

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php

THE SUFFICIENCY OF THE CROSS (I): THE CRUCIFIXION AS JESUS' ACT OF OBEDIENCE

J. R. DANIEL KIRK, BIBLICAL SEMINARY, HATFIELD, PENNSYLVANIA

INTRODUCTION: AN INTRAMURAL DEBATE

By all accounts, a lively discussion arose at the Westminster Assembly in September of 1643 when the commissioners set themselves to revise Article Eleven of the Thirty-Nine Articles, the article on justification.¹ In particular, a day-long debate unfolded over the question of the active obedience of Christ.² The committee working on Article Eleven proposed that the original 'we are accounted [*sic*] righteous before God, only for the merits of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' be changed to 'we are accounted righteous before God . . . only [*sic*] for our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ [*sic*] sake, his *whole obedience* and satisfaction being by

¹ The summary of the debate that follows is derived from Chad B. Van Dixhoorn, 'Reforming the Reformation: Theological Debate at the Westminster Assembly 1643-1652' (Ph.D. Dissertation: Cambridge University, 2004), 270-344. Previous summaries of the justification debate are dependent on Alexander F. Mitchell, *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1874), lxx-lxxvii; and *idem*, *The Westminster Assembly: Its History and Standards* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1884), 149-56. Thus, recent works that comment on this discussion in the Assembly will all have to be re-evaluated to the extent that Van Dixhoorn's thesis (and the minutes appended to it) qualify and correct Mitchell's interpretation of the Assembly's minutes. These recent works include William S. Barker, *Puritan Profiles: 54 Influential Puritans at the Time When the Westminster Confession of Faith was Written* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 1999), 158, 176; Peter J. Wallace, 'Whose Meaning? The Question of Original Intent', n.p. [cited 29 November 2004], online: <http://www.nd.edu/~pwallace/intent.htm>; and Benjamin T. Inman, 'God Covenanted in Christ: The Unifying Role of Theology Proper in the Systematic Theology of Francis Turretin' (Ph.D. Dissertation: Westminster Theological Seminary, 2004), e.g., 303.

² Van Dixhoorn, 'Reforming', 293; Mitchell, *Minutes*, lxx-lxxvii.

God imputed unto us.³ The minutes of the Assembly indicate that by adding the phrase ‘whole obedience’ the revised article would ‘hould [*sic*] out both the active and passive obedience of Christ’.⁴ A minority contingent, under the leadership of Thomas Gataker, argued for changing the proposed language by striking out the word ‘whole’. The ensuing debate revolved around whether the nature of Jesus’ righteousness that God reckons to the sinner in justification is both Jesus’ active righteousness (i.e., his whole life of obedience to the law of God) and passive righteousness (i.e., his obedience in the act of his death), or whether the righteousness associated with Jesus’ death is, by itself, the righteousness that avails for sinners in justification.⁵ Although the majority of commissioners sided against Gataker, William Twisse, and Richard Vines in their understanding of the issue, and even voted against them in their framing of a revised Thirty-Nine Articles, the Assembly nevertheless crafted the language of the Westminster Confession so as to allow for the ‘passive righteousness only’ position. They struck out the word ‘whole’ and thereby left the precise nature of the imputed righteousness of Christ ambiguous.⁶ The final form of the Westminster Confession of Faith and

³ Van Dixhoorn, ‘Reforming,’ 293 (*italics added*).

⁴ *Ibid.*, citing Minutes folio 1:10v. The Minutes are transcribed in an appendix of Van Dixhoorn, ‘Reforming’.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 292-319; Mitchell, *Minutes*, lxvi. Gataker’s own study on justification, *An Antidote Against Error Concerning Justification* (London: J. C. for Henry Brome, 1679), lends weight to the view that he was defending a ‘passive righteousness only’ view at the Assembly. Van Dixhoorn points out that the minority contingent appealed to Anselm of Canterbury as providing historical precedent for its position, a precedent acknowledged by both parties in the debate (‘Reforming’, e.g., 297). Anselm had argued in *Cur Deus Homo* that obedience to God was due from Jesus as a human, so that it was in delivering himself to death, something above and beyond the obedience required of a human, that God’s honour was restored (*Cur Deus Homo*, 2:6).

⁶ Van Dixhoorn, ‘Reforming’, 324-26. Mitchell gives a somewhat distorted presentation of the issue in two ways: (1) he indicates that omission of the word ‘whole’ from the Confession resulted from the vote that was taken at the conclusion of the debates; (2) he presents the debate about the Thirty-Nine Articles as though it were a debate about the final form of the Confession (*Minutes*, lxv-lxvii). The available minutes are somewhat more shrouded in mystery: they do not tell how the final form of the Confession came to reflect the desire of the minority group. Nonetheless, the presence, length, and importance of the earlier debate supports the basic thesis that

Catechisms demonstrates a fact that contemporary theological and ecclesiastical discussions often ignore, namely, that the outcome of the Assembly's work was a consensus document. Part of their consensus-building included making allowance for a range of views with respect to the precise nature of Christ's righteousness.⁷

Despite the fact that his summary must now be nuanced in light of Van Dixhoorn's work, William S. Barker rightly highlights this facet of the Assembly's work:

One of the interesting debates in the summer of 1643 pertained to the question of the imputation of Christ's active obedience, as well as his passive obedience, to the believer in justification. Daniel Featley, echoing Archbishop James Ussher, argued for the imputation of Christ's active obedience. Ranged against him were such figures as William Twisse, Thomas Gataker and Richard Vines, who contended that it was Christ's passive obedience alone that was imputed to the believer for justification. Such formidable theologians succeeded in getting the term 'whole obedience' removed from the phrase 'imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them' in Chapter XI of the Westminster Confession, but the imputation of Christ's active obedience was thus included; and in the Savoy Declaration, under John Owen's influence, it would be sharpened into 'Christ's active obedience unto the whole law, and passive obedience in his death for their whole and sole righteousness'. The Westminster divines, in such controversies, sought to be clear and faithful

the Westminster Confession of Faith, as written and adopted, made room for the minority view through its concession to an ambiguous formulation.

⁷ Thus the reluctant conclusion of Van Dixhoorn: 'Those divines who did not hold to the doctrine of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ could be satisfied with the statement if they believed that it was a consensual construction, not *teaching* their position, but not *excluding* it either. Members who held to the doctrine of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ but still wanted a consensual statement of the matter could likewise vote for this formulation, for it allowed their doctrine. Those who held to the imputation of the active obedience of Christ and who thought that the *Confession* allowed only for their position could be happy. However, the divines who held to the doctrine of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ, who thought that the *Confession* and catechisms were consensual but wanted to *exclude* the theology of their opponents, were bound to be dissatisfied and likely voted against the wording of the *Confession* and catechisms; such were the majority who revised the Assembly's *Confession* in the 1650s ('Reforming', 328-29).

to Scriptural language, yet to allow for shades of difference within a generic Calvinism.⁸

As in the case with the infra- and supralapsarian positions on predestination, two views are included within the Westminster Standards, and any debate between parties holding one view or the other is an ‘intramural debate’ taking place within the arena of Westminster orthodoxy.⁹

At present, just as during the time of the Assembly’s original deliberations, a majority of Westminster Calvinists hold to the imputation of the active righteousness of Christ.¹⁰ The purpose of the current study is to argue the case for the minority (yet well-documented and confessional) position, that the righteousness connected with Jesus’ death, by itself, is

⁸ Barker, *Puritan Profiles*, 176; cf. 158; see also Wallace, ‘Whose Meaning?’, n.p.

⁹ The language of ‘intramural debate’ with respect to this issue is employed in Inman, ‘God Covenanted in Christ’, 303.

