

# The Obedience of Jesus Christ

## **A Defence of the doctrine of Christ's Active Obedience**

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As an examiner for colleges participating in the Australian College of Theology I set a question asking students to explain the importance of the distinction between the active and passive obedience of Christ. To my surprise of the eighty or so students who sat the exam only one tried to answer the question, and he or she had misunderstood it completely. Why would this be the case among students whose colleges for the larger part proclaim to teach the Reformed faith? Is this distinction not a part of the Protestant understanding of the doctrine of justification, shared by Reformed and Lutherans alike? Moreover, is it not a key doctrine of the distinctive Reformed understanding of the divine covenants?

Intrigued by the lack of interest shown by the examinees I set out to familiarise myself further with the doctrine of the obedience of Christ, with the aim to share my findings with the readers of *Vox Reformata*. During these studies I was also asked to write a report commenting on a recent church statement on the atonement. This report represents the efforts of the new Uniting Churches in the Netherlands, and seeks to find some common understanding in a context where the traditional Reformed doctrine of the atonement has come under heavy attack. What struck me was that the statement completely ignored the fall of Adam. Perhaps this should not have surprised me, since the historicity of Adam was an earlier casualty in the church's strife to make its teachings palatable to all. But it convinced me all the more that the doctrine of the atonement can only be understood against the background of man's fall into sin.

### *Statement of the doctrine.*

The following definition of the doctrine comes from the Evangelical Dictionary of Theology:

Evangelical theologians ... have rightly discerned that both Christ's own right to minister as God's Messiah-Saviour and the salvation of those he came to save directly depend on his personal, perfect and perpetual obedience to God's holy law. To make this clear, theologians customarily distinguish between the passive

and active obedience of Christ. These are not at all satisfactory terms inasmuch that nothing that Christ performed did he do passively, that is, resignedly, without full desire and willingness on his part. Much better are the terms “preceptive” and “penal,” which are becoming increasingly preferred respectively to “active” and “passive.” By preceptive obedience is meant Christ’s full obedience to all the positive prescriptions of the law; by penal obedience is intended his willing, obedient bearing of all the sanctions imposed by the law that had accrued against his people because of their transgressions. By the former – i.e., his preceptive obedience – he made available a righteousness before the law that is imputed or reckoned to those who trust in him. By the latter – i.e., his penal obedience – he took upon himself by legal imputation the penalty due to his people for their sin. His preceptive and penal obedience, then, is the ground of God’s justification of sinners, by which divine act they are pardoned (because their sins have been charged to Christ, who obediently bears the laws sanctions against sin) and accepted as righteous in God’s sight (because Christ’s preceptive obedience is imputed to them).<sup>1</sup>

Theology has an abundance of terms that can be improved upon (think of the term *divine attributes*, as if men can attribute God’s qualities to him), but which have the weight of history and common usage.<sup>2</sup> We will not follow Reymond’s alternative terminology, therefore. However, we must point out that the claim that this doctrine represents the position of “evangelical theologians” is not altogether correct. Those evangelicals who have a more Arminian, Baptist or Methodist background either ignore the doctrine (e.g. Millard Erickson<sup>3</sup>) or attack it (e.g. Daniel Fuller<sup>4</sup>). Even among those who represent the Reformed heritage the doctrine is sometimes ignored, discarded or attacked. We will examine

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<sup>1</sup> R.L. Reymond, “Obedience of Christ”, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), p. 850.

<sup>2</sup> Here we should note that Thomas Watson uses the term “active obedience” for Christians doing what God commands, and “passive obedience” for the Christian’s willingness to submit to whatever God may inflict. See his *Body of Practical Divinity*, sermon on the third petition in the Lord’s Prayer.

<sup>3</sup> See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> See Daniel P. Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), pp. 181-2. Fuller argues that in Scripture obedience is “never an obedience of works.”

the opposition to the doctrine below, but first we will look at the development of the doctrine, and its place in Reformed theology. Then, after examining the objections raised to the doctrine we will look at the Scriptural data on the meaning and significance of the obedience of Christ.

### *Antecedents to the doctrine.*

The distinction between the active and passive obedience of Christ does not seem to have a history beyond the time of the Reformation. Caught up in debates surrounding the person of Christ and the nature of the Trinity the early church paid minimal attention to the doctrine of the atonement. While recognising that salvation came only through Christ, some of the church fathers nevertheless made statements that later Pelagius could readily appeal to in support of his teaching on salvation by works. Typical is a statement like: “Therefore brethren, by doing the will of the Father, and keeping the flesh holy, and observing the commandments of the Lord, we will obtain eternal life.”<sup>1</sup>

Such early works as the *Didache* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* suggested that Christ’s work only covered sins committed before conversion and baptism. Sins committed subsequent to this needed to be confessed and atoned for by the Christian himself, by way of fasting, alms, martyrdom, or other acts of merit.<sup>2</sup> The *Shepherd of Hermas*, Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian all add that there is only one repentance granted for each kind of serious (mortal) sin after the original remission of sins at baptism.<sup>3</sup>

Origen’s position that humans are pre-existent spirits incarnated for purification also implies salvation by works, as do some of his more explicit statements. Speaking about the need for discipline in society Origen writes that Christ “was made obedient unto death that he might teach obedience to those who could not otherwise than by obedience

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<sup>1</sup> Second Clement, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, p. 519. There is some controversy as to whether this second Clement lived in the second century or at a later time.

<sup>2</sup> The word merit was introduced into Latin theology by Tertullian, who used it to translate the Greek μερίς (*share* or *portion*), but filled it with the full meaning the word derives from Latin law, as a reward for work done.

