

Into the Lions' Den: Christ's Active Obedience Re-Visited

Definitions

Justification by faith is a legal or forensic term. The sinner who trusts Christ is justified; that is, God pardons the guilt of the sinner who trusts Christ, and imputes righteousness to him, constituting him perfect in his sight.

Christ's obedience is both *active* and *passive*.¹ Christ's *active* obedience is his entire life of obedience to his Father's will, including the Mosaic law, from his incarnation to his burial; his *passive* obedience is his suffering and death on the cross under the curse of the law.

To *impute* means to lay to the account of, to credit to. In justification, therefore, righteousness is laid to the account of, credited to, the sinner who believes.²

Righteousness in this context means perfection, uprightness.

And *justifying righteousness, Christ's righteousness*, is... Ah! That's what this article is about.

Introduction

When talking about justification, the phrase, 'Christ's righteousness', or its equivalent, appears repeatedly in countless books, hymns, sermons, Confessions of Faith, *etc.*,

¹ But, as I will explain, I do not like the terms. Nor do I agree with dividing Christ's obedience into distinct parts.

² There are, in fact, three imputations. *First*, Adam's guilt is imputed to all men (Ps. 51:5; Rom. 5:12,18-19; Eph. 2:1-3). *Secondly*, the sin of the elect is imputed to Christ (Isa. 53:4-6; Rom. 8:3-4; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13). *Thirdly*, Christ's righteousness is imputed to the elect (Rom. 3:21-26; 5:18-19; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9).

yet, remarkably, 'the righteousness of Christ', as a phrase, never once appears in Scripture. As may be imagined, many have held strong opinions about this expression, what it means, and whether or not it is right to use it. Needless to say, nobody – among those I am talking about – questions the sinlessness of Christ; *that* is not the point at issue. Rather, what is this 'righteousness', 'the righteousness of Christ', that God accounts to the sinner when he believes?

Here we come face to face with the much-debated topic of Christ's so-called active and passive obedience. In the matter of justification, I take 'the righteousness of Christ' to encompass both. In this article I briefly say why.

But before I do let me make it clear that, as I have noted, I do not like the terms 'active obedience' and 'passive obedience' when applied to the person and work of Christ. For a start, I do not approve of the notion of dividing the obedience of Christ; it is all one. Not only that. Christ was *active* on the cross, in his death. He could categorically state: 'I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father' (John 10:17-18). 'I lay down my life'! This is active! Again, as Christ asked Peter when he was being arrested, and Peter wanted to intervene by force: 'Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?' (John 18:11). And his very dying was a voluntary act: 'Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last' (Luke 23:46). Consequently, I would like to abandon this distinction between the 'active' and 'passive' obedience of Christ. 'Obedience', by definition, must an act of the will, a determined submission. Therefore, the notion that Jesus was active until the cross, and then passive, is utterly false. We know that right from the start Christ came to fulfil the law (Matt. 5:17).

Nevertheless, since the terms 'active' and 'passive' are used so frequently when talking about Christ's obedience, I am forced to fall in with the practice.

This question of whether or not Christ's active obedience is imputed to the sinner at the point of faith is, to say the least, contentious. Some say it is; others say it is not. And some have their say with vehemence. Good men are divided over it, strongly divided; indeed, I have friends on each side of the debate. Wisdom might dictate, therefore, that I should keep quiet, offend neither, and so preserve my good name with both. But I think it would be wrong of me not to set out a brief statement of my position. Even so, I know this article will disappoint (no worse than that, I hope!) some of my friends. Of course, I'm not foolish enough to think it is going to cut the Gordian knot. Yet it might help others think through the issue for themselves. Indeed, it might help me. For, if I am mistaken, I need to be shown it; constructive criticism of what I write could set me on the right path. I welcome such, therefore. I am not writing, as it were, with the inflated idea that I will bring all conversation on the subject to a close. Rather, I want to stimulate it.

Many things are not at issue, but what is at issue is this: What precisely is justification? What righteousness, precisely, is imputed to the believer for justification?

Before I start, a few negatives. Because of the sensitivity of this subject, I will quote no man's writing in support of what I say.³ There is plenty to draw on, I assure you, but I refrain. I admit that too many base their case for including the active obedience of Christ in justification (as many other doctrines for that matter) on Confessions and the statements of good men. Parroting *Sola Scriptura* is all very well, but too often the reality is more akin to *Mainly* or *Primarily Confessional*. I will stick to Scripture.