¹⁰ Meredith G. Kline has championed this view, e.g., *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 26-38. More recently it formed part of his critique of Daniel P. Fuller in an article entitled ‘Covenant Theology Under Attack’ in the magazine of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, *New Horizons* (February 1994). The article is available on the internet at http://www.opc.org/new_horizons/Kline_cov_theo.html (accessed May 12, 2004). Despite his differences with Kline on the nature of covenant and law, John Murray concurs with him on the necessity of Jesus’ active obedience (John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955], 21, 45). The active righteousness view is represented in the Southern Presbyterian tradition in America by Robert Lewis Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), 625-6, and in the Northern, Princetonian tradition in America by Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 3:118. Francis Turretin, the seventeenth-century continental theologian, clearly articulates the active-righteousness view in his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (3 vols; ed. James T. Dennison, Jr.; trans. George Musgrave Giger; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), Fourteenth Topic, Question 13 (pp. 2:445-55). A recent representative of this view in the Continental Reformed tradition is Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (4th ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 515. On a more popular level, the active righteousness position seems to be enshrined in the document, ‘The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration’, *Christianity Today* (June 14, 1999): 51-6.

the righteousness that avails for sinners in justification. By addressing a number of exegetical and theological concerns, I intend to demonstrate that this minority position is at least worthy of greater attention that it has received.

This first essay will investigate the most common biblical passages used to support the doctrine of the active obedience of Christ. As Van Dixhoorn highlights, the commissioners to the Westminster Assembly envisioned their task as one of articulating the doctrine taught by Scripture on this point.¹¹ Exegesis of several key passages, especially Romans 5, undergirded the arguments on both sides of the debate. This first essay will honour their intention to produce a biblically sound theology by revisiting the passages that give rise to the language of Jesus' obedience and righteousness.

Part two of this study will begin with an investigation of the theological logic by which NT writers delineate the relationships between Christ, his righteousness, justification, and works. Recognizing that theological coherence is an important standard to pursue beyond exegesis of particular words, we will see that the NT writers wrestled with the very question that the active-righteousness position seeks to answer, but with a decidedly different outcome. Our study will conclude by addressing a few lingering *theologoumena* and particular texts that lend indirect weight to the minority position. It is my contention that such attention to the relevant texts will indicate that the NT writers look, without exception, to the obedience of Jesus in his death, and the righteousness procured by it, as the grounds of justification. Humanity cannot be justified by the law, not simply because we as fallen people cannot fulfil its precepts, but also, and even more importantly, because we see that even the One who lived perfectly (a) saved us through his death rather than through the law, and (b) was himself cursed rather than blessed by the law.

At this point it is important to highlight that neither the advocates of the minority position at the Westminster Assembly nor the current essay dispute that Jesus was, in fact, sinless or 'actively righteous'.¹² That is to say, all affirm that Jesus is the only human being ever to love God perfectly and love neighbour perfectly throughout the whole course of his life. To put it another way: all parties agree that Jesus takes away the sin of the world only as the 'spotless lamb of God'. The point of contention lies in whether Jesus' whole life of obedience (more particularly, obedience

¹¹ Van Dixhoorn, 'Reforming', 309-14.

¹² In this sense, 'active righteousness' is not in question, but rather assumed, in the following study. See Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:445-6.

to the law) must be imputed for the justification of the believer, or whether the righteous act of Jesus' death is sufficient for our justification. Jesus' sinlessness is not in dispute, nor is imputation in dispute.¹³ The point of discussion is narrowly focused on the question: What is the righteousness by which the believer is justified in Christ?

Before addressing passages that are adduced to support the majority position, I cite John Owen here at length, by way of introduction, to summarize this position.¹⁴ Even though other authors do not posit all the same arguments or proof texts, the substance of Owen's position represents the conservative Reformed traditions. Owen states the position against the sufficiency of passive righteousness thus:

Notwithstanding that there was *no wrath* due to *Adam* yet he was to obey if he would *enjoy eternal life*. Something there is moreover to be done in respect of us, if after the slaying of the enmity and the Reconciliation made shall enjoy life; *being reconciled by his death*: we are saved by that *perfect Obedience* which in this life he yielded to the Law of God. There is a distinct mention made of *Reconciliation*, through a *non-imputation* of sin as Ps. 32:1; Luke 1:77; Rom. 3:25; 2 Cor. 5:19; and *Justification* through an imputation of Righteousness, Jer. 23:6; Rom. 4:5; 1 Cor. 1:30; altho these things are so far from separated that they are *reciprocally* affirmed of one another; which as it doth not evince an *Identity*, so it doth an eminent *Conjunction*: and this last we have by the life of Christ.

This is fully *expressed* in that *Typical Representation* of our *Justification* before the Lord, Zech. 3:3, 4, 5; two things are there expressed, to belong to our free Acceptation before God. 1. The *taking away of the guilt of our sin*, our filthy robes; this is done by the *death* of Christ. Remission of sin is the proper *fruit thereof*; but there is more also required, even a *collation* of Righteousness, and thereby a right to life eternal; this is here called *change* of raiment; so the Holy Ghost expresses it again, Isa. 61:10, where he calls it plainly the *garment of salvation*, and

¹³ Cf. Van Dixhoorn, 'Reforming', 319-20.

¹⁴ Owen will serve as the principal interlocutor throughout most of our study, due to the representative nature of his position, and because of his concern to offer exegetical arguments (rather than merely assertions) for the active righteousness position. It should be noted that the purpose of this essay is not so much to provide an exhaustive survey of the historically accepted position, but rather to argue exegetically with respect to one facet of that tradition. Hence, we will be engaging historical figures simply to clarify the positions against which we are arguing.

the *robe of Righteousness*: now this is only made ours by the *obedience* of Christ, as the other by his death.¹⁵

Owen views the results of Christ's work negatively and positively. Negatively, he sees that the death of Christ takes away sin, removing what hinders humanity's relationship with God. Positively, he believes that Jesus' obedience in keeping the law earns the righteousness by which humanity is, positively, judged to be righteous (i.e., justified).¹⁶ The present study affirms the biblical testimony to the effect that the righteousness by which humanity is justified is, in fact, Christ's righteousness – a righteousness that persons 'wear' like a garment.¹⁷ The argument offered here challenges neither *solus Cristus* nor imputation;

¹⁵ John Owen, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost* (2nd ed.; London: for William Marshall, 1700), 223 (italics original). See Sinclair Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 86-7. Owen's concerns with regard to the dual nature of Christ's work are shared by Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:447; Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 625-6; Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:118-19; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 515; Kline, *By Oath Consigned*, 31-5; Murray, *Redemption Accomplished*, 45. The debates at the Westminster Assembly took a similar track, in that the proponents of the imputation of the active righteousness of Christ argued that the death of Jesus merely restored humanity to its pre-lapsarian state (Van Dixhoorn, 'Reforming', e.g., 302).

¹⁶ On the page antecedent to the block quotation provided here, Owen explicitly states that the obedience he has in mind is Jesus' obedience to the law (Owen, *Of Communion with God*, 222). The reader should note the conjunction between the phrases 'active obedience' and 'active righteousness' on the one hand and 'passive obedience' and 'passive righteousness' on the other. In each case, the quality of the obedience determines the quality of the righteousness. Thus, e.g., saying that Jesus' passive obedience (i.e., his obedience unto death on a cross) is sufficient for justification is tantamount to saying that passive righteousness is sufficient for justification.

¹⁷ In affirming the positive element of justification, though without reference to the active righteousness of Christ, we argue for a position different than that associated with the passive righteousness position by Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 515. He associates the denial of the imputation of active righteousness with Piscator and the Arminians, who also deny the positive side of justification. The burden of the current argument is to demonstrate that union with Christ in his death (and resurrection) is sufficient to attain the positive element of eternal life as well as the 'negative' element of remission of sins.

rather, it challenges the assertion that the *locus* of the righteousness imputed in justification is Jesus' life of law-keeping rather than his death on the cross.¹⁸ Having set out the issue to be investigated, we turn now to an analysis of the NT texts that are regularly employed to support the active righteousness position.

JESUS' ACT OF RIGHTEOUS OBEDIENCE

1) *Romans 5:18-19*

In the history of this dispute (including the debates at the Westminster Assembly) the passage most often invoked to support Jesus' active obedience as the locus of justification is perhaps Romans 5:18-19.¹⁹ It reads:

Therefore, as through one trespass [there was] condemnation for all men, so also through one act of righteousness (*di' henos dikaionatos*) [there is a result leading] to justification of life (*eis dikaiosin zoes*) for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience (*dia tes hupakoes tou henos*) the many will be made righteous.²⁰

Two facets of this passage touch on the issue of the quality of Christ's righteousness: (1) Is *di' henos dikaionatos* in v. 18 rightly translated 'through one righteous act' (NIV, NASB, ESV text) or 'through one [man's] righteous act' (KJV, RSV, NRSV, ESV footnote)? (2) To what obedience does Paul refer when he says in v. 19, *tes hupakoes tou henos*?

