

“[T]he Reformers held and taught, that we were justified ‘only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us,’ or put down to our account; and they based their doctrine on such considerations as these, — that a righteousness of some kind is indispensable, if God is to accept us as righteous, — that it must be such a righteousness as is adequate to meet and satisfy all the requirements of that perfect Law, which is God's rule in judgment, — that its requirements, both penal and preceptive, were fulfilled by the obedience, passive and active, of the Lord Jesus Christ,<sup>1</sup> — that He thus became ‘the end of the Law for righteousness to every one that believeth in His name.’” James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification*, pp. 131-132

**I. ACCORDING TO SHEPHERD, SINCE JUSTIFICATION INCLUDES ONLY THE REMISSION OF SINS, ONLY THE PASSIVE OBEDIENCE OF CHRIST AT CALVARY (NOT HIS ENTIRE LIFE OF ACTIVE OBEDIENCE) IS IMPUTED IN JUSTIFICATION.**

- “Justification is the remission of sin on the ground of the righteousness of Christ imputed to the believer. This righteousness was his suffering and death for us, what later theologians called his passive obedience. The righteousness of Christ secures the remission of sin.” (BOTB, 111)
- “Now how did Christ perform this legal righteousness for us? Did he do it by fulfilling the law during the whole course of his life (what theologians ordinarily refer to as his *active obedience*)? Or did he do it by submitting to punishment prescribed in the law for transgressions of the law (what theologians ordinarily refer to as *passive obedience*)?... The righteousness Christ wrought out for us was not the fulfillment of the demands of the law during the whole course of his life but rather his death and resurrection to pay the penalty for sin. In other words, the righteousness of Christ imputed to us for our justification is not his active obedience, but his passive obedience.” (BOTB, 105)

**II. ACCORDING TO SHEPHERD, THE HISTORIC REFORMED, CONFSSIONAL VIEW OF JUSTIFICATION LIMITS JUSTIFICATION TO THE REMISSION OF SIN, AND DOES NOT ASSERT THE IMPUTATION OF CHRIST'S ACTIVE OBEDIENCE TO BELIEVERS.**

- “We do not find a belief in the imputation of active obedience in Calvin, Ursinus, or the Heidelberg Catechism for the reason that their understanding of justification as the remission of sins did not require it and they did not find it in the Bible... Early Reformed theology had no doctrine of the imputation of active obedience... Even the Westminster Confession as late as 1647 was written as a compromise document to accommodate the views of three prominent members of the Westminster Assembly... who did not subscribe to the imputation of active obedience.” (BOTB, 115)<sup>2</sup>

**TESTIMONY OF JOHN CALVIN**

**CALVIN:** “Thus stripped of our own righteousness, we are clad with Christ's righteousness; unrighteous in our own works, we are justified by faith in Christ.” (Calvin's First Catechism, Sect. 16)

- “From this we infer that we must seek from Christ what the law would give if anyone could fulfill it; or, what is the same thing, that we obtain through Christ's grace what God promised in the law for our works: “He who will do these things, will live in them”... For if righteousness consists in the observance of the law, who will deny that Christ merited favor for us when, by taking that burden upon himself, he reconciled us to God as if we had kept the law? ... What was the purpose of this subjection of Christ to the law but to acquire righteousness for us, undertaking to pay what we could not pay? Hence, that imputation of righteousness without works which Paul discusses.” (Institutes, 2.17.5; Cf. *Comm. on Rom. 2:13; 10:5-6*)

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Col. 2:14; Matt. 3:5; Rm. 5:19; 2 Co. 5:21; Php. 2:7-8 [Lk. 22:42; Jn. 10:18] — “*The LORD Our Righteousness*” (Jer. 23:6)

<sup>2</sup> William Cunningham (Hist. Theo., Vol. 2, pp. 14-15): “It may be proper, however, before leaving this topic, to advert to a misrepresentation that has been often given of the views of the Reformers, and especially of Calvin, upon [justification]. When Protestant divines began, in the seventeenth century, to corrupt the scriptural doctrine of justification, and to deviate from the doctrinal orthodoxy of the Reformation, they thought it of importance to show that justification meant merely the remission or forgiveness of sin, or guilt, to the exclusion of, or without comprehending, what is usually called the acceptance of men's person, or their positive admission into God's favor, — or their receiving from God, not only the pardon of their sins, or immunity from punishment, but also a right or title into heaven and eternal life. And in support of this view, these men appealed to the authority of the Reformers, and especially of Calvin. Now it is quite true, that Calvin has asserted again and again that justification comprehends only, or consists in, the remission or forgiveness of sin or guilt. But I have no doubt that a careful and deliberate examination of all that Calvin has written upon this point, will fully establish these two positions, — first, that when Calvin asserted that justification consisted only in the remission of sin, he meant this simply as a denial of the Popish doctrine, that it is not only the remission of sin, but also the sanctification or renovation of the inner man, — this being the main and, indeed, the only error upon the point which he was called upon formally to oppose; and secondly, that Calvin has at least as frequently and as explicitly described justification as comprehending, not only remission of sin in the strict and literal sense, but also positive acceptance or admission into the enjoyment of God's favor, — ‘*gratuita Dei acceptio*,’ as he often calls it, — including the whole of the change effected upon men's state or legal condition in God's sight, as he distinguished from the change effected upon their character. This is one of the numerous instances, constantly occurring, that illustrate how unfair it is to adduce the authority of eminent writers on disputed questions which had never really been presented to them, — which they had never entertained or decided; and how necessary it often is, in order to forming a correct estimate of some particular statements of an author, to examine with care and deliberation all that he has written upon the subject to which they refer, and also to be intelligently acquainted with the way and manner in which the whole subject was discussed on both sides.”