<sup>3</sup> Hermas, *Commandments*, IV, 3; Clement, *Stromata or Miscellanies* II, 13; Tertullian *Heresies* 6; as given in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vols. 1, 2&3

obtain salvation.”<sup>1</sup> However, in the end for Origen, too, it is not just the believer’s own obedience that saves him, but his being joined to Christ, whose obedience extends beyond his work on the cross to include making the world subject to the Father:

... He became obedient to the Father, not only to the death of the cross, but also, in the end of the world, embracing in himself all whom he subjects to the Father, and who by him come to salvation, He Himself, along with them, and in them, is said also to be subject to the Father; all things subsisting in him, and He Himself being the Head of all things, and in him being the salvation and the fullness of those who attain salvation.<sup>2</sup>

If this statement distinguishes between a passive (“death on the cross”) and a further (“but also ...”) obedience of Christ then it must be pointed out that this further obedience, spoken of as subjection to the Father, cannot be identified with what is normally understood by Christ’s active obedience, because it extends beyond his state of humiliation to include the rest of the world’s history.

A more accurate presentation of the doctrine of salvation comes from the late second century Letter to Diognetus (author unknown). It appears to point out the significance of both the active and passive obedience of Christ when it states:

He [God] himself gave up his own Son as a ransom for us – the holy one for the unjust, the innocent for the guilty, the righteous one for the unrighteous, the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal. For what else could cover our sins except his righteousness? In whom could we, lawless and impious as we were, be made righteous except in the Son of God alone? O sweetest exchange! O unfathomable work of God! O blessings beyond all expectation! The sinfulness of many is hidden in the Righteous One, while the righteousness of the One justifies the many that are sinners.<sup>3</sup>

Correctly the editor comments, “The whole argument of Rom., chs. 5 to 8. with its exposition of our new life in Christ who died in obedience to the Father, underlies this passage. The development of the theme in

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<sup>1</sup> Origin, *De Principiis*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, p. 343.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> “Letter to Diognetus,” ed. Cyril C. Richardson, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, ed. J. Baillie *et al.* (London: SCM Press, 1953), vol 1, pp. 220-1.

Diognetus shows how realistically the author interpreted the Pauline doctrine of justification.”<sup>1</sup>

Sadly the Church did not follow Diognetus in attributing our salvation to “the Son of God alone.” Among those who came after him there were an increasing number who began to look at other, mere human beings, to supplement the work of Christ. We find this trend in Irenaeus, who spoke of salvation in terms of a work of “recapitulation” achieved by both Christ and the Virgin Mary together. He clearly recognises the need for both a passive and active obedience, but he attributes the passive obedience to Christ, and the active obedience to the Virgin Mary:

... [Christ] by his obedience on the tree renewed [and reversed] what was done by disobedience in [connection with] a tree; and [the power of] that seduction by which the virgin Eve, already betrothed to a man, had been wickedly seduced was broken when the angel in truth brought good tidings to the Virgin Mary, who already [by her betrothal] belonged to a man. For as Eve was seduced by the word of an angel to flee from God, having rebelled against his Word, so Mary by the word of an angel received the glad tidings that she would bear God by obeying the Word. The former was seduced to disobey God [and so fell], but the latter was persuaded to obey God, so that the Virgin Mary might become the advocate of the virgin Eve. As the human race was subjected to death through [the act of] a virgin, so it was saved by a virgin, and thus the disobedience of one virgin was precisely balanced by the obedience of another. Then indeed the sin of the first-formed man was amended by chastisement of the First-begotten, the wisdom of the serpent was amended by the simplicity of a dove, and the chains were broken by which we were in bondage to death.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of Mary as the antitype of Eve continued to gain in popularity, but the idea that Mary contributed to the salvation of man was not really accepted as a part of church doctrine until some six centuries later. At first Mary was seen mainly as the divinely appointed intercessor through whom the Christian gained access to the Son. But at the Synod of Constantinople in 754, despite opposition from the emperor

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<sup>1</sup> Cyril C. Richardson (ed.), *op. cit.*, footnote 16.

<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, *loc cit.*, pp. 398,399. Note that the translator used the phrase “renewed and reversed” (underlined) to render the Latin *recapitulare*.

Constantine V, the western church followed the East in accepting Mary as “the mediatrix of law and grace.”<sup>1</sup>

The years that followed saw a growing interest in Mary and the saints. The first official canonisation had taken place in 993 A.D., and it had become commonplace for Christians to address the saints and Mary in prayer, next to God and Christ.<sup>2</sup> It was believed that Mary had merited this right of intercession by her perfect obedience, and people prayed to Mary to intercede for them “through the prerogative that thou hast merited.”<sup>3</sup> But more and more the idea developed that the merits of Mary and the saints did not just give them the right to intercession, but the right to contribute to salvation by giving their merit to others. By the fifteenth century we find churchmen like Thomas á Kempis praying to Mary as “the expiator of all the sins I have committed.”<sup>4</sup>

According to Adolph Harnack, one theologian who contributed to this development was Anselm of Canterbury. His satisfaction theory of the atonement presented Christ’s suffering’s on man’s behalf as superabundant in satisfying the honour of God. This superabundance of satisfaction came to be regarded as a part of a store of merit available to the church for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>5</sup> The saints were similarly thought to have a superabundance of merit through works of “supererogation,” works that went beyond what they needed for their own salvation. In the centuries that followed this store was regarded as available to the Pope, as the keeper of the key, for the granting of forgiveness from sin. Indeed Pope Leo X based the granting of indulgencies on this “treasury of merits” representing “the superabundance of the merits of Christ and the saints.”<sup>6</sup>

Robert Franks suggests that the doctrine of Christ’s active and passive obedience has its roots in Catholic scholasticism, which taught that Christians gained merit from voluntary good works. This merit was variously pictured as a debt owed by God (Anselm of Canterbury), as a

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<sup>1</sup> See Jaroslav Pelikan, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, pp. 105, 111, vol. 3, p. 165f.

<sup>2</sup> See Pelikan, *op. cit.*, vol 2, pp. 111, 177.

<sup>3</sup> From a prayer of Peter Damien (11<sup>th</sup> century), see Pelikan, *op. cit.*, vol 3, p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas á Kempis, “Prayers and Meditations on the Life of Christ”, cited in Pelikan, *op. cit.*, vol. 4, p. 40.

<sup>5</sup> Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma* trans. N. Buchanan (New York: Dover Publications, 1961), vol. VI, pp. 192ff.

<sup>6</sup> See Pelikan, *op. cit.*, vol 4, p. 135.