With regard to the first question, either translation of *di' henos dikaionatos* produces a bit of a quandary for the active righteousness position, since the description of Jesus' work that results in justification is given in the singular: *dikaionatos*. Thus, even without *henos* underscoring its singularity, the active righteousness position must provide some sort of plausible interpretation of the singular as representative of a

¹⁸ Van Dixhoorn, 'Reforming', 319-20.

¹⁹ E.g., Owen, *Of Communion with God*, 222; Kline, *By Oath Consigned*, 31; Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 746-7; for the discussion at the Westminster Assembly see Van Dixhoorn, 'Reforming', 310-14.

²⁰ All translations are the author's unless otherwise noted.

whole lifetime of law-keeping righteous actions (plural).²¹ Thus, arguments at the Westminster Assembly included the suggestion that the reference to a righteous act is synecdochal.²²

It is the second question, however, where support for the active righteous position is mainly anchored.²³ John Owen provides two reasons why the 'obedience' in view here is not Jesus' obedience in going to death but rather his lifelong obedience of law-keeping. First, Owen asserts that the contrast between Adam and Christ that Paul draws in 5:19 requires an 'active' understanding of Jesus' obedience because it must serve as an exact opposite to Adam's 'active' disobedience.²⁴ Owen's argument here is guilty of equivocation. Adam's disobedience is, to be sure, the 'active' disobedience to a positive command that he received from God. But when we compare the work of Jesus, his willing death on the cross must also be looked at as an act of obedience to God's (the Father's) command (cf. Gal. 1:4).²⁵ Owen is using 'active' here in a different sense from the way in which it is employed in the distinction between active and passive obedience. Both result from what we might call active submission to divine commands: the content of the obedience qualifies it as either active (obeying the law) or passive (obeying the command to die). But without establishing that Adam's one act of disobedience was his active disobedience to the whole moral law, Owen cannot use the Adam-Christ comparison to argue that Jesus' parallel obedience must be active obedience to the whole moral law.²⁶ The Fall narrative, however, along with Paul's

²¹ John Murray seems to make such a move in his comment on 5:19: 'Undoubtedly it was in the cross of Christ and the shedding of his blood that this obedience came to its climactic expression, but obedience comprehends the totality of the Father's will as fulfilled by Christ' (*The Epistle to the Romans* [2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968], 1:205).

²² Van Dixhoorn, 'Reforming', 311-12.

²³ Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:450, and Kline, *By Oath Consigned*, 312, both indicate the centrality of Romans 5:19 for the notion that Jesus obeyed the law to procure righteousness for his people.

²⁴ Owen, *Of Communion with God*, 222.

²⁵ Murray, *Redemption Accomplished*, 20; *idem*, 'The Obedience of Christ', in *Collected Writings of John Murray: Vol. 2, Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 151-7.

²⁶ On this see Turretin: 'He [Paul] considers what is opposed to the disobedience of Adam, but as that was a violation of the whole law, so also the former must be a fulfilment of the whole law' (*Institutes*, 2:450). Unfortunately, Turretin does not lend clear support to his assertion that Paul views Adam's *one* transgression as a transgression of the whole

interpretation of it in Romans 5, points particularly to the one *peculiar* command that God gave by which the fate of the many rested in Adam's hands: the command concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A comparison with Jesus would more naturally fall to the one *peculiar* command that God gave by which the fate of the many rested in his hands: the command concerning the tree on which Jesus died.²⁷

An important feature of Romans 5:12-21, not always given its full weight, is the thoroughgoing *contrast* that Paul draws between Adam and Christ. As C. E. B. Cranfield comments on vv. 15-17, 'He has shown that, apart from the one point of the formal similarity between the relation of Christ to all men and the relation of Adam to all men, they stand over against each other in utter dissimilarity.'²⁸ If Romans 5:12-21 is to be adduced in support of the majority position, it would be necessary to demonstrate that the point of comparison between Adam and Christ in Romans 5 comes at the point of the active (i.e., law-keeping) nature of their obedience, particularly in view of the fact that 5:12-21 is rife with comparison *and contrast* of these two figures. It is therefore the responsibility of the exegete to argue that a particular point of comparison is similar when Paul himself does not draw such a conclusion. Paul could have said, in 5:15, that in contrast to the many dying by the one man's transgression, the many receive the gift through Jesus' law-keeping. But he does not. Rather, Paul says that it comes by Jesus' grace. Likewise, Paul could have said in 5:16 that, in contrast to condemnation coming out of one transgression, the gift comes out of many acts of righteousness.²⁹ But Paul does not. Rather, Paul says that it comes out of many *transgressions*. Paul could have said in 5:17 that, in contrast to death reigning through one man's transgression, 'righteousness reigns through one man's life of law-keeping. But Paul does not. Rather, Paul says that the reign of grace and life comes through one – Jesus Christ. Paul does not say what Owen's exegesis should lead him to say in the places where Paul is explicit about the nature of the life-giving person and work of Christ. It

(moral?) law. The context of Romans 5 argues rather strongly against it.

²⁷ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 344; Simon Légasse, *L'épître de Paul aux Romains* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 372-3; so, too, Vines at the Westminster Assembly (Van Dixhoorn, 'Reforming', 310-11, citing Minutes folio 1:12v).

²⁸ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 1:288.

²⁹ Murray, *Romans*, 1:196, feels the weight of this disjunctive juxtaposition and pauses to explain why the parallel is not what one would have expected.

is therefore questionable to assert that Paul's description of Adam's work requires a predictable counterpoint with regard to the work of Christ. There is only one certain comparison between the two figures, one point at which Adam is a type (*tupos*, 5:14): the one represents the many.³⁰

Owen's second argument for active obedience in Romans 5:19 is that obedience means *doing*, 'something to which passion or suffering cannot belong.'³¹ In other words, for Owen, the semantic range for 'obey' is simply not broad enough to encompass Jesus' suffering. The NT data, however, do not support this assertion. On the contrary, whenever the phraseology of obedience is applied to Jesus in the NT it describes Jesus' obedience in going to death on the cross. The NT uses the language of Jesus' obedience only three times. In addition to Romans 5:19, Philippians 2:8 says that Jesus became obedient to death (*hupokoos mechri thanatou*), and Hebrews 5:8 relates that Jesus learned obedience through the things he suffered (*emathen aph' hon epathen ten hupakoen*). Even a cursory reading of these other verses makes clear that Jesus' obedience consists at least in part, if not in its entirety, in Jesus' suffering and death.³²

Along with Romans 5:19, Philippians 2 and Hebrews 5 are the only passages in the whole NT that speak of Jesus' work using the language of obedience (or obedient). It is therefore imperative that they be allowed to set the agenda for discourse regarding the quality of Jesus' obedience.

³⁰ See Moo, *Romans*, 334, 343; Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:283. Cranfield later comments that certain phrases are added in the apodosis of 5:17 'to emphasize what is for Paul the one real point of likeness between Christ and Adam, namely, the fact of one man's action's being determinative for the existence of the many' (287).

³¹ Owen, *Of Communion with God*, 222.

³² For Philippians 2:8 referring to Jesus' death see John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians* (trans. John Pringle; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 58-9; Murray, 'Obedience,' 154; *idem*, 'The Death of Christ,' in *Collected Writings of John Murray: Volume 1, The Claims of Truth* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), 36-9; Moisés Silva, *Philippians* (Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary; Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 119-21; Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letters to the Philippians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 216. For Hebrews 5:8 referring (at least in part) to Jesus' death one can refer even to John Owen, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (7 vols.; Evansville, Ind.: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1960), 4:523; see John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (trans. John Owen; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 123-4; William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (WBC 47A; Dallas: Word, 1991), 121.