Again, I do not take the position I do, in order to lend support to the advocates of covenant theology. But neither

³ I do quote Martin Luther – but not to establish my thesis.

am I going to reject something which covenant theologians teach just because they do teach it. The fact is, whatever may be alleged, I do not take my stance because I am a covenant theologian, or because I am influenced by covenant theology, or because the vestiges of my long-held covenant theology colour my thinking here. Covenant theology has nothing to do with it, as far as I am concerned. In particular, I do not hold to the so-called covenant of works.⁴ I am a new-covenant theologian. Even so, I do not approach the question because of my system; indeed, new-covenant theology is not a system such as, say, covenant theology. I have no system in mind other than to let Scripture speak.⁵

A common accusation laid against people like me is that we have a theory, and are hunting (in vain) for a text for it. I admit the obvious: there is no plain or explicit text for the inclusion of the active obedience of Christ in justification. Obvious? Of course! If there had been a plain text, there would be no debate. But if an explicit text is absolutely essential in forming doctrine, how will we establish – by an explicit text – that justification is by faith *alone*? Is there such a text? Again, is there an explicit text to prove that Christ, in his sufferings, earned the gift of faith for the elect?⁶ What about the trinity, the pastor (if you hold to such an office), the canon of Scripture, the inclusion of the Song of Solomon in that canon, the cessation of the gifts, Jesus' establishment of Sunday as the Lord's day (if you think he did and think it is)? Can we be given a plain text for such? By the way, do not assume my opinion on any of these topics. I simply ask.

Justification is more than pardon

It seems to me that those who advocate passive obedience (and reject Christ's active obedience) in this matter of

⁴ See my 'The Covenant That Never Was'.

⁵ I acknowledge that I too have my presuppositions. We all do. But I *try* to argue my case from Scripture, not my theology.

⁶ This is vital in the debate over Amyraldianism. See my *Amyraut*.

justification think that pardon, 'a clean slate', is the equivalent of justification. This is far too weak, and is, to speak frankly, unscriptural. The justified man is positively righteous in God's sight – not merely neutral, innocent, without guilt. He *is* pardoned, of course, but he is also perfect in God's sight – positively perfect, that is. I am deliberately using the tautology to make the point. It is not (merely) that his sins are forgiven: he is constituted righteous before God. Let me quote some relevant passages to make myself clear:

As by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous (Rom. 5:19).

Here we have it: by Christ's obedience, the believer is made or constituted 'righteous'. This is far more than being pardoned. Just as those in Adam are made more than merely 'sinful', so those in Christ are made more than merely 'un-sinful'.⁷

Again:

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them... For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:19-21).

Here we have it: in Christ believers are pardoned – God 'not counting their trespasses against them' – *and* fully righteous – they have become 'the righteousness of God' in Christ.

Again:

⁷ It is commonly said that justification is 'just as if I had never sinned'. Not so! It is just as if I had always fully obeyed God in his law, and pleased him absolutely! And it is more that 'just as if'. In Christ, I *am* completely free of condemnation, having been made, constituted, perfectly righteous – as righteous and pleasing to God as Christ himself. It is not (as it is often said to be) that God (merely) declares me to be righteous. In Christ, he makes me righteous, he constitutes me a righteous man. See my *Four*.

We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all... For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified (Heb. 10:10,14).⁸

Here we have it: by Christ's one offering,⁹ the believer is made or constituted 'permanently perfect'. This is far more than being pardoned.

In the passage where he deals most extensively with the subject of justification (Rom. 1:16-17; 3:21– 5:21), the apostle is clear that righteousness is imputed to the believer; he is not merely pardoned. And that righteousness is called 'the righteousness of God' (Rom. 3:22), it being intimately connected with the person and work of Christ, and received through faith:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith (Rom. 1:16-17).

⁸ This 'perfection' speaks of the believer's positional sanctification and the 'sanctification' speaks of his progressive sanctification. The complication arises because of the translators and their use of 'sanctification'. The believer, as he trusts in Christ is counted 'perfect', fully righteous, in God's sight. Sanctification is both positional and progressive. By 'progressive sanctification', I mean the believer's imperfect (in this life) outworking of the perfect positional-sanctification he has in Christ by virtue of his union with Christ at his conversion. The sinner, on coming to faith, is united to Christ, and is justified and positionally sanctified. Thus, in God's sight, in Christ he is accounted or made righteous, free of sin and condemnation, and perfectly separated unto God. See, for instance, 1 Cor. 1:2,30; 6:11; Eph. 5:25-27; Heb. 10:10-18; 13:12. In his Christian life, he has to work out his perfection in Christ, and he will be moved to do so by the Spirit under the direction of Scripture; this is his progressive sanctification or holiness of life. But this, alas, is imperfect. The believer will only be absolutely sanctified in the eternal state. See my *Fivefold*.