Christian inheritance (Duns Scotus), or as a gift of God's good pleasure (Thomas Aquinas). Franks argues that Protestants, who looked only to Christ's merits for their salvation, enlarged his obedience to a "general obedience in life" and a "special obedience in death." While Christ's "special obedience" paid the penalty for sin, they taught that the merits of his "general obedience" were mediated to believers through their mystical union with Christ.<sup>1</sup>

There are already hints of such thinking even before the time of the Reformation. Wessel Gansfort, one of the fifteenth century Brethren of the Common life, wrote:

For everyone who believes Christ is the end and the fruit of the law of righteousness, because he is the one who gives to all who believe in his name the right to become sons of God. By believing the Word they join themselves to the Word. The Word to which they are joined in faith is God. And it is good to adhere to God, because they who adhere to God become one Spirit with him, righteous with the righteous one, holy with the holy one.<sup>2</sup>

### *Development of the Doctrine*

It appears to me that, historically speaking, the doctrine of the active and passive obedience of Christ began with Luther's attack on the Roman Catholic practice of indulgencies. As noted, the practice of offering indulgencies was defended on the grounds that these were based on a treasury of merits contributed by Christ and the saints.<sup>3</sup> In his 95 theses Luther countered this teaching with the arguments that the saints had no credit in merit, while the merits of Christ were freely given by him through his Spirit (theses 58-60). Putting forwards his own view of salvation by grace he argued:

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<sup>1</sup> Robert S. Franks, "Merit," in *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, ed. J. Hastings *et al.* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1909), pp. 167-70.

<sup>2</sup> Wessel Gansfort, *De Magnitudine Passionis*, cited in *Documenta Reformatoria*, ed. J.N. Bakhuizen van den Brink *et al.* (Kampen: Kok, 1960), pp. 4,5 (my translation).

<sup>3</sup> This doctrine was defended with appeal to a papal bull issued by Clement VI in 1343, entitled *Unigenitus*. Because the material appealed to did not belong to the body of the Bull itself, but to an appendix, it was considered outside canon law and therefore referred to as the *Extravaganta*.

This statement is evangelical, for it is written in many places in the Bible that we are justified by the blood and obedience of Christ. Paul, for example, says in Romans 5 [19], “By one man’s obedience [I believe this obedience to be the merits of Christ] many will be made righteous.”<sup>1</sup>

Soon after, in a sermon on “Two Kinds of Righteousness” (1518 or 1519) Luther came close to defining what is understood by Christ’s active and passive obedience when he wrote:

Therefore a man can with confidence boast in Christ and say: “Mine are Christ’s living, doing and speaking, his suffering and dying, mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, suffered, and died as he did.” ... Even Christ himself, therefore, who says he came to do the most sacred will of his Father [John 6:38], became obedient to him, and whatever he did, he did it for us and desired it to be ours, saying, “I am among you as one who serves” [Luke 22:27].<sup>2</sup>

Luther pointed out that the righteousness the believer has before God is not his own, but an imputed or “alien” righteousness, a righteousness based on the merit of Christ. The imputation of this “alien” righteousness does not mean the sinner is not changed in his life before God, for the righteousness believers receive from Christ acts as a catalyst, prompting Christians to also grow in righteousness. However, Luther does not regard such growth in righteousness as the Christian’s own righteousness, but a further instalment of the “alien” righteousness received from Christ. Luther therefore insisted that “alien” righteousness is not instilled all at once.<sup>3</sup>

This concept of a progressive instillation of the “alien” righteousness of Christ led to some confusion that was not really solved until Melancthon defined the believer’s own pursuit of righteousness as the work of sanctification. But a different approach to explaining the “alien”

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<sup>1</sup> *Luther’s Works, Vol. 31, Career of the Reformer*, H.T. Lehmann (ed.). Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957, p. 282

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 297, 298.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 299.



righteousness in believers came from Andreas Osiander. He taught that the righteousness believers received from Christ is the righteousness of his divine nature, which flows into their hearts when Christ indwells them. This pantheistic presentation saw Osiander arguing that even the original righteousness of Adam was the result of the indwelling eternal Logos.<sup>1</sup> The divine Logos left Adam when he sinned, but by taking on human nature Christ was able to re-establish contact with the human race so that his righteousness could once again flow into the hearts of believers.

It was in the debates against this heresy that, according to Jaroslav Pelikan, the terms *passive* and *active obedience* were first formulated by a pupil of Melancton, Justus Menius.<sup>2</sup> He pointed out that the righteousness of Christ received by believers was not an indwelling divine righteousness, but the result of Christ's passive and active obedience which involved Christ's human as well as divine nature.<sup>3</sup> This approach was eventually taken up in the Formula of Concord (1577), which sets forth some of the fullest definitions of Christ's passive and active obedience in its renunciation of Osiander's position:

Therefore the righteousness which by grace is reckoned to faith or to the believer is the obedience, the passion, and the resurrection of Christ when he satisfied the law for us and paid for our sins. Since Christ is not only man, but God and man in one undivided person, he was as little under the law – since he is the Lord of the law – as he was obligated to suffer and die for his person. Therefore his obedience consists not only in his suffering and dying, but also in his spontaneous subjection to the law in our stead and his keeping of the law in so perfect a fashion that, reckoning it to us as righteousness, God forgives our sins, accounts us holy and righteous, and saves us forever on account of this entire obedience which, by doing and suffering, in life and in death, Christ rendered for us to his heavenly Father.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 158, 159.

<sup>2</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition, a History of the Edevelopment of Doctrine, volume 4, Reformation of the Church Dogma.*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 164.

<sup>3</sup> Justus Menius, *Righteousness*, Erfurt, 1552. Cited by Jaroslav Pelikan, *loc. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> *Formula of Concord*, Art. III, 14,15; in *The Book of Concord*, trans. & ed. by T.G. Tappert, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959, p. 541.