- “Now, someone asks, How has Christ abolished sin, banished the separation between us and God, and acquired righteousness to render God favorable and kindly toward us? To this we can in general reply that he has achieved this for us by the whole course of his obedience. This is proved by Paul’s testimony: ‘As by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience we are made righteous’ [Rom. 5:19]. In another passage, to be sure, Paul extends the basis of the pardon that frees us from the curse of the law to the whole life of Christ; ‘But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, subject to the law, to redeem those who were under the law’ [Gal. 4:4-5]. Thus in his very baptism, also, he asserted that he fulfilled a part of righteousness in obediently carrying out his Father’s commandment [Matt. 3:15]. In short, from the time when he took on the form of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation in order to redeem us.” (Institutes, 2.16.5)

### TESTIMONY OF ZACHARIAS URSINUS

**URSINUS:** HC Q. 60. “How are thou righteous before God? A. Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ; so that, though my conscience accuse me that I have grossly transgressed all the commands of God, and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil; notwithstanding God, without any merit of mine, but only of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ; even so, as if I never had had, nor committed any sin; yea, as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ hath accomplished for me; inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart.” (CHC, 324)

- “*Created righteousness* is legal and evangelical. By *legal righteousness* we mean the fulfilling of the law by one, who is thereby declared righteous; or it is such a fulfilling of the law as that which is accomplished by one’s own obedience; or it is a conformity to the law which he has who is declared righteous. The legal righteousness was the righteousness of Adam before the fall, and is in the angels, and in Christ as far as he is man. Evangelical righteousness is the fulfilling of the law, performed, not by us, but by another in our stead, and imputed unto us of God by faith. *Legal righteousness* is performed, either by obedience to the law, or by punishment. The law requires one or the other.” (CHC, 325)<sup>3</sup>
- “[Christ] satisfied the law in a two-fold respect. First by his own righteousness; and secondly, by making satisfaction for our sins, each of which is most perfect.” (CHC, 215)
- “We can never satisfy the law, neither by punishment nor obedience... although we are not able to make satisfaction through obedience, we are, nevertheless, able to make it through the endurance of a sufficient punishment, not in ourselves, but in Christ, who has satisfied the law both by obedience and punishment.” (CHC, 83)
- “The man Christ was perfectly righteous, or has fulfilled the law in four respects. 1. By his own righteousness. Christ alone performed perfect obedience, such as the law requires. 2. By enduring punishment sufficient for our sins. There was a necessity that this double fulfillment of the law should be in Christ: for unless his righteousness had been full, and perfect, he could not have satisfied for the sins of others; and unless he had endured such punishment as has been described, he could not thereby have delivered us from everlasting punishment. The former is called the fulfilling of the law by obedience, by which he himself was conformable thereunto; the latter is the fulfilling of the law by punishment, which he suffered for us, that we might not remain subject to eternal condemnation.” (CHC, 86-87)
- “Christ fulfilled the law in two respects: by obedience and suffering. He was just and holy in himself and did not violate the law in a single instance, but partly performed in our behalf those things which he was not bound to do, and partly sustained the punishment of the law.” (CHC, 617-618)<sup>4</sup>

### TESTIMONY OF REFORMED CONFESSIONS & CATECHISMS

**FRENCH CONFESSION (1551):** “We believe that all our justification rests upon the remission of our sins, in which also is our only blessedness, as saith the Psalmist [Ps. 32:2]. We therefore reject all other means of justification before God, and without claiming any virtue or merit, we rest simply in the obedience of Jesus Christ, which is imputed to us as much to blot out all our sins as to make us find grace and favor in the sight of God.” (Art. 18)

**BELGIC CONFESSION (1561):** “However, to speak more clearly, we do not mean that faith itself justifies us, for it is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our Righteousness. But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all his merits, and so many holy works, which he hath done for us and in our stead, is our Righteousness.” (Art. 22) Cf. *Canons of Dort (1619), Head 2, Rejection 4*

<sup>3</sup> *Shepherd (BOTB, 104):* “What does this mean? What is justification and what is the ‘satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness’ that is imputed to us? To answer these questions, we will look first at the Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on Lord’s Day 23... Ursinus makes a distinction between legal righteousness and evangelical righteousness (p. 325), and calls legal righteousness the fulfillment of the law by one who is thereby declared righteous. Then he says, ‘Legal righteousness is performed, either by obedience to the law, or by punishment. The law requires one or the other.’ It is important to notice the disjunction. The law requires either obedience to its requirements or punishment for disobedience, but not both.”