In the process of giving his reading of Philippians 2:8, John Murray indicates the two possible interpretations of *hupekoos mechri thanatou*: ‘When Paul says that Jesus was “obedient unto death, even the death of the cross”, he does not mean that he was obedient up to the point of death, but obedient to the extent of yielding up his life and dismissing his spirit in death.’³³ In other words, Murray is saying that *mechri* does not indicate that death is the last in a temporal succession of obedience but that death is a great act of obedience.³⁴ Turretin’s exegesis of the passage takes a both/and approach.³⁵ He argues for an inclusion of Jesus’ whole life of obedience ‘both because that obedience is referred to the whole emptying (*kenosin*) and humiliation of Christ (which appeared not only in his death but in his whole life) and from other passages where that obedience is described by the imprinting of the law upon his heart and his active obedience of it (Ps. 40; Heb. 10:5).’³⁶ Yet, the flow of the passage in which the phrase in question appears does not appear to align well with the first leg of Turretin’s argument. Widely regarded as an early hymn, Philippians 2:6-11 records the humiliation of Christ in two successive steps, using parallel form:³⁷

vv. 6-7a: God empties himself

Who, though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped

vv.7b-8: the God-man humbles himself

And being found in human form

³³ Murray, ‘Death of Christ’, 37.

³⁴ See Herbert Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (rev. Gordon M. Messing; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1956), §1700.

³⁵ Turretin, *Institutes*, 450-1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Fee, *Philippians*, 214-15. The visual representation offered here was created based on his exegesis of the passage and his labels for the two stages.

but emptied himself	he humbled himself
taking the form of a servant	becoming obedient to the point of death
being born in the likeness of men	even death on a cross

In each step, the hymn tells what stage Jesus is in ('form of God' and 'likeness of humanity' respectively) when he performs a given action. The finite verbs ('emptied' and 'humbled' respectively) tell what Jesus does as the one whom the hymn describes in the opening of each section.³⁸ Hence, Jesus as one in the very form of God emptied himself (*heauton ekenosen*, v. 6); and as one in the likeness of a human he humbled himself (*etapeinosen heauton*, v. 8). In addition, in both v. 6 and v. 8 the participial clause following the main verb tells *how* it is that Jesus performed the action in view.³⁹

This is where the contested phrase, *genomenos hupekoos mechri thanatou*, fits into the flow of the passage: it tells the means by which Jesus the human humbled himself.⁴⁰ It is not the case, as Turretin indicates, that the obedience refers to the emptying and the whole life of humiliation as well. Quite to the contrary, the moment of humiliation is realized not at the incarnation but in the death on the cross itself.⁴¹ Philippians 2 does not support the majority view. Attention to both structural and grammatical constructions strongly supports the conclusion that the obedience in view is Jesus' death on the cross.

³⁸ Silva, *Philippians*, 119, argues that such a two-stage reading is overly wooden. His primary concern, however, is to underscore that Jesus' death on the cross is not merely a function of his humbling himself but also of his emptying himself. Thus, although Silva interprets the parallelism differently, he still sees obedience in the passage as focusing on the cross rather than on a lifetime of law-keeping.

³⁹ Fee, *Philippians*, 217. In other words, the participle is a participle of means (Silva, *Philippians*, 120). Thus, NASB and ESV: 'He humbled himself by becoming obedient' (Phil. 2:8).

⁴⁰ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 630.

⁴¹ This general line of interpretation is also taken by Michael S. Horton, 'A Dying Man's Consolation: The Active & Passive Obedience of Christ', in *Modern Reformation* 5 (March/April 1996). Cited August 2, 2004. Online: <http://home.christianity.com/local/48470.html>.

We can also see that external considerations raised by Turretin, i.e., an appeal to Psalm 40, cited in Hebrews 10:5, fall somewhat short of establishing his point. Hebrews 10:5 reads: ‘Therefore coming into the world he says, “Sacrifice and offering you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me.”’ This citation of Psalm 40 is part of a longer citation of Psalm 40:6-8 that the writer of Hebrews ultimately interprets thus: ‘By which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all’ (10:10).⁴² The will of God that Jesus obeys in Hebrews 10 is none other than the command to die on the cross.⁴³ Geerhardus Vos summarizes this passage accurately: ‘the will of God here referred to is specifically the will that the Messiah should suffer and die’.⁴⁴

As the broader tradition of Reformed exegesis indicates, the passage in question speaks of the passive obedience of Christ.⁴⁵ Interestingly, John Owen’s own exegesis of Psalm 40 indicates that the Psalm ultimately refers to Jesus’ passive obedience: ‘He gave himself a sacrifice to God of a sweet smelling savour. And this he did willingly, as became him who was to be a Sacrifice. The law of this obedience being written in his heart, Ps. 40: 8; that is, he had a readiness, willingness, desire for its performance.’⁴⁶ Owen interprets God’s command to Jesus to die on the cross as the ‘law’ that was written on Jesus’ heart as prophesied in Psalm 40:8. Notwithstanding the assertions of Turretin, Philippians 2:8, one of the three texts in the NT that applies the language of obedience to Jesus, stands over against Owen’s argument that Jesus’ death is not properly labelled obedience. The so-called passive obedience of Jesus is true obedience, we might even say ‘active obedience’, to the command concerning his passion.

Hebrews 5:8 is also problematic for the majority position. We have already seen that Hebrews 10 looks to the death of Jesus as his ‘doing

⁴² A number of interesting variances between MT, LXX and Hebrews exist, but investigation of these would take us beyond the scope of the present study. The variations are discussed by Calvin, *Hebrews*, 225-30; see William Lane, *Hebrews 9-13* (WBC 47b; Dallas: Word, 1991), 262-63.

⁴³ Calvin, *Hebrews*, 229-30; Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:470-1.

⁴⁴ Geerhardus Vos, ‘The Priesthood of Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews’, in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Richard B. Gaffin; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 147.

⁴⁵ See above, n. 36. The summary of Lane is apt: ‘In the following paragraph (vv. 5-10) the writer argues that the ineffective sacrifices of the old covenant have been superseded by the sufficient sacrifice of Christ’ (Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 262).

⁴⁶ Owen, *Of Communion with God*, 226-7 (italics original, underscore added).

God's will' (Heb. 10:5-8); the same idea is expressed in Hebrews 5:8: 'Although being a son, he learned, through the things which he suffered (*hon epathen*), obedience (*ten hupakoen*).' The association of suffering and obedience in Hebrews 5:8 undermines Owen's argument cited above that obedience means *doing*, 'something to which passion or suffering cannot belong'.⁴⁷ As does Philippians 2:8, Hebrews 5:8 explicitly connects what Owen determines to be improper: obedience and Jesus' death. Our understanding of the passage finds support from within the Reformed tradition, as Calvin prepares for his comments on Hebrews 5:8 with these words on the preceding verse: 'Why was it that he dreaded death except that he saw in it the curse of God, and that he had to wrestle with the guilt of all iniquities, and also with hell itself?'⁴⁸ When Hebrews 5 speaks of Jesus' obedience, it has his death in view.

Within the context of Hebrews two more things can be said to underscore that Hebrews 5:8 views Christ's sufferings as the locus of his obedience. First, the passage speaks of Jesus' high priesthood. The theology of high priesthood that the author of Hebrews develops revolves entirely around two ministries of Jesus: (1) giving up his life on the cross, and (2) interceding for the saints in heaven.⁴⁹ Hebrews' theology of the priesthood is summarized well in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, answer 25: 'Christ executeth the office of a priest, in his once offering up of himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God, and in making continual intercession for us.'⁵⁰ Owen gives this same summary of the priestly office of Christ: 'The general acts of the Lord Christ as the high priest of the church are two, – namely, *oblation* and *intercession*.'⁵¹ In keeping with the theology of both the book of Hebrews and the Catechism, Hebrews 5:8 speaks of Jesus as a priest who suffered on behalf of his people. Such mortal suffering is explicitly referred to as Jesus' obedience to God.