## *Christ's Obedience in Reformed Theology*

In his studies on Christ's human nature in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Calvin speaks of the obedience of Christ restoring Christians to God's favour. At first he only explains this in terms of expiation and propitiation, making no mention in the context to what later theologians called Christ's active obedience.<sup>1</sup> He notes that Christ's obedience covered more than what he did on the cross, but with reference to Rom. 4:25 he links the believer's imputation of Christ's righteousness not to Christ's active obedience, but to his resurrection:

By his death sin was taken away, by his resurrection righteousness was renewed and restored... Our salvation may thus be divided between the death and the resurrection of Christ: by the former sin was abolished and death annihilated; by the latter, righteousness was restored and life revived, the power and efficacy of the former being still bestowed upon us by means of the latter.<sup>2</sup>

Also in his commentary on Romans there is no mention of Christ's active obedience, not even where he comments on the comparison between Christ and Adam. Commenting on Rom. 5:20 he seems to have only Christ's passive obedience in mind when he writes, "Christ, in satisfying the Father, has provided a righteousness for us."<sup>3</sup> However, it is likely, but not conclusive, that Calvin had both Christ's passive and active obedience in mind when, with reference to Gal. 2:21, he writes:

For we hence infer, that it is from Christ we must seek what the Law would confer on anyone who fulfilled it; or, which is the same thing, that by the grace of Christ we obtain what God promised in the Law to our works: "If a man do, he shall live in them" (Lev. xviii. 5) ... For if the observance of the Law is righteousness, who can deny that Christ, by taking this burden upon himself, and reconciling us to God, as if we were the observers of the Law, merited favour for us. Of the same nature is what he afterwards says to the Galatians: "God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Bevenridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 1559 edition, II, xii, 1-4.

<sup>2</sup> *Institutes*, II, xvi, 13.

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Romans* ...

were under the law” (Gal. iv. 4,5). For to what end that subjection, unless he obtained justification for us by undertaking to perform what we were unable to pay? Hence that imputation of righteousness without works, of which Paul treats (Rom. iv. 5), the righteousness found in Christ alone being accepted as if it were ours.<sup>1</sup>

The words “merited favour for us” suggest that Calvin, like Luther, looked towards the good works of Christ rather than works of saints for salvation.

A statement in one of his sermons on Deuteronomy also comes close to our definitions of the passive and active obedience of Christ:

For in telling us that we be set free from the curse of the law, he says that our Lord Jesus bare it in his body by being hanged upon a tree. Also it is the same thing that Saint Peter meant in saying that he bare our sins upon the tree. And otherwise this saying of the prophet Isaiah had not been fulfilled, that the chastisement of our peace was laid upon him, so as he was fain to bear our punishment, whereby we might be reconciled unto God. And in the foresaid text which I alleged out of Galatians [Gal. 3:13], Saint Paul treats of two things. He says that because we cannot attain to righteousness, but by fulfilling the law in all points, and by being discharged before God: it behoved our Lord Jesus Christ to be subject to the law, to the intent that his obedience might now be imputed unto us, and God accept thereof as though we brought the like obedience of our own.<sup>2</sup>

In Calvin’s writings we do not find the issue of Christ’s obedience discussed in the context of a covenant of works, with Christ presented as the second Adam succeeding where the first Adam failed. This theme was left for his successors to develop.

The Reformed confessions, similarly, do not tell us much about Christ’s active obedience. They do not give any definition which matches that found in the Lutheran Formula of Concord given above. It is only hinted

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, II, xvii, 5.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, Ch. 21, facsimile of John Harrison’s edition of 1583, trans. Arthur Golding (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth) p. 763. The present author has modernised the language.

at in the French Confession of 1559, which merely states that the obedience of

Christ blots out our sins and “makes us find grace and favour in the sight of God.”<sup>1</sup> The Belgic Confession adds: “But Jesus Christ is our Righteousness in making available to us all His merits and all the holy works He has done ...”<sup>2</sup> Probably the Irish Articles of Religion (1615) gives the fullest definition when it states that Christ, “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.”<sup>3</sup>

No doubt William Cunningham was correct when he attributed the greater precision with respect to the identification of this doctrine to the later years of the Reformation:

By the righteousness of Christ, the Reformers understood the whole vicarious work of Christ, including both His sufferings as satisfactory to the divine justice and law, which required that man’s sins should be punished, and His whole obedience of the law, as meritorious of the life that was promised to obedience, the former being usually called by later divines, when the subjects came to be discussed with greater minuteness and detail, His *passive*, and the latter His *active*, righteousness.<sup>4</sup>

Cunningham gives no references, and it is not clear when the terminology became accepted. William Perkins clearly distinguishes between Christ’s obedience “in his passion and death and in his fulfilling of the Law,” but does not name the distinction.<sup>5</sup> In fact, in Britain one of the earliest uses of the terminology *passive and active obedience* does not even refer to the obedience of Christ, but to that of the believer. Thus Thomas Watson urges Christians to pray for “active obedience” in

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<sup>1</sup> French Confession Art. xviii, in

<sup>2</sup> The Belgic Confession Art. 22, in *Book of Forms*, Reformed Churches of Australia, Geelong: Reformed Publishing House, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Irish Articles of Religion, Art. 35, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper, 1877), vol. 3, p. 535.

<sup>4</sup> William Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, 1862 (London: Banner of Truth, 1969), vol. 2, pp. 45, 46.

<sup>5</sup> William Perkins *The Works of that Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ in the University of Cambridge, the Second Volume*, (London: John Legat, 1631), p.205.

keeping God's commands, and "passive obedience" in submitting to God's will.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps it took the disputes with the Arminians to sharpen the distinctions. Parallel to their denial of the imputation of Adam's guilt to all men, Arminians denied the need for the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to believers. They held that God accepts faith in lieu of righteousness. The Canons of Dort reject the Arminian position, but only speak of Christ's merits only in terms of his satisfaction for sin (Second Point of Doctrine).