⁹ This, I grant, seems to clinch the case for the passive-obedience-only school. But if it were that simple, there would be no debate. Read on.

The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe... to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:21-22,26).

To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness (Rom. 4:5).

For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ... As by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous (Rom. 5:17,19).

And it is not only in Romans 1:16-17; 3:21 – 5:21 that we meet with such statements:

Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith (Rom. 9:30).

Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rom. 10:4).

Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30).

We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified... For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose (Gal. 2:16-21).

That I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that

which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith (Phil. 3:8-9).

Although none of these passages use the phrase, 'the righteousness of Christ', nevertheless that is precisely what they are referring to – the righteousness which is imputed to the sinner at the point of faith, the righteousness *of* God, a righteousness *from* God, this righteousness being intimately connected with Christ; in short, 'the righteousness of Christ'. Now this righteousness cannot possibly be Christ's intrinsic righteousness.¹⁰ If it is, why did Christ have to become a

¹⁰ Take 'the righteousness of God' in Rom. 1:16-17. On this, Luther movingly commented: 'I had been captivated with a remarkable ardour for understanding Paul in the epistle to the Romans. But up until then it was... but a single saying... "In it the righteousness of God is revealed" – that stood in my way. For I hated that word "righteousness of God", which... I had been taught to understand... the formal... justice... by which God is righteous and punishes sinners and the unrighteous. Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt I was a sinner before God with a most disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love – indeed, I hated – the righteous God who punishes sinners. Secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant. Finally, by the mercy of God, as I meditated day and night, I paid attention to the context of the words: "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written: 'He who through faith is righteous shall live'". Then I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous [man] lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. This, then, is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, *viz.* the... righteousness with which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: "The righteous one lives by faith". Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally [different] face of all Scripture showed itself to me. And whereas before "the righteousness of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway to heaven' (see: 'Preface to Latin Writings [1545]' in *Luther's Works* 34:336-37; WAusg 54.185-86).

man, live under the law and die on the cross? Then again, in his justification, the believing sinner is not so joined to Christ that he is 'Godified' or 'deified'; being a 'partaker of the divine nature' (see 2 Pet. 1:4) does not mean that!¹¹ Nevertheless, he is constituted righteous. Whatever else can this righteousness, the righteousness of Christ, be, therefore, but Christ's complete mediatorial obedience to his Father's will, including the law of Moses, culminating in his sacrifice on the cross, all of which was vindicated by his resurrection?

Christ, himself, is the believer's righteousness

I have already quoted the apostolic assertion: 'Christ Jesus... became to us... righteousness' (1 Cor. 1:30). In his prophecy, Jeremiah, the prophet who more than any predicted the glory of the new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34; Heb. 8:6-13), made it clear that, in the new covenant, Christ himself would be the believer's righteousness:

'Behold, the days are coming', declares the Lord, 'when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness"' (Jer. 23:5-6).

He repeated the point:

'Behold, the days are coming', declares the Lord, 'when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness"' (Jer. 33:14-16).

Christ *himself* is the believer's righteousness (Jer. 23:6; 33:16; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Pet. 1:1); that is, Christ and all his

¹¹ See also Heb. 3:14; 6:4.

work, his whole obedience, constitute the believer's righteousness. So much so, to crown it all, Christ himself is the new covenant (Isa. 42:6; 49:8).¹² Christ's obedience, Christ himself, throughout his life from his birth to his resurrection, culminating in his death, established this righteousness for his elect, which becomes theirs as they come to faith.

Take Philippians 3:8-11. Paul, speaking passionately of 'the righteousness which is from God by faith', explained his meaning: 'Righteousness... which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know him [Christ]'. That I may know *him!* That's it! This 'righteousness' that Paul needed and found could be summed up in a person: Christ! Christ himself!