A further indication that 5:8 has so-called passive obedience in mind comes from William Lane: 'The crucial consideration is that in Hebrews

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Hebrews*, 123. Owen himself also substantiates an association between obedience and Jesus' death in his comments on Hebrews 5:8 and 10:7 (*Hebrews*, 4:523; 6:470-1).

⁴⁹ See Vos, 'Priesthood of Christ', 132-3, 139, 141.

⁵⁰ Vos notes that Hebrews stands almost alone in describing Jesus' ministry in terms of a priestly office ('Priesthood of Christ', 126). The conjunction between Hebrews' articulation of Jesus' priesthood and the Catechisms' articulations of the priesthood is therefore not surprising.

⁵¹ Owen, *Hebrews*, 2:194.

the verb *paschein*, which ordinarily means “to suffer”, is used only of the passion of Jesus and takes on the nuance of “to die” (2:9, 10; 9:26; 13:12).⁵² Again, we highlight that Owen’s argument against a truly ‘passive’ obedience lies in the incompatibility between suffering and true obedience. Vos, however, states how these two are related in Hebrews 5: ‘It must be plain to the most superficial reader that “obedience” here has a very specific meaning: it is obedience to the call of suffering.’⁵³ Thus we conclude that in Hebrews, as in Philippians, it is precisely passive obedience that is in view when the NT authors predicate obedience of Jesus.

Our exegetical forays into Philippians and Hebrews have been for the purpose of assessing the contention of the active-righteousness position (using Owen as an example) that ‘obedience’ in Romans 5:18-19 must refer to Jesus’ life of law-keeping more generally. There are only two NT passages outside of Romans 5 that speak of Jesus’ obedience, or obeying, and in both it is precisely Jesus’ passive obedience, and *not* simultaneously his active obedience, that is in view. Without further exegetical argument from Owen based on Romans 5 itself, we are at least on firm ground to be wary of the majority position’s reading, if not fully justified in concluding the absence of exegetical basis for such a view. The presupposition created by the other NT passages that speak of Jesus’ obedience explicitly is that his death is in view.⁵⁴

Owen had suggested the insufficiency of the cross to render fully the connotations of the word ‘obedience’ in Romans 5. However, the exegetical considerations of Romans 5 itself, together with the biblical theological factors of the remaining NT evidence, do not support the

⁵² Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 121. The latter two references, Hebrews 9:26 and 13:12, are particularly clear in making Lane’s point.

⁵³ Vos, ‘Priesthood of Christ’, 147.

⁵⁴ Space does not allow discussion of other arguments in favour of a passive righteousness reading of Romans 5:18-19, although two can be mentioned: (1) Paul has already spoken of Jesus’ work and righteousness on at least two occasions in Romans (3:21-26; 4:23-25) and in both cases he speaks of Jesus’ death (and resurrection), but not his law-keeping; (2) the law in Romans 5-8 does not come in alongside of grace and righteousness on the Christ side of the Adam-Christ divide; rather, it comes in alongside of sin and death for the purpose of increasing transgression (5:20). This latter point is especially significant, since it illustrates that Paul turns the presumed role of the law on its head: it does not come in as an entity which leads to righteousness and life, but rather as an entity that exacerbates sin, transgression and death.

majority position that Romans 5:19 must have reference to Jesus' whole life of law-keeping.

2) *Matthew 3:15*

If Romans 5:18-19 is most often adduced to speak of Jesus' obedience, Matthew 3:15 takes pride of place with respect to Jesus' righteousness. In the context of John's reluctance to baptize Jesus, Jesus counters, 'Let it be so, for thus it is necessary for us to fulfil all righteousness (*dikaïosunen*).'⁵⁵ Owen comments:

That whatever is required of us by vertue [*sic*] of any Law, that he did and fulfilled. Whatever was required of us by the Law of Nature in our state of *Innocency*, whatever kind of Duty was added by morally positive, of Ceremonial Institutions, whatever is required of us in way of *Obedience* to righteous, Judicial Laws, He did it all... So Matt. 3:15. He said *it became him to fulfil all Righteousness, pasan dikaïosunen*, all manner of Righteousness whatever; that is everything that *God required*, as is evident from that general *Axiome* to the Baptism of *John*.⁵⁵

The argument, then, is that Jesus' response to John's protestation in Matthew indicates that Jesus came to do everything God commands his people to do, including baptism. Thus *all* righteousness is fulfilled.⁵⁶

Richard B. Gaffin, however, offers a better way forward for understanding this saying of Jesus within the context of Jesus' baptism. Gaffin places the baptism of Jesus within a broader framework of Jesus' baptismal ministry; as John says, Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.⁵⁷ This ministry is the harbinger of the eschatological judgment with its 'dual outcome of salvation or judgment'.⁵⁸ In order for Jesus to fulfil his Spirit-and-fire ministry, however, Jesus himself must

⁵⁵ Owen, *Of Communion with God*, 214 (italics original).

⁵⁶ Turretin concurs with Owen in this reading, suggesting that 'fulfil all righteousness' indicates a numerical completion of the works of law God has assigned to humanity to perform (*Institutes*, 2:451-2); see also Horton, 'Dying Man's Consolation', n.p.

⁵⁷ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr, *Perspectives on Pentecost: New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 14-20.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 15. On fire, water, and Spirit imagery in descriptions of eschatological judgment, see W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (3 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark; 1988), 1:316-17.

receive the baptism of the Spirit and the baptism of fire.⁵⁹ The Messiah must himself take on the judgment due his people by becoming associated with sinful humanity in its sinfulness so that his own baptismal ministry might result in salvation. Jesus' baptism with water, then, is an anticipation of a later baptismal judgment he must endure: it is a precursor to the cross.⁶⁰ This representative sin-bearing, argues Gaffin, is the point of Jesus' being baptized by John.⁶¹

Yet it would seem that such an understanding of Jesus' words falls neatly on the side of Jesus' passive righteousness. The Messiah's undergoing a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins is precisely what Jesus has in view when he says to John, 'It is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness': this indicates that Jesus fulfils all righteousness by becoming identified with sinful humanity in its sinfulness (i.e., on the cross), rather than by becoming identified with humanity in its need to obey whatsoever prescripts God might determine to lay upon humanity. To suggest that Matthew 3:15 supports the active righteousness view is to give insufficient weight to the nature of the 'command' that Jesus was obeying.⁶² It is not submission to a rule in general that is in view, but submission to God's baptismal provision for sinful humanity, that is, submission to the sign of Jesus' own forthcoming 'baptism' on the cross. As D. A. Carson comments, 'the Servant's first mark is obeying God: he "fulfils all righteousness" since he suffers and dies to accomplish redemption in obedience to the will of God. By his baptism Jesus affirms his willingness to do his assigned work.'⁶³ When read within the context

⁵⁹ Gaffin, *Perspectives*, 15-16. Much to the same effect is Kline, *By Oath Consigned*, 58-9.

⁶⁰ Murray, 'Obedience of Christ', 151; Kline, *By Oath Consigned*, 58.

⁶¹ Gaffin, *Perspectives*, 15-16.

⁶² Earlier, John Calvin had rejected the line of interpretation offered by Owen (*Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke* [2 vols; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], 1:202). Although he does not argue for a proleptic enactment of the passion in the same way that Gaffin does, he does make tantalizing reference to the union that believers can have with Christ in baptism, because of Christ's own baptism, and cites Romans 6 as proof (1:202). He further comments with respect to John's protestation that Christ calls attention to his own role as a servant, and makes reference to Philippians 2:7 (1:202). So Calvin sees Jesus' baptism as an act of obedience to God, done so that humanity might share baptism in common with him, but he does not work out the allusions to other passages which rightly point in the direction of baptismal *death* as the point of contact.