It would appear that the nature of the Christ's righteousness, including the significance of his passive and active obedience, received a fuller treatment in subsequent discussions, because this distinction is rejected by the Arminian, Philip a Limborgh, as an "unnecessary" doctrine "invented by men." He adds:

But it is not necessary to determine whether justification consists exclusively in the forgiveness of sins or also in the imputation of righteousness, distinguished as actual and formal transactions. Furthermore, whether it is just righteousness that is imputed, or the righteousness of Christ, be it of the passive [obedience] or the active and passive [obedience] together.<sup>2</sup>

At this time a further development took place in that the distinction between the active and passive obedience of Christ was taken up in the newly developing federal theology. Interest in the covenant had disappeared after Augustine, but it was rekindled in the context of the Swiss reformation under Zwingli and Bullinger.<sup>3</sup> They developed the covenant concept in support of the doctrine of infant baptism. It was Franciscus Junius who recognised God's dealings with Adam in paradise as a covenant of works requiring obedience, and during the lapsarian controversies a further enhancement came with the recognition of Adam's federal headship. This made way for the recognition that Christ,

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Watson, *Body of Practical Divinity*, Sermon on the Third Petition of the Lord's Prayer. Cited from <http://www.bpc.org/resources>

<sup>2</sup> P. Lamborgh, *Theologia Christiana*, (Amsterdam, 1730) VII, 21, 13; cited in *Documenta Reformatoria*, p.337.

<sup>3</sup> According to P.Y. De Young the importance of the covenant was discussed in the *Epistle of Barnabas*, and recognised by Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Augustine. For a history of covenant theology see his *The Covenant Idea in New England Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945), pp.15ff.

in his active obedience, fulfilled the covenant of works as the federal head of the covenant of grace. According to G. Vos this development in Reformed theology took place independently in the Netherlands under Cloppenburg, and in Scotland under Robert Rollock.<sup>1</sup>

The beginnings of this development can also be found in the Westminster Confession of Faith, written some years after the Arminian dispute. This confession recognises God’s “covenant of works” as one which promised life to those who obeyed (WCF 7:2), and goes on to state:

The Lord Jesus, by His perfect obedience, and sacrifice of Himself, which He, through the eternal Spirit, once offered up unto God, has fully justified 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 has given unto Him. (8:5)

In a later chapter the confession notes that Christians have both “the obedience and satisfaction of Christ” imputed to them (11:1). However, the confessions does not go on to define the nature of this obedience. Although it identifies Christ as the “Testator” of the covenant of grace, there is no direct explicit statement to say Christ also fulfilled the covenant of works.

By the time Francis Turretin wrote his book *The Atonement of Christ* the distinction between the active and passive obedience of Christ had become an accepted part of Reformed doctrine. Turretin points out that, even as we can distinguish between Christ’s passive and active obedience, we can also distinguish a twofold result:

There is in the obedience of Christ *a twofold efficacy*. The one is expiatory, that by which we are freed from those punishments from which we are liable on account of sin. The other is a meritorious efficacy, by which, through the remission of our sins, a title to eternal life and salvation has been acquired for us. For as sin brought upon us two evils – the loss of life, and exposure to death; so redemption must procure two benefits –

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<sup>1</sup> G. Vos, *De Verbondsleer in de Gereformeerde Theologie* (Grand Rapids: “Democrat” drupes, 1891), pp. 9, 11; cited in De Young, *op. cit.*, pp. 29, 30.

liberation from death and a title to life; or deliverance from hell and an introduction into heaven.<sup>1</sup>

But here we should note that Turretin, as well as the majority of Reformed theologians who followed him, were careful to maintain the unity of the doctrine of justification. He therefore warns against linking this twofold efficacy with the twofold obedience:

Those who make these too nice distinctions, attribute the atonement to his sufferings; and the acquisition to a right to life, to his active obedience to the law. These distinctions receive no countenance from Scripture, which nowhere distinguishes the obedience of Christ into parts, but, on the contrary, represents it as a thing unique, by which he hath done in our place everything which the law requires of us... Christ merited by making atonement, and by meriting he made atonement.<sup>2</sup>

Similar warnings can be found in the works of a number later theologians. Here we may include George Smeaton (1870),<sup>3</sup> Thomas Crawford (1954)<sup>4</sup> and Gerrit Berkouwer (1965).<sup>5</sup>

### *Objections to the doctrine*

Mention has already been made of the objections of the Arminian, Phillip Limborgh. Arminius himself, seeking a mediating position in the dispute with his Calvinist opponents, had written:

I believe that sinners are accounted righteous solely by the obedience of Christ; and that the righteousness of Christ is the only meritorious cause on account of which God pardons the sins of believers, and reckons them as righteous as if they had perfectly fulfilled the law. But since God imputes the righteousness of Christ to none except believers, it may be well

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Turretin, *The Atonement of Christ*, trans. J.R. Wilson (Grand Rapids: Baker 1978), pp. 91,92.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93,94.

<sup>3</sup> George Smeaton, *Christ's Doctrine of the Atonement* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991, first printing 1870), p. 238; Thomas J. Crawford, *The Doctrine of Holy Scripture Respecting the Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954), p.59.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas J. Crawford, *The Doctrine of Holy Scripture Respecting the Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954), p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> G. Berkouwer, *The Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 314ff.

and properly said, to a man who believes, faith is imputed for righteousness, through grace, because God has set forth his Son Jesus Christ to be a propitiation, through faith in his blood.<sup>1</sup>

This statement was unacceptable to the Calvinists because it continued to regard faith as the grounds for, rather than the instrument of, salvation. But it is surprising that Arminius was willing to accept the imputation of Christ's righteousness, because he denied its parallel, the imputation of Adam's guilt.

The followers of Wesley did recognise the imputation of Adam's guilt, but nevertheless continued to deny the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Thus an early defender of Methodism, Richard Watson, writes:

Justification being the pardon of sin by judicial sentence of the offended Majesty of Heaven, under a gracious constitution, the term affords no ground for the notion that it imports the imputation or accounting to us the active and passive righteousness of Christ, so as to make us both relatively and positively righteous.<sup>2</sup>

Watson present us with one of the most extensive attempts to refute the doctrine of the passive and active obedience of Christ. He lists six objections to the doctrine, 1) that it is "nowhere stated in Scripture", 2) that Christ did not represent us as "our delegate", 3) that if Christ's righteousness were given us as if we had done his righteous deeds, it would imply the "monstrous notion" that our sins were "so accounted Christ's as that he did them", 4) that God's looking at us as if we had fulfilled the law "involves a fiction", 5) that there is no such thing as "fulfilment of the law by a delegate" and 6) that it "shifts the meritorious cause of man's justification from Christ's 'obedience unto death' to Christ's active obedience to the precepts of the law".<sup>3</sup>

The Baptist, Millard Erickson, represents a modern, modified, Arminian approach. Though described as "gently Calvinistic,"<sup>4</sup> Erickson denies the

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<sup>1</sup> Nichols's *Works of Arminius*, cited by Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes* (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book-Room, 1823), vol. 2, pp. 570-1.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes*, vol. 2, p. 559.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 560-63.