And the same goes for every believer: Christ *himself* is the believer's righteousness. The believer is constituted righteous because he is united to Christ, because he is in Christ and Christ is in him. As a believer, Christ is formed in him, lives in him by the Spirit (John 14:23; 15:1-11; 17:23; Rom. 8:9-11; Gal. 2:20; 4:19; Eph. 3:17; Col. 1:27). The true believer must live as Jesus lived (see 1 John 2:6, NIV), and, by the Spirit, he is empowered to grow in Christ-likeness. 'As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me' (John 6:57). In how many ways Scripture highlights union with Christ! It is such an important concept. No wonder, then, that the phrase 'in Christ' appears so often in the sacred pages.

In short, the believer is righteous, righteous because he is in Christ and Christ is in him. Union with Christ, the believer's union with Christ in his life, death and resurrection, is the key (Rom. 6:1-14; Eph. 2:6).

We know that Christ came into the world expressly to do his Father's will (Heb. 10:5-10), and that included obedience to the will of God expressed in the Mosaic law. Christ, therefore, was born under the law (Gal. 4:4). As a

¹² For my view of this, see my *Believers*.

consequence, Christ, in his life, was fully obedient to the commands of the law, and, in his death, suffered its penalty, curse and condemnation. Throughout his life he was obedient to his Father, always pleasing him. As he himself said: 'I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me... I always do the things that are pleasing to him' (John 8:28-29). Always! Not just in his dying on the cross! 'I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father' (John 10:17-18). 'I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment – what to say and what to speak... What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me' (John 12:49-50). 'I do as the Father has commanded me' (John 14:31). In this way, both actively and passively, Christ established that righteousness which would justify the elect. God the Father demonstrated his total satisfaction – pleasure – in, by and with this completed work of his Son, and his full acceptance of it, by raising him from the dead, receiving him back in exaltation into glory, crowned in triumph (Ps. 24:7-10; Isa. 52:13; 53:12; Phil. 2:9-11; 1 Tim. 3:16). And all this belongs to the believer because he is 'in Christ'.

Before I develop all this, let me say that there is no question but that the weight of Scripture comes down heavily on Christ's blood-sacrifice as God's justifying act (Rom. 3:24-26; 5:6,8-10; 6:1-10; 7:6; 8:3; 2 Cor. 5:18-21; Gal. 3:13; Heb. 9:12-15,28; 10:1-14; 13:12; 1 Pet. 3:18; and scores of others). As Paul told us, this is at the heart of the Lord's supper: 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till he comes' (1 Cor. 11:26). Above all, we have the cardinal text: 'As one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men' (Rom. 5:18). That 'one act of righteousness' can only be Christ's sacrifice on the cross, the shedding of his blood. Scripture always lays massive emphasis on the death of

Christ, under the curse of the law, as the justifying righteousness which God accounts to the believer. And nothing I write here must, in the slightest way, be taken to indicate that I am in the least degree detracting from Christ's blood-sacrifice.

But this does not mean that Christ's life of obedience to the Father's will under the law of Moses had no place in establishing the believer's justifying righteousness. Just as we must not detract from his blood-sacrifice, so must we not detract from his law-life of obedience. After all, as I have shown, justification is more than forgiveness, more than pardon; it is God accounting righteousness to the one to be justified. There is a negative aspect to all this: the removal of sin, its guilt, condemnation and power. But there is also a positive aspect: the reckoning of righteousness.

The Mosaic law's regulations fully typified this – the offering of a sacrificial victim. The shedding of its blood typified the removal of sin. The victim had to be without blemish (Ex. 12:5; 29:1; and scores more). Christ, fulfilling the law in every aspect, was without blemish (1 Pet. 1:19). His obedience under the law fitted him to be the perfect sacrifice (Heb. 5:9).¹³

Even so, there is more to Christ's life of obedience than to fit him to be the sacrifice. It did of course, but as he told John the Baptist when urging him to baptise him: 'Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness' (Matt. 3:15). In his baptism, Christ was identified with us. And this is part of his sanctifying of himself for us (John 17:18-19).

¹³ And speaking of the sacrifices, in the first five chapters of Leviticus, we read of two types of offering under the old covenant: the sweet-savoured and the non-sweet. The latter typified the work of Christ in bearing both his people's guilt and God's wrath upon them for it; the former, his righteousness offered to justify them (Eph. 5:2). Thus, as in so many matters (sabbath, priesthood, sacrifice, temple, altar, feast, and so on), the old covenant was a shadow of the new.