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *CHC (pp. 104-105):* “The law promises life to those who are righteous in themselves, or on the condition of righteousness, and perfect obedience. ‘He that doeth them, shall live in them.’ ‘If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments’ (Lev. 18:5. Matt. 19:17). The gospel, on the other hand, promises life to those who are justified by faith in Christ, or on the condition of the righteousness of Christ, applied unto us by faith. The law and gospel are, however, not opposed to each other in these respects: for although the law requires us to keep the commandments if we would enter into life, yet it does not exclude us from life if another perform these things for us. It does indeed propose a way of satisfaction, which is through ourselves, but it does not forbid the other, as has been shown.”

**SECOND HELVETIC CONFESSION (1566):** “We teach that this law was not given to men, that we should be justified by keeping it; but that, by the knowledge thereof, we might rather acknowledge our infirmity, sin, and condemnation; and so, despairing of our strength, might turn unto Christ by faith... Therefore Christ is the perfecting of the law, and our fulfilling of it; who, as He took away the curse of the law, when He was made a curse for us (Gal. 3:13), so does He communicate unto us by faith His fulfilling thereof, and His righteousness and obedience are imputed to us.” (15.3)

**THIRTY-NINE ARTICLES OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND (1571):** “We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by Faith, and not for our own works or deservings. Wherefore, that we are justified by Faith only, is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort, as more largely is expressed in the Homily of Justification.” (Art. 11)<sup>5</sup>

**IRISH ARTICLES OF RELIGION (1615):** “...it pleased our heavenly Father of his infinite mercy, without any desert of ours, to provide for us the most precious merits of his own Son, whereby our ransom might be fully paid, the law fulfilled, and his justice fully satisfied. So that Christ is now the righteousness of all them that truly believe in him. He, for them, paid their ransom by his death. He, for them, fulfilled the law in his life; that now, in him, and by him, every true Christian man may be called a fulfiller of the law: forasmuch as that which our infirmity was not able to effect, Christ's justice hath performed.” (Art. 35; Cf. Art. 34)

**WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH<sup>6</sup> (1647):** “God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which He bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience; promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it: and endued him with power and ability to keep it.” (WCF 19.1; Cf. 19.6)

- “The Lord Jesus, by His perfect obedience, and sacrifice of Himself, which He, through the eternal Spirit, once offered up unto God, hath fully satisfied the justice of His Father; and purchased, not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for all those whom the Father hath given unto Him.” (WCF 8.5)

**WESTMINSTER LARGER CATECHISM (1648):** “Justification is an act of God's free grace unto sinners, in which he pardoneth all their sins, accepteth and accounteth their persons righteous in his sight; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone.” (WLC 70)

- “Although Christ, by his obedience and death, did make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to God's justice in the behalf of them that are justified; yet in as much as God accepteth the satisfaction from a surety, which he might have demanded of them, and did provide this surety, his own only Son, imputing his righteousness to them...” (WLC 71)

- “Christ maketh intercession, by his appearing in our nature continually before the Father in heaven, in the merit of his obedience and sacrifice on earth, declaring his will to have it applied to all believers; answering all accusations against them, and procuring for them quiet of conscience, notwithstanding daily failings, access with boldness to the throne of grace, and acceptance of their persons and services.” (WLC 55)<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> *The Third Homily ~ Of Justification (T. Cranmer):* “Christ is now the righteousness of all them that truly do believe in him. He for them paid their ransom by his death. He for them fulfilled the law in his life. So that now in him, and by him, every true Christian man may be called a fulfilled of the law; forasmuch as that which their infirmity lacked, Christ's justice hath supplied.”

<sup>6</sup> *OPC Report on Justification (2006):* “[Shepherd's] assertion that the Westminster Assembly “accommodated the views” of those who “did not subscribe to the imputation of active obedience” is an unsurprising claim, based particularly on earlier works. William Barker, for instance, has argued that certain “figures... succeeded in getting the term ‘whole obedience’ removed from the phrase ‘imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them’ in Chapter 11 of the Westminster Confession,” all sides agreeing that “whole obedience” in that context meant both the active and passive obedience of Christ. Barker's account, however, conflates two entirely separate events. The debate over “whole obedience” in 1643 was decided in favor of adding “whole obedience” as part of a revision of article 11 (on justification) in the Thirty-Nine Articles. The debate over chapter 11 of the WCF took place three years later, perhaps without some of the earlier disputants, and apparently did not revisit all the earlier debates about active obedience.”

<sup>7</sup> Cf. WLC 20, 31, 38-39, 48, 52, 72-73, 93-95, 97, 99, 194.