<sup>4</sup> By J.I. Packer on the dust jacket of Erickson's *Christian Theology*.



imputation of Adam's guilt to infants on the grounds that they do not participate in Adam's sin until they reach the age of accountability.<sup>1</sup> Obviously such an approach allows no room for the concept that believers share in Christ's active obedience, because this would necessitate a *limbus infantum* for children who died before they identified with Christ. Such children might be counted as innocent, but without participating in Christ they would not be part of him and share in his righteousness. Moreover, this teaching leaves the question why those who die in infancy should suffer the penalty of Adam's sin unanswered.

Others have taken a less polemic approach. Some, like Robert Franks, whose comments were noted earlier, have simply dismissed the distinction between Christ's active and passive atonement as a product of protestant scholasticism. Others, like Herman Hoeksema, have ignored the issue, and have simply interpret the obedience by which Christ rendered satisfaction to God in terms of his passive obedience alone:

To satisfy the justice of God one must perform an act that is the perfect antithesis of the act of wilful disobedience of man in the first paradise. His act must be the perfect "yes" over against the sinner's "no." And this is exactly what Christ accomplished on the cross.<sup>2</sup>

Significantly Hoeksema also dismisses the idea of a covenant of works between God and Adam. We find a similar dismissal of this covenant in the approach of Daniel Fuller<sup>3</sup> and Donald Bloesch. According to the latter the covenant of works was a form of legalism:

While in Reformed history allusion was sometimes made to a covenant of works, this is best understood as a legalistic misunderstanding of the covenant of God's grace.<sup>4</sup>

Wolfhart Pannenberg accepts the idea of a passive and active obedience of Christ but fills the concepts with new meaning. Correctly Pannenberg

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<sup>1</sup> *Christian Theology*, pp. 652-6.

<sup>2</sup> Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1973), p. 381.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), *passim*.

<sup>4</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *Jesus Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 203.

recognises Christ's work in contrast to that of Adam, observing, "Jesus has

become the fulfilment of the human destiny to community with God."<sup>1</sup> However, for him Christ's role as representative of the new humanity was primarily exemplary<sup>2</sup>, and that leads him to conclude:

We must, however, avoid the idea that active obedience is connected with fulfilling the will of the Creator formulated in the law while passive obedience goes beyond this in offering the obedience as satisfaction for sin. We shall see that Jesus' vicarious suffering may not be understood as a work of satisfaction.<sup>3</sup>

## The Doctrine Defended

As we saw above, critics of the double obedience doctrine contend that the doctrine of the active obedience of Christ has no Scriptural basis. One of them observes that while support for the doctrine "has been drawn from such texts as Rom. 5<sup>19</sup> ('through the obedience of the one shall the many be made righteous') ... this idea receives no support from the Gospels, and none from the text itself, when carefully interpreted."<sup>4</sup> Indeed the doctrine has more usually been defended on theological grounds, with an appeal to a covenant of works.

All this is not to suggest that no scriptural support for this doctrine has been brought forwards. We have pointed out that many theologians warn against separating the two aspects of Christ's obedience, and in giving scriptural support for Christ's obedience both aspects are often dealt with together. We find an example of this approach in an Dictionary entry by Alois Stöger:

In the New Testament Jesus rates his entire life by obedience to his Father. In the temptation he is confronted with the decision of how he is to fulfil his messianic mission. It is from obedience that he decides not upon the way offered to him by Satan but on his Father's way; he repeatedly refers to some precept of the law in order to express what obedience means to him (Mt. 4:1-11;

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<sup>1</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Jesus, God and Man*, trans. L.L. Wilins and D.A. Preibe (London: SCM Press, 1968), p. 195.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>4</sup> Frank H. Foster, "Obedience" in *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, ed. J. Hastings *et al.* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1909), pp. 256-258.

Lk. 4:1-13). When Peter wants to prevent him taking the way of suffering, he repulses him as tempter, and points out that it is not the words of men but the words of God he has to fulfil (Mt. 8:33 parallels). The prayer at Gethsemane shows what depths of suffering his obedience to the will of his Father leads him into (Mt. 26:39, 42; Mk 14:36; Lk. 22:42).

And he continues,

For Paul obedience is the key concept for the soteriological work of Jesus. By the incarnation Jesus becomes subject to the law of Moses so that he can free those others who are subject to it (Gal. 4:4). Obedience is the meaning of Jesus' life and death (Phil. 2:8). The disobedience of Adam brought all that is contrary to salvation into the world. Salvation is founded upon Jesus' act of obedience (Rom. 5:19).<sup>1</sup>

While the passages Stöger' brings forward do indicate that Christ's obedience covers more than his suffering, they fall short of upholding a doctrine of active obedience defined in terms of Christ fulfilling the covenant of works which Adam failed to keep. They do not speak of Christ obeying God's will, as expressed in commandments, on man's behalf. Other biblical defences of the active obedience doctrine go little beyond what Stöger presents.<sup>2</sup>

Yet I believe there is a good biblical defence for this doctrine, centred on the "hymn" cited by Paul in the second chapter of his letter to the Philippians.<sup>3</sup> Recent scholarship has given us a whole new insight into the meaning of these verses, and related passages, but to the best of my

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<sup>1</sup> Alois Stöger, "Obedience" in *Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology*, ed. J.B. Bauer (London: Sheed and Ward, 1970), pp. 616-20

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, J. Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), pp. 19ff.; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan; Leicester: IVP, 1994), pp. 570ff.