⁶³ D. A. Carson, *Matthew* (The Expositor's Bible Commentary 8; Grand

of John's message of coming baptismal judgment, as a number of exegetes within the Westminster Calvinist tradition have urged us to do, Jesus' declaration about fulfilling all righteousness must be taken in tightest connection with his passive obedience, and hence the passive righteousness he obtained by the cross.⁶⁴

3) *Galatians 4:4*

Paul describes the salvific activity of God in the following manner in Galatians 4:4-5: 'God sent forth his son, born from woman, born under the law (*genomenon hupo nomon*), so that he might redeem those under the law (*tous hupo nomon exagorase*), so that we might receive adoption.' Owen understands Paul here to be saying that Jesus' birth 'under the law' teaches that Jesus came in such a fashion that he might keep the law on behalf of his people:

It must needs be, that whilst he had his *conversation in the flesh*, he must be most *perfectly and absolutely holy*. But yet the *prime intendment* of his accomplishing of holiness, which consists in the complete obedience of his *whole life* to any Law of God, that was no less for us than his suffering Death: That this is so, the Apostle tells us, Gal. 4:4, 5. *God sent forth his Son made of a Woman, made under the Law, to redeem them that were under the Law*: this scripture formerly named, must be a little farther insisted on. He was both *made of a Woman*, and *made under the Law*, that is, obedient to it for us. The end here both of the *Incarnation* and *Obedience* of Christ to the Law, (for that must needs be here understood by the Phrase *hupo nomon genomenos*, that is disposed of in such a condition, as that he must yield subjection and obedience to the Law) was all to redeem us. In those two expressions, *made of a Woman*, *made under the Law*, the apostle doth not knit his Incarnation and Death together, with an exclusion of the obedience of his life... Now we were *under the Law*, not only as obnoxious to its *Penalties*, but as bound to all the *Duties* of it. That this is our being *under the Law*, the Apostle informs us, Gal. 4:21.⁶⁵

Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 108.

⁶⁴ This interpretation of the baptismal scene points toward an area where further discussion might be warranted, namely, the significance of righteousness itself as that (polyvalent?) category extends beyond obedience to the commandments of God.

⁶⁵ Owen, *Communion with God*, 220 (italics original). See Ferguson, *John Owen*, 87. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 515, appears to be reading the passage in much the same way.

Both Owen and Robert Lewis Dabney envision two possible readings of Gal. 4:4: either (a) Jesus was made subject to only the penal aspects of the law, such that the verse speaks about his passive obedience only; or (b) Jesus was made subject to the prescriptive elements as well, such that the verse speaks about the necessity of his active righteousness for the redemption of humanity.⁶⁶ Certainly Owen and Dabney are correct in their insistence that one could not be subject to the penalties of the law without also being subject to its injunctions.

A careful examination of *hupo nomon*, however, reveals that the question at issue is neither law as prescript nor law as that which metes out punishment, but rather, as Herman Ridderbos contends, law as a ruling power whose reign has come to an end.⁶⁷ Paul's usage of the phrase throughout his letters substantiates this claim (see Rom. 6:14-15; 1 Cor. 9:20; Gal. 3:23; 4:4-5, 21; 5:18), but his articulations in Romans 6 are particularly clear.⁶⁸ In Romans 6:12-15, Paul contrasts two possible ways of life: one way involves serving impurity and lawlessness, the other involves serving God and righteousness. In a striking turn, he urges his readers to live in accordance with their salvation, to serve God and righteousness, precisely because they are *not* under law. In other words, being 'under law' is not an equivalent expression to 'obeying God'. In keeping with Paul's statement in 5:20 that the law came in alongside (*pareiselthen*) sin and death for the purpose of increasing transgressions, so we find in ch. 6 that obedience to God and being under the law fall on opposite sides of the Fall/Salvation divide.⁶⁹ Like sin and death, law is a

⁶⁶ Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 626.

⁶⁷ Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (trans. John Richard de Witt; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 148: 'This whole negative significance – described in all kinds of metaphors – which the law has for man and which makes him live in a condition of slavery, Paul expresses in the set phrase 'to be under the law' (*hupo nomon einai* ...).' It seems to be in recognition of the redemptive-historical qualification placed on 'law' in Galatians that John Murray interprets Galatians 4:4 as referring to the ceremonial law (*Redemption Accomplished*, 45).

⁶⁸ J. Louis Martyn shows how Paul employs the language of 'being under something' throughout Galatians as an indication of the inimical powers that enslave humanity (*Galatians, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 33a; New York: Doubleday, 1997], 370-3).

⁶⁹ For a helpful summary of Romans 6, especially with regard to Paul's concern about sin and death as powers that Christ overcomes in the eschatological events of his death and resurrection, see Moo, *Romans*, 350-2.

power that rules at cross-purposes to God's desired life of righteousness;⁷⁰ unlike sin and death, however, it has a God-ordained (but not salvific) function to perform in the accomplishment of redemption (5:21).⁷¹

Against such a backdrop we return to Galatians 4:4 and find that Jesus' work of redemption required him to enter the realm where not only sin and death held sway, but also that particular sphere where the law came in alongside to exercise its authority alongside of them. J. Louis Martyn comments on Galatians 4:4 to this effect: God sent his Son 'into the malignant orb in which all human beings have fallen prey to powers inimical to God and to themselves'.⁷² To this extent the conclusion of Murray is apt: 'In him the Mosaic law realized its purpose, and its meaning received in him its permanent validity and embodiment. Consequently he redeemed from the relative and provisional bondage of which the Mosaic economy was the instrument.'⁷³ Galatians 4:4 is not an indication of the nature of Jesus' obedience; it is rather an indication of the power to whose grip Jesus submitted in order to redeem those who were held in its grasp.⁷⁴ Indeed, submission to the law is in view, as Calvin comments, but when we ask what such submission entails, and how it is effectual for the redemption of God's people, it must be placed alongside Jesus' submission to other governing powers in the cosmos – powers such as sin and death.⁷⁵ The question of *how* his submission earned redemption for God's people (see *exagorase* in Gal. 4:4) is the larger question that the current study is seeking to answer. And the answer this study offers, in the plain language of Paul in Galatians, is that 'Christ redeemed (*exagorasen*) us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse on our behalf' (Gal. 3:13), which is to say by going to the cross, by hanging on the tree (see Part II on Gal. 3:13).

⁷⁰ See Murray, *Romans*, 229: 'Law can do nothing to relieve the bondage of sin; it accentuates and confirms that bondage. It is this last feature of the impotency of the law that is particularly in view in the clause in question.'

⁷¹ Moo, *Romans*, 349.

⁷² Martyn, *Galatians*, 390.

⁷³ Murray, *Redemption Accomplished*, 45. Although it is not entirely clear from this citation, we likely differ from Murray in terms of what the content of that 'purpose' might be, as our continuing discussion will make clear.

⁷⁴ Thus John Calvin rightly highlights that Galatians 4:4 refers to Jesus' subjection to the law (*Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* [trans. William Pringle; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], 118).

⁷⁵ On Calvin's comment see the preceding note.

4) *Romans 8:3-4*

This final exegetical foray serves as a transitional point in our study. It corresponds with the current section in that it involves us in an exegetical debate about the meaning of a passage used to support the active righteousness position. But it also illustrates the theological question that the active righteousness position strives to answer: what does God do for humanity in the face of humanity's failure under the law? The passage in question reads as follows:

For what the law could not [do], in that it was weak through the flesh, God [did]: sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh in order that the righteousness of the law (*to dikaioma tou nomou*) might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

John Owen offers an interpretation representative of the majority position:

That whatever *Christ did as Mediator*, He did it for them *whose Mediator* he was, or in whose stead, and for whose good, He executed the Office of a Mediator before God: This the Holy Ghost witnesseth, *Rom 8:3*...Because that we *could* not in that condition of weakness, whereinto we are cast by sin, come to God, and be freed from condemnation by the Law; God sent Christ as Mediator to do and suffer whatever the Law required at our hands, for that end and purpose, that we might not be condemned, but accepted of God. It was all to this end, *That the Righteousness of the Law might be fulfilled in us*; that is, which the Law required of us, consisting in Duties of Obedience, this Christ performed for us.⁷⁶

In step with the theology of the active righteousness view, Owen sees the passage teaching a two-fold work of Christ vis-à-vis the law: (1) in the phrase 'for sin, condemned sin in the flesh' he sees Jesus fulfilling on behalf of God's people the law's demand for death and condemnation (i.e., the passive righteousness of Christ); (2) in the phrase, 'that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us' he sees Jesus fulfilling on behalf of God's people the positive, prescriptive requirements of the law (i.e., the active righteousness of Christ).⁷⁷ Turretin highlights the

⁷⁶ Owen, *Communion with God*, 217-18 (italics original).