And that was just the start of it. The Son of God became a man for the very purpose of living a life of obedience to the law, which obedience culminated in the offering of his body on the cross. And he underwent all this in order to establish the righteousness that would justify his people. True, the penalty of the law was death, but the way of righteousness under the law was: 'Do and live' (Lev. 18:5; Neh. 9:29; Ezek. 20:11,13,21; Rom. 10:5); as Moses declared to the Israelites: 'It will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to observe all these commandments before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us' (Deut. 6:25). '[God] will render to each one according to his works... It is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified' (Rom. 2:6,13). The law was 'the very commandment that promised life' (Rom. 7:10), 'the very commandment that was intended to bring life' (NIV), 'which was to result in life' (NASB). That is to say, if a man kept God's law perfectly, he would merit life – eternal life.¹⁴ In other words, the law had two things to say with regard to sin and righteousness: it issued both precept and penalty. On the one hand, it demanded perfect obedience and promised reward for it, while, on the other hand, it warned and exacted the ultimate penalty for one transgression. Hence, instead of saying that God demanded 'active' and 'passive' obedience to the law, we could speak in terms of 'preceptive' and 'penal' obedience. Christ suffered the penalty of disobedience (though he himself never sinned) (Isa. 53:1-10; Gal. 3:13), and obtained the reward for perfect obedience (Isa. 53:10-12; John 13:31-32; 17:1).

It was for this very reason, as I have said, that Christ was born under the law (Gal. 4:4). This means far more than that he was a Jew. He was, of course, but he was born under the law in order to come under its jurisdiction, and obey it and suffer under it so that he might redeem his people (Gal. 4:5). And this he did perfectly, without sin (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb.

¹⁴ Of course, because man is fallen in Adam, the law cannot justify; it is too weak for that (Rom. 8:3).

4:15; 7:26), thus earning salvation for his people – his entire obedience culminating in the offering of himself (or the Father's offering of his Son) as a perfect, spotless sacrifice on the cross. He became, therefore, the perfect Saviour for sinners for ever (Heb. 2:10,18; 5:9; 7:28). His entire existence as a man leading up to the cross is also a vital and integral part of this 'righteousness of Christ'. Hence:

Mary... will bring forth a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:20-21). God was manifested in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:16). The Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). Jesus Christ... was born of the seed of David according to the flesh (Rom. 1:3). You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9). When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law... (Gal. 4:4-5). Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, 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... (Phil. 2:5-8). Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared in the same [their humanity – NIV], that through death he might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage (Heb. 2:14-15). When he came into the world, he said: '...A body you have prepared for me... "Behold, I have come... to do your will, O God"...'... By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (Heb. 10:5-10).

When he was twelve, Jesus told his parents that he must be 'about [his] Father's business' (Luke 2:49). And, as we have seen, when he came to John to be baptised, he spoke of fulfilling 'all righteousness' (Matt. 3:15). While we must avoid speculation, we may surely say that, right from his baptism, the Lord Jesus was on that path of public obedience

which would lead him inexorably to the cross. And in the years following his baptism, right up to his crucifixion, how often he spoke of the will of his Father, of his doing that will, of his finishing the work his Father had given him to do (John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38; 9:4; 17:4), culminating in his triumphant cry on the cross: 'It is finished' (John 19:30). Truly, as a 'servant' (Isa. 42:1; 52:13; Matt. 20:28; Phil. 2:7), Christ always kept his vow to his Father (Ps. 40:6-8; Heb. 10:5-9). And God was pleased. So much so, in prophecy Christ could say:

He brought me out into a broad place; he rescued me, because he delighted in me. The Lord dealt with me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he rewarded me. For I have kept the ways of the Lord, and have not wickedly departed from my God. For all his rules were before me, and his statutes I did not put away from me. I was blameless before him, and I kept myself from my guilt. So the Lord has rewarded me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight (Ps. 18:19-24).

Consequently, although Scripture lays heavy stress on the death of Christ, the shedding of his blood in atoning sacrifice, as the justifying act, it also speaks of his obedience (Phil. 2:8; Heb. 5:8-9; 10:5-14,19-20). 'By one man's obedience many will be made [constituted] righteous' (Rom. 5:19). Without question, this obedience, as I said, culminated in his death (Matt. 26:39; John 10:18; Rom. 5:18-19; Phil. 2:8; Heb. 5:8; 10:10), for 'Christ... offered himself without spot' – 'without blemish' (NASB); 'unblemished' (NIV) – 'to God' (Heb. 9:14). Nevertheless, his life-obedience was essential to that work. When we are told that God sent 'his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin [and thus] he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us' (Rom. 8:3-4), we must not restrict this to Christ's work on the cross, but include his entire life of obedience.