<sup>3</sup> For our purpose we will not enter into the debate whether this was indeed an early hymn or whether it is simply prose, other than where it touches on our argument. For an argument that this is indeed a hymn see E.Lohmeyer, "Kyrios Jesus. Eine Untersuchung zu Phil. 2:5-11" in *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften*, phil.-hist. Kl. 1927/28. Source cited by C.K. Barrett, *From First Adam to Last* (London: A. & C. Black, 1962), p. 70.

knowledge no one has applied this new insight to the doctrine here in question.<sup>1</sup>

This passage, Phil. 2:5-11, is one of only three where the obedience of Christ is explicitly mentioned. The others are Rom. 5:18 and Heb. 5:8, of which the first of these reads:

For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

The fact that this occurs in a passage contrasting Adam and Christ makes those who take a covenantal approach to presume that the obedience here referred to includes the active as well as the passive obedience of Christ. However, this is not made explicit, and as it is possible to think of Christ's obedience here in terms of his passive obedience alone. By this interpretation the parallel between Adam and Christ may not be as complete, but it is certainly possible to limit this to Christ's work of atonement, especially as the preceding verse makes mention of a single act of righteousness. In Heb 5:8 Christ's obedience may similarly be limited to his passive obedience, as it makes explicit mention of Christ's suffering: "Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered ..."

It has often been presumed that the obedience spoken of in Phil. 2:5-11, where the context speaks of Christ's humiliation and death, similarly speaks of his obedience only in terms of his passive obedience, his willingness to suffer and lay down his life. But there is now good reason to believe that this passage also points to Christ's active obedience.

The opening verses to the "hymn" read:

<sup>5</sup>Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:  
<sup>6</sup>Who being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,  
<sup>7</sup>but made himself nothing,  
taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.

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<sup>1</sup> Many authors only relate the doctrine to v. 8 of the Philippians passage, e.g. J. Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 20; Berkouwer, *op. cit.*, p. 314; R.L. Reymond *op. cit.* p. 850.

<sup>8</sup>And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself,  
and became obedient unto death –  
even death on a cross!

In seeking to understand the meaning of this hymn a lot of debate has focussed on the first two phrases of verse six. At the centre of the debate lies the word *harpagmon* (ἄρπαγμον, here translated “something to be grasped”). Ralph Martin asks,

Does it mean that Christ enjoyed equality with God but surrendered it by becoming man, or that he could have grasped at equality with God by self-assertion, but declined to do so and embraced rather the will of God in the circumstances of the incarnation and the cross?<sup>1</sup>

The answer depends on whether the *harpagmon* is interpreted as relating to something Christ already had or something Christ might have aspired to. Traditionally the Latin terms *res rapta* (“something to hold on to”) and *res rapienda* (“something to be grasped”) marked these two positions respectively. Since the thing in question was “equality with God” earlier and conservative exegetes tended to opt for the *res rapta* position, while those theologians who questioned Christ’s pre-incarnate deity often chose for the *res rapienda* option. However, both options presented some problems. Those who held that the verse indicates that Christ enjoyed divine status before and even during the time of his incarnation had difficulty coming up with a good translation of, and explanation for, the second half of the verse. Why would Christ want to grasp equality with God when he already had it? But those who denied Christ’s equality with God prior to his exaltation had difficulties translating and explaining verse six, which states that the pre-incarnate Christ was in the form of God.

A solution to the problem came with the insight that the verse is best explained with reference to the account of Adam in the opening chapters of Genesis. This position, which has only come to its own in recent years, has a long history.<sup>2</sup> According to Martin, G. Estius already made

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians* (London: Tyndale, 1959), p. 97.

<sup>2</sup> See Ralph P. Martin, *A Hymn of Christ* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1979), pp161f.

the connection in a commentary on Philippians published in 1631, where he drew a parallel between the temptation of Adam and Christ. Hugo Grotius also made that association when he translated ὡς ἄνθρωπος (“as a man”, v. 8) with *tanquam Adam* (“as Adam”). In the mid-nineteenth century H.F. Ernesti wrote an article in German the title of which translates as: “Phil. II. 6-11 explained in reference to Gen. II-III.”<sup>1</sup> Subsequent to that scholars like D. Somerville began to look upon the Adam-Christ parallel as a master key to understanding Paul’s theology.<sup>2</sup> F.P. Badham was one of the first to defend this position in an English language publication.<sup>3</sup>

The solution was that both the *res rapta* and *res rapienda* interpretations applied. Jesus, who came as the God-man, had equality with God in his divine nature, but not in his human nature. In the words of C.K. Barrett:

Paul, [seeing more clearly than his predecessors,] ... affirms that for Christ equality with God was both *res rapta* and *res rapienda*. As the eternal Son of God, he had it; yet emptied himself and became obedient (cf. II Cor. viii. 9). As Man, the new Adam, he had it not; yet did not snatch at it, but chose rather the life of obedient and dependent creatureliness for which God had made him.

And he continues,

In Christ the defective anthropological situation was rectified because at last an obedient and believing man was found; and the cosmic situation was retrieved, because the Son of God was humble enough to enter the world, which, though it was God’s creation, had now fallen under the dominion of the demonic powers.<sup>4</sup>

In the same passage Barrett points out that neither Adam nor Christ acted as an individual, but were representative of their people.

Before we go on to explore the implications of this interpretation of the passage with respect to Adam it should be noted that a number of other approaches have also been suggested. Thus some scholars, including R.

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<sup>1</sup> “Phil. II. 6-11 aus einer Anspielung auf Gen. II.-III. Erläutert.”

<sup>2</sup> *St Paul’s Conception of Christ or the Doctrine of the Second Adam*, 1897.

<sup>3</sup> F.P. Badham “Adam” in *Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Hastings (1908).