⁷⁷ Similarly, see Turretin's argument based on Romans 8: 'Christ, therefore, supplying what the law could not do in us must accomplish what the law demanded of us and is called "righteousness" (*dikaioma*) or the right of law (viz., "a right to life") which arises from its fulfilment, not only as passive, but also as active. For since the law and commands of God are the

theological concern of the active righteousness position when he interprets *dikaionoma* as 'right to life'.⁷⁸ He sees obedience to the precepts of the law as the prerequisite to participating in life with God.

This raises once again the question of whether Paul has Jesus' active righteousness in view. Romans 8 concludes the preceding discussion with a triumphant declaration of the results of the eschatological transfer that has occurred for those who are in Christ: 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 8:1).⁷⁹ Forensic language of escaped condemnation (v. 1) finds its ground (*gar*, v. 2) in the transfer of lordship from the (Mosaic) law of sin and death to the freeing law of the (Holy) Spirit of life (v. 2).⁸⁰ The transfer from the realm of the law of sin to the realm of the 'law' of the Spirit, in turn, finds its ground (*gar*, v. 3) in the activity of God described in vv. 3-4. More specifically, v. 3 tells the reader the action on which Paul's claim in v. 2 is based, and v. 4 tells the reader the purpose (*hina*) God had in mind when performing the action of v. 3. The result of Paul's logical construction is that v. 3 grounds both v. 2 and v. 4 in parallel fashion, forming the logical basis of v. 2 and giving the basis for a further purpose in v. 4. We can represent this diagrammatically as follows:

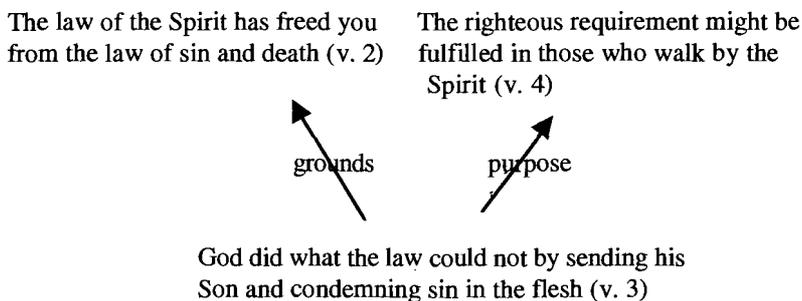


Figure 1

same, punishments cannot be said to fulfil the law or its commands, but to satisfy the denunciations of the law' (*Institutes*, 2:415).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Moo is particularly helpful in laying out the eschatological and participatory nature of Romans 8 (*Romans*, 471-73).

⁸⁰ Moo, *Romans*, 474. See Frank Thielman, *The Law and the New Testament: The Question of Continuity* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1999), 27.

The first implication of the logic of Paul's argument is that v. 3, in picking up a shortcoming of the Mosaic law, addresses the negative statement about the law in v. 2. As Paul makes clear throughout Romans 6-7, the law came as a spiritual entity into a world ruled by sin and death, and it was therefore unable to make fleshly people spiritual. That is to say, the inability of humanity to fulfil the law (the problem that the active righteousness position purports to solve) is a live question for Paul. His answer to the question is God's intervention in Christ. Verse 3 indicates that Paul finds God's first-order intervention to solve the 'problem' of the law in the death of Christ (i.e., in Jesus' passive obedience/righteousness).

Indeed, most commentators agree that v. 3 speaks of the death of Jesus (his act of passive obedience). For example, in the citation from Owen's work above, he says, 'Because that we *could* not in that condition of weakness, whereinto we are cast by sin, come to God, and be freed from condemnation by the law; God sent Christ as Mediator to do and suffer whatever the Law required at our hands, for that end and purpose, that we might not be condemned, but accepted of God.'⁸¹ Immediately thereafter he states the purpose of this action by quoting v. 4. These comments indicate that Owen interprets God's giving of his Son 'for sin' in terms of the penal suffering that the law requires. To much the same effect is Calvin's comment that 'Paul clearly declares that our sins were expiated by the death of Christ because it was impossible for the law to confer righteousness on us.'⁸² Murray demurs slightly, arguing instead that Paul speaks in v. 3 about the death of Christ voiding sin of its *power*.⁸³ Without getting into the nuances of the debate Murray takes up with Calvin and others, we note that all these commentators see v. 3 as a reference to the work of Christ on the cross. *This* is God's answer to the insufficiency of the (Mosaic) law.

The most significant point of contention has to do with whether v. 4, reflecting the purpose of God's condemnation of sin in the flesh of Christ, speaks of Jesus' obedience to the law on behalf of sinful humanity. Turretin adduces Romans 8:3-4 in support of the active righteousness position through an appeal to the nature of 'just requirement' of the law. He asserts that punishment is insufficient to warrant such a label.⁸⁴ The problem with Turretin's explanation of the verse, however, is that his focus on word usage is not accompanied by any discussion about the

⁸¹ Owen, *Communion with God*, 217-18 (italics original).

⁸² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, (trans. and ed. John Owen; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 279.

⁸³ Murray, *Romans*, 1:277-82.

⁸⁴ Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:451.

logical flow of the verses in question. Turretin thus gives no account of how it is that the death of Christ can serve as the logical grounds for the reckoning of his active righteousness. Owen's interpretation of the verse is stronger in that it gives due weight to the *hina* that connects vv. 3 and 4. He says, in effect, that it is Jesus' death on the cross that allows God to reckon to believers Jesus' active righteousness that he performed on their behalf.⁸⁵

Douglas Moo argues that Romans 8:3-4 demonstrates that both Jesus' death and his law-keeping provide the righteousness by which believers are justified. He argues for the position that the *dikaioma* of the law is fulfilled in believers by the imputation of Christ's law-keeping on their behalf while arguing against the position that it is fulfilled by means of Christians themselves walking according to the Spirit. He puts forward two primary arguments in favour of his own position: (1) the passive verb *plerothe* indicates that the fulfilment comes to Christians from without and is therefore not something they do on their own; (2) the failure of humanity to fulfil the law is precisely the problem that needs to be overcome (v. 3a); therefore, the actions of believers could never overcome the barrier of the flesh that prevents humanity from obeying the law of God.⁸⁶ Moo then puts forward his conclusion (what we will label point 3 for easy reference): 'only through a perfect obedience of the law's demands' can the inability of the law be overcome.⁸⁷ Next to this claim Moo lays another: (4) 'In laying upon him the condemnation due all of us (v. 3b; cf. v. 1), God also made it possible for the righteous obedience that Christ had earned to be transferred to us.'⁸⁸

Moo's first objection, that *plerothe*, being passive, indicates divine rather than human action, is by no means a necessary conclusion. Paul describes the believer as walking according to the Spirit (v. 4). The position against which Moo argues claims that it is by means of the activity of God the Holy Spirit that the *dikaioma* of the law is fulfilled – a perfectly legitimate reading of the passive voice. Points 2 and 3 are the heart of Moo's argument. Moo rightly claims that Paul's theology holds that truly sinful human flesh is incapable of obeying the law's demands (v. 3a; cf. 7:5, 25). The problem with advancing such an argument at this point, however, is that Moo has lost sight of where v. 4 falls in the logic

⁸⁵ Owen, *Communion with God*, 218.

⁸⁶ Moo, *Romans*, 483.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 483. To much the same effect was Thomas Goodwin at the Westminster Assembly (Van Dixhoorn, 'Reforming,' 312-13.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 483.

THE SUFFICIENCY OF THE CROSS

of the argument. Romans 8:4 is not the *grounds* by which the inability of the law is overcome; rather, is the *purpose* for which the inability of the law is overcome through the death of Christ (v. 3). Whereas Moo says 'only through a perfect obedience of the law's demands' can the inability of the law be overcome,⁸⁹ Paul puts the matter exactly opposite: it is *because* the inability of the law has been overcome (through Christ's death [vv. 2-3]) that the righteous demands of the law can be met.