Furthermore, we know that Christ is 'the last Adam' (1 Cor. 15:45). The first Adam failed to obey God, and

therefore died, bringing all men down with him by his one act of disobedience, his one sin, his one trespass (Rom. 5:16,18), resulting in a cataract of trespasses (Rom. 5:16), and the reign of death (Rom. 5:17). Christ, 'the last Adam', lived a life of perfect obedience to God his Father, and then offered that perfect life in his one and only sacrificial death to atone for the elect, thus uniting his active and passive obedience in order to present his people faultless before his Father, enabling them to reign in life (Rom. 5:17), even as kings (1 Pet. 2:4-10; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

Yes, the apostle does speak of Adam and Christ in terms of 'one act' – Adam's one act of disobedience and Christ's 'one act of righteousness' (Rom. 5:18). But there is a contrast which must not be missed. To ruin all and bring the threatened condemnation, one transgression was sufficient; to merit the promised reward, a lifetime of obedience was required. Just as: 'Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it' (Jas. 2:10), so to obtain the reward, Christ never once sinned throughout his entire life. One transgression would have ruined all. Consequently, his entire life had to be one of complete obedience.

And then, to crown it all, Christ's entire obedience of life unto death was completely vindicated by his resurrection:

Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, 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. Therefore God also has highly exalted him and given him the name which is above every name... (Phil. 2:5-9).

Now it is far too weak to say that Christ was raised from the dead simply to vindicate his work, or give proof of the justification he had accomplished on the cross, or to demonstrate that God was being fair to Christ in that since he had earned the pardon, so it was only right that he should be raised. The apostle used *dia*, 'for', 'on account of', in both

parts of the following sentence. Christ was delivered *dia* our offences, and was raised *dia* our justification:

Righteousness... shall be imputed to us who believe in him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of [for] our offences, and was raised because of [for] our justification (Rom. 4:22-25; see also Rom. 8:33-34; 1 Cor. 15:17; 2 Cor. 5:15).

The apostle clearly attributes the same weight and power to the resurrection as he does to the death of Christ as far as justification goes. Christ died for our sins, on account of our sins, to deal with our sins, in order to deliver us from our offences, and likewise he was raised for our justification, on account of our justification, in order to justify us. This passage, on its own, drives a coach and horses through the passive-obedience-only view.¹⁵

I spoke of the resurrection, and the part it plays in justification. How frequently the early preachers included the resurrection! See Acts 2:24,31-33; 3:15,26; 4:2,10,33; 5:30-31; 10:40; 13:30,33-37; 17:3,18,31-32; 23:6; 24:15,21. In addition, I quote the following from my *Particular Redemption and The Free Offer*:

Christ died *for* sinners and was raised again *for* those same sinners (Rom. 4:25 AV, NIV). *For* whom? Paul could tell believers: 'If Christ is not risen... you are still in your sins' (1 Cor. 15:17). 'But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ... and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus' (Eph. 2:4-6). Christ died *for* – and was raised *for* – the elect, 'for us'. Not only so. The elect died *with* – and were raised *with* – Christ. This takes us to the vital doctrine of union and identification with Christ in his death *and* burial *and* resurrection *and* ascension. The elect died with Christ when he died, *and* were buried with him when he was buried, *and* were raised

¹⁵ Union is the key, I remind you, and union with Christ involves union with him in his resurrection (Rom. 6:4-8).

with him when he was raised, *and* were taken into glory and seated with him (Rom. 6:2-11; 7:4-6; 2 Cor. 5:14-18; Gal. 2:19-20; Eph. 2:1,4-6; Col. 2:11-15,20; 3:1,3; 1 Pet. 2:24; see also John 14:19; Rom. 8:34; 1 Thess. 5:10; 1 Pet. 1:3). Christ 'was delivered up because of our offences, *and was raised for our justification*' (Rom. 4:25), the 'our' being, of course, the elect.¹⁶

Thus, Christ's *entire* work in his obedient life, culminating in his atoning sacrifice, leading to his vindication by the resurrection, all combined to weave that robe of righteousness which justifyingly clothes the believer in the sight of God (Isa. 61:10; Zech. 3:4). Moreover, as the apostle declared – and note the double 'much more' – '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' (Rom. 5:9-10); that is, in his resurrected life.¹⁷

Consider: 'Christ also has loved us and given himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma' (Eph. 5:2). Without doubt, the apostle is referring to the sacrificial death of Christ at Calvary. Now look at the context – both immediate and extended (Eph. 4:17 – 6:24). Once again, there is no question; the context is progressive sanctification. Let me quote the verse *in full*: 'And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma'. 'Walk' is a word of progressive sanctification, practical godliness. The apostle is commanding believers to live a life of love, not only *because* Christ loved them and gave himself for them, but *as – even as, just as* – he loved them and gave himself for them. Believers must live as Christ

¹⁶ My *Particular* pp28-29.