<sup>4</sup> Barrett, *op. cit.*, p. 72

Bultmann, see the key to the passage in a gnostic redeemer myth.<sup>1</sup> Howard Marshall argues that the hymn is based on the O.T. concept of Wisdom, “who went out from her dwelling place with God to be with mankind.”<sup>2</sup> More popular, and accurate, is the idea that the servant songs of Isaiah form the background to this hymn. This approach, worked out in some detail by W.D. Davies, is not incompatible with the view that Christ is presented as the Second Adam. Davies writes:

In our previous treatment of this passage we argued that Paul was here thinking of Christ, as the second Adam, who was to be contrasted to the first Adam, the obedience of the former being opposed to the disobedience of the latter. Combined with this Adamic conception we are to find here, however, the idea of the Suffering Servant of Deutero-Isaiah. In this passage, Christ the Second Adam is obedient *as Servant*.<sup>3</sup>

Sinclair Fergusson takes a similar position. Arguing that in the passage Jesus is portrayed as ‘Adam in reverse’ he continues:

- (i) *Being in very nature God he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped* (v. 6) reminds us of Adam’s failure. He was created as the image and likeness of God (*Gen. 1:26*). But he *grasped* after equality with God (‘you shall be as God’ [*Gen. 3:5*] the tempter suggested). By contrast, Jesus, whose right equality with God always was, did not refuse to become *obedient* (v. 8).
- (ii) The Son *made himself nothing* [emptied himself] ... *taking the form of a servant* (v. 7). Here we may have an echo of the great prophecy in Isaiah 52:13-53:12, where the Sufferer ‘poured out his life unto death’ (*Isa. 53:12*). He is described by God as ‘my servant’ (*Isa. 52:12*). He did what Adam refused to do: serve God.<sup>4</sup>

Time and space prevent me from going into all the arguments why there is indeed this double Old Testament background to the passage, for this I must refer the readers to the sources cited. But if these words of

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<sup>1</sup> R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament, I* (London: SCM Press, 1952), p. 175.

<sup>2</sup> Howard Marshall, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (Epworth Press, 1991), p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> W.D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: S.P.C.K., 1965), p. 274.

<sup>4</sup> S.B. Fergusson, *Let’s Study Philippians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997).

Fergusson accurately reflect the meaning of the passage, as I am convinced they do, they point us to both the passive and active obedience of Christ. As the suffering servant he poured out his life (passive obedience), and as the obedient second Adam he served God as Adam and his progeny had been meant to serve God (active obedience). Thus, as stated by the author of the book of Hebrews, the prophetic words of Psalm 8 were fulfilled in Christ,

It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. But there is a place where someone has testified:

What is man that you are mindful of him,  
The son of man that you care for him?  
You made him a little lower than the angels;  
You crowned him with glory and honour  
And put everything under his feet.

In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. [Heb. 2:5-9]

Even as Adam's lack of obedience led to the death of those he represented Christ's obedience brings life to those represented by him (Rom. 5:18). But it not only brought life, Christ's active obedience came with the reward for such obedience, lordship over creation (cf. Gen. 1:28). This is brought to our attention in the opening verses of Romans, where we read that Paul was set apart for the Gospel, further identified as:

... the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scripture regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendent of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared to be the Son of God with power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. [Rom. 1:2-4, NIV footnote reading]

Note how it speaks of Christ according to his human nature. Here is the answer to those who find it hard to understand why Christ would snatch



at “equality with God” if he already had such equality.<sup>1</sup> Christ had to meet God’s demands in his human nature, so that like Adam he might be tempted, our representative High Priest, like unto his brethren (Heb. 2:10-11). And the author of Hebrews continues,

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. [Heb 2:14-15]

The author of Hebrews goes on to show how Christ’s resistance to temptation allows him to sympathise with his brethren (v. 18). But in view of what we learned above it is clear that Christ’s temptations also had another purpose, namely to show his obedience where Adam had failed. Note how Luke places the account of Christ’s temptations immediately after his identification of him as “the son of Adam, the son of God” (Lk. 3:37). The implication that Christ was tried as Adam was tried before him has not escaped the exegetes.<sup>2</sup>

If the Scriptures do not define the doctrine of the active and passive obedience of the second Adam as explicitly as our Reformed dogmatics, we must nevertheless conclude that there is good evidence to conclude that this doctrine is simply assumed. The doctrine that Christ, as the second Adam, reversed the course of history is almost presuppositional to Paul’s soteriology as well as his anthropology. Barrett expresses Paul’s position on this point precisely when he states:

In Christ the defective anthropological situation was rectified because at last an obedient and believing man was found; and the cosmic situation was retrieved, because the Son of God was humble enough to enter the world, which, though it was God’s creation, had now fallen under the dominion of the demonic powers.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Barrett, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Walter L Liefeld, “Luke,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. F.E. Gabelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p. 861; and Micheal Wilcock, *The Message of Luke* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1979), pp. 57-60.

<sup>3</sup> Barrett, *op. cit.*, p. 72

## *Conclusion*

In this paper we examined the doctrine of the active obedience of Christ and its antecedents. We noted that the concept developed in the early years of the Reformation among Lutheran and Reformed theologians alike. The doctrine of the active obedience of Christ came as the Reformation answer to the Catholic teaching that believers received merit from Mary and the saints. The terminology probably has its origin among the Lutherans. The Reformed appear to have taken over the terminology, and made it a part of their covenant theology.

The opposition of Arminian theologians came with the charge that this doctrine was a theological construct without adequate scriptural support. We agreed that there is no explicit biblical formulation of this doctrine, but showed that there is good reason to believe that is reflected a foundational thought in Pauline theology. The more recent interpretation of Phil. 2:5-11 with respect to the disobedience of the first Adam lends strong support to the position that where Paul speaks of the obedience of Christ he is not limiting this to Christ's suffering, but includes with this the obedience that was lacking in the firsts Adam. It is this aspect of Christ's obedience that we know as the active obedience of Christ.

One may ask: But why is it necessary to make this distinction? There are several reasons. Firstly, by drawing the parallel between Adam and Christ this doctrine gives support to the Reformation doctrine of the imputation of Adam's sin and the total depravity of man. Secondly, by pointing out that Christ did all that God requires of man it guards against any idea of a salvation by works. In this way the doctrine of the active and passive obedience of Christ upholds