That is to say, Moo has only established an argument that stands on the other side of the cross, before God acting in the death of Christ. He has not addressed the eschatological 'now' in which the believer lives thanks to God's sending his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin. Once we take full stock of the *hina* that connects vv. 3 and 4, point 3 of Moo's argument is reduced to the level of bare assertion. He claims that the inability of the law can only be overcome through perfect obedience to it (how he understands 'fulfilment of the righteous requirement' in v. 4.) Hence, Moo's vision of the passage is something like this:

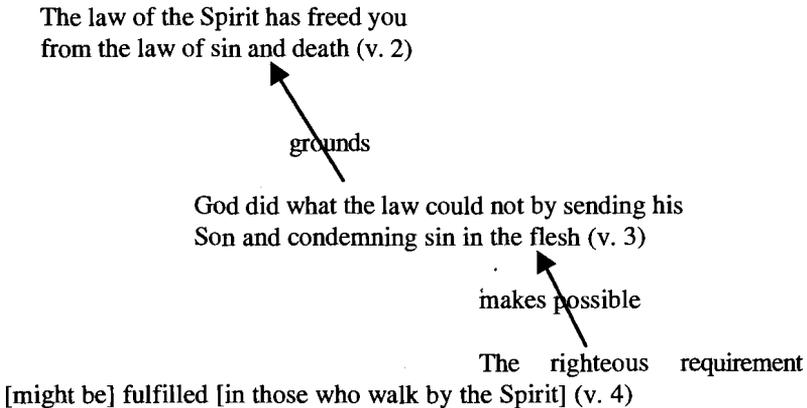


Figure 2

The passage, however, locates fulfilment of the law's righteous requirement after God's action in the *cross of Christ* to overcome the inability of the law. To be sure, this sacrifice could not be effective apart from the sinlessness of Christ. The point of our intramural debate, however, is not whether or not Christ was sinless; all agree that Jesus

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 483.

perfectly loved God and loved neighbour throughout the whole course of his life. The question in focus is whether or not this life of 'law-keeping' is reckoned to believers in justification.

Moo has replaced the grounds and means by which God overcame the inability of the law (i.e., the death of Jesus on the cross) with what he takes to be the teaching of v. 4 (i.e., the imputation of the active righteousness of Christ). He then argues that the death of Christ made possible the imputation of Christ's active righteousness. Thus he not only sees what he understands to be the teaching of v. 4 to be the means by which God overcomes the inability of the law (what v. 3 speaks of); he *also* wants to use v. 3 as the logical ground of v. 4! Because Moo's argument depends on a transposition of the logical flow of vv. 3 and 4, his points 2 and 3, the heart of his argument for the accounting of Jesus' law-keeping to believers, does not stand as argued.

The exegete against whom Moo is directing his argument is John Murray.⁹⁰ Murray views v. 4 as of a piece with a larger argument in which the believer's freedom from the power of sin and the law are in view. Thus, v. 4 indicates the effect in the believer 'of the judgment executed upon the power of sin in the cross of Christ and of the inwardly operative power of the Holy Spirit based upon and emanating from the once-for-all accomplishment in the cross of Christ'.⁹¹ The strongest argument Murray marshals for his position is contextual:⁹² the description of the believers as those who walk according to the Spirit is in keeping not only with the preceding, positive indication of the work of God in v. 2 (a positive indication that v. 3 logically grounds), but it is also in keeping with the subsequent verses.⁹³ The following verses indicate that believers live by the Spirit, therefore setting their minds on the Spirit, with the implication that their thoughts and actions, being spiritual, please God.⁹⁴ Murray's position finds further strength in that he recognizes the redemptive context in which v. 4 occurs, and so he can hold it in contrast with other, negative

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Murray, *Romans*, 1:283.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 1:283-4.

⁹³ Légasse comments on the importance of the 'law of the Spirit' in ch. 8: 'L'absence de condamnation est aussitôt justifiée par la substitution d'une loi à une autre, la première délivrant l'humanité de la seconde. La première est la "loi de l'Esprit de la vie". Le rôle de l'Esprit dans la nouveau statut de l'humanité est développé dans la suite du chapitre' (*Romains*, 483).

⁹⁴ On the importance of the Spirit for Paul's description of salvation in ch. 8, see James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (WBC 38a; Dallas: Word, 1988), 414-16.

statements about the law that find their grounds in the state of the cosmos and humanity before the cross of Christ.⁹⁵

In addition to Murray's points, one more argument presents itself from the flow of vv. 2-4. Romans 8:2 speaks of the two sides of the aeonic divide: the 'law' of the (Holy) Spirit of life in Christ sets believers free from the (Mosaic) law of sin and death. Verses 3 and 4 take up these two aeons in reverse order. The negative side, the law of sin and death, God overcomes by giving his Son to die. The purpose of this death is the spiritual freedom in which the believer walks.⁹⁶ Thus, vv. 3 and 4 together explain v. 2. In parallel with the transition that Paul describes in 7:1-6, 8:2-4 portrays the spiritual life of the believer as the counterpoint to bondage under the law, and shows the transition from one state to the other initiated in the cross of Christ.⁹⁷ Moreover, it is *in* Christ that the believer participates in this new era – a union that centres on Christ's death, resurrection and exaltation.⁹⁸

Verse 4 envisions the life of the believer as a transformed entity: the believer now lives differently than the unbeliever – not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.⁹⁹

Romans 8:3-4 is significant for this study inasmuch as the passage directly addresses the question of what God does in the face of the failure of the law. Given the tremendous weight that Reformed theologians have placed upon the active righteousness of Christ, Paul's silence here is deafening. He does not say that God met the problem of the law's failure through Christ's success before the law; rather, he says that God met the problem of the law's failure through Christ's death on the cross. The active righteousness position argues for more than Jesus' sinlessness as something that qualifies him to die for believers (this is the common ground between the two positions). In addition, it argues for the imputation of Jesus' record of law-keeping to the account of believers. Paul omits this additional datum in Romans 8:3-4. As we turn in Part II of this study to deal with the theological question more directly, and attempt to establish positively the various interrelationships among law, righteousness, Christ, and salvation in the NT, we will find that the

⁹⁵ Murray, *Romans*, 283.

⁹⁶ See Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 424.

⁹⁷ On the comparison between 8:1-4 and 7:1-6 see Légasse, *Romains*, 482-3.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 483.

⁹⁹ A fuller investigation of Romans 7-8 (impossible to perform here) would further underscore that Paul does in fact have a transformed life in view for the believer in this context.

answer Paul gives in 8:3-4 is the answer that he gives *every* time he confronts the failure of the law to provide salvation. Having given humanity a spiritual law that was incapable of making them spiritual people, God provided the means for humanity to become spiritual by giving his Son on the cross and raising him from the dead.

CONCLUSIONS: EXEGETICAL BASIS FOR THE ACTIVE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF CHRIST

We have considered four main passages (Rom. 5:18-19; Matt. 3:15; Gal. 4:4; Rom. 8:3-4) often invoked in support of the doctrine of the imputation of the active righteousness of Christ, and have found, in step with the best of the Reformed exegetical tradition from Calvin and Owen to Vos, Ridderbos, Murray and Gaffin, that the passages do not teach that Jesus' law-keeping is reckoned to believers for their justification.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, Philippians 2:8 and Hebrews 5:8 also indicate that Christ's obedience refers to his death, not to his law-keeping. All these NT writers show themselves to be of one voice when they speak of Jesus' obedience: he obeys the Father's command to die. This is the obedience of Christ that we find in the NT.

The question still presses itself, however: how does God respond to the failure of humanity under the law? The NT writers take up this question, but their answer is not what the advocates of the active righteousness position would lead us to expect. In the second part of our study, we will turn our attention from examination of exegetical supports to examination of the theological framework that the NT writers develop as they themselves deal with the question of humanity's failure under the law. There we will see the NT focus on the sufficiency of the cross of Christ for obtaining eschatological blessing for humanity.

¹⁰⁰ Again we want to underscore that the question is not about *whether* Christ's righteousness is imputed; the debate at hand revolves around the *quality* of the righteousness that is, in fact, reckoned to believers.