¹⁷ Please note that I do not, as many, warp this to argue that this 'life' speaks of Christ's life before the cross, thereby forcing the text to support my thesis. Even so, it does show that Scripture can speak of Christ's work and life, other than on the cross, as contributing to our salvation.

lived before his death. In light of the point I am making, this tells me that Christ's obedience, while it was supremely his sacrificial *death*, also included his peerless *life*. In other words, 'the righteousness of Christ', which is accounted to the believer for justification, embraces Christ's entire obedience – both in life and death, both active and passive. Indeed, as I have observed, it is impossible to divide Christ's obedience in this way; it is all of a piece.¹⁸

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the note at the end of the previous paragraph, it is my conviction that Christ's lifetime obedience to his Father's will, including his obedience under the Mosaic law, culminating in his sacrificial death, all under the law, constitutes the justifying righteousness for believers – 'the righteousness of Christ'. And this is what is imputed to the believer.

Imputed righteousness

And when the sinner believes – trusts Christ – he receives this perfect righteousness of Christ. It is imputed to him. It is reckoned to him. It is credited to his account. He receives it at once. Upon his believing, he is absolutely justified. This righteousness, being Christ's perfect and unchangeable and unchanging righteousness, never wanes, never alters. It is fixed, absolute, complete, and knows no variation. The perfect righteousness of Christ clothes the believing sinner, and the believing sinner, therefore, is for ever, from the

¹⁸ While I am, myself, firmly convinced that 'the faith *of* Christ' (Rom. 3:22,26; Gal. 2:16, twice; 3:22; Eph. 3:12; Phil. 3:9; all in the Greek) should be thought of as 'faith *in* Christ' (as NKJV, NIV, NASB – but see NASB margin in Rom. 3:26; Eph. 3:12), and not 'the faith *of* Christ' (AV – except Rom. 3:26), I realise that the point has been debated for centuries, and is still fervently contested today, not least in the debate over the New Perspective. If the 'of' is right – and, as I say, I am not persuaded it is; in fact, I am convinced that it is not – then perhaps 'the faith of Christ' could be thought of as 'the faithfulness of Christ'. As such, it would lend even more weight to the claim for justification by Christ's obedience in life, as well as his obedience in death.

instant he is justified, perfect beyond all condemnation in the sight of God. God sees no sin in him at all. I am not for a moment suggesting that the believer is sinless. I am not talking about progressive sanctification! No! I am concerned here with justification. I am not talking about the sinner's lifestyle, but his standing before God.¹⁹ As the sinner believes, he is at once and for ever free of condemnation, whoever might accuse him, and whatever offence they might accuse him of (Rom. 8:1,33-34). *Christ* is his righteousness!

Thus the gospel can truly be said to 'establish the law' (Rom. 3:31). All the law's commands were fully met by Christ. All the law's penalties were fully paid by Christ. All the Father's will was accomplished (John 19:30) by Christ who fulfilled the prophet's words: 'The LORD is well pleased for his righteousness' sake; he will exalt the law and make it honourable' (Isa. 42:21).

And this is what I understand by 'the righteousness of Christ', and the imputation of that righteousness to the sinner as he believes.

Finally, to make the point yet again

First:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, *in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us*, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:1-4).

¹⁹ I am not saying, I hasten to add, that there is no connection between the two. Progressive sanctification is an inevitable consequence of justification. See Eph. 2:8-10, for example. See also Col. 1:22-23. No progressive sanctification? No justification! See Heb. 12:14; Jas. 2:14-26.

By Christ's work, 'the righteous requirement of the law' is 'fulfilled in us'; that is, in believers. 'Fulfilled', and 'fulfilled in us'! Clearly, this is something which God in Christ has done *for* and *in* believers, not something to be done *by* believers trying to keep the law. Paul here *describes* believers; he does not tell them to fulfil the law, spelling out their duty. God, by his Son, Christ Jesus, accomplished the fulfilment of the righteous requirement of the law, and it is this perfect obedience of Christ, his righteousness, which is imputed and imparted to believers. Thus Christ fulfilled the law, and believers have fulfilled it in him. Christ's work imputed to them by the Spirit accomplishes their justification. Christ's work being imparted to them by the Spirit accomplishes their progressive sanctification. And it is this sanctification which is the evidence and fruit of the fulfilment of the righteous requirement of the law in believers in and by Christ.

