalition.org/about/foundation-documents/confessional> (accessed June 28, 2012).
4. <http://t4g.org/2009/01/today-in-christian-history> (accessed June 29, 2012).

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Dr. Houghton was promoted to Heaven on July 13, 2020, leaving a legacy of service and faithfulness to the thousands of men and women who he impacted during his ministry.