Note how Paul does not say the law is now 'obeyed' or 'kept' or 'done' by believers – the usual way of talking about keeping the law – but he says that what the law requires is now 'fulfilled' in believers. Note the passive. Note the word itself: 'fulfilled'! – a word of immense significance in New Testament terms. As we have seen, Christ set the tone right at the start: 'Do not think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfil. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled' (Matt. 5:17-18). As Paul said in Galatians 5:13-18, the indwelling Spirit ensures the 'fulfilment' of the law, its goal, end or aim in the believer – which is, to bring about righteousness. The law, though holy, righteous and good (Rom. 7:12), being weak, could not bring about the righteousness that God required. It is the Spirit who has been given to believers in order to effect, to 'fulfil', the law in them, and so establish that righteousness which the law demanded but was unable to produce. The point is, 'the righteousness requirement' of the law demands positive obedience and not (mere) passive suffering. God 'passed

over' the sins of Israel in the Passover, he did not visit them in wrath (Ex. 12:1-28). But the death of the sacrificial lamb did not make the Israelites positively righteous in God's sight. Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us (1 Cor. 5:7), and so, while we have been redeemed by his precious blood (1 Pet. 1:19), our sins have been expiated, yet this still leaves the need for the imputation of positive righteousness. And we know what the law demanded; we have the scriptural mantra regarding the law: 'Do and live; fail to do and die':

You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the Lord your God. You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the Lord (Lev. 18:4-5).

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put [Jesus] to the test, saying: 'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him: 'What is written in the law? How do you read it?' And he answered: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself'. And he said to him: 'You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live' (Luke 10:25-28).

When [a man] has done what is just and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live. The soul who sins shall die... If a wicked person turns away from all his sins that he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is just and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions that he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness that he has done he shall live (Ezek. 18:19-22).

[God] will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first

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and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality... It is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified (Rom. 2:6-11,13).

Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them (Rom. 10:5).

All who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written: 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them'. Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for: 'The righteous shall live by faith'. But the law is not of faith, rather: 'The one who does them shall live by them' (Gal. 3:10-12).

And then this:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:17-20).

And then:

Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rom. 10:4).

Jesus was unique in that he is the only man that has ever lived in order to fulfil the will of God, and that will surely included the keeping and fulfilling of the law. Christ came into the world in order to fulfil it, as he said (Heb. 10:5-9), and he is the only man ever to come with that purpose, and to do it. Since we ourselves can never produce any better righteousness than that of the Pharisees, the only way that our righteousness can exceed theirs is if the righteousness of Jesus is imputed to us. Moreover, Matthew 5:17-20 speaks

of far more than *suffering*, even unto *death*, under the law. Indeed, there is no suggestion whatsoever here of any connection between the Pharisees and death. It is all a question of *obedience in life*. Clearly, Christ was talking of positive obedience to the law.

In short, for justification the sinner has to have a righteousness which matched 'do and live', or else he would die. Christ did both the doing and the dying. It seems to me that the passive-obedience-only school captures the sense of the dying and the pardon, but the full biblical position is only reached if we include Christ's active obedience. We then get both the doing and the dying.

Conclusion

Whether, in this article, I have convinced anyone that we should think of both the active and passive obedience of Christ when speaking of justifying righteousness, such is my case. Nevertheless, as I have said, I am open to correction, and I welcome constructive criticism. I also respectfully ask those who still hold the passive-only-obedience position to face a few questions:

1. Is justification pardon or does it include positive righteousness?
2. If the answer to that question is the latter, then what, *precisely*, is this positive righteousness which is imputed to the believer?
3. Have you taken *full* account of both the *parallel* and the *contrast* involved in Paul's comparison of Adam and Christ?
4. Why, on your scheme, did Jesus have to become a Jew, to be made under the law?
5. Have you taken *full* account of Romans 4:25?
6. In light of that question, do you regard the life of Christ merely a preparation for the cross, and his resurrection

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merely a vindication of the cross? Or does Christ's life and justification play a bigger role in the believer's justification than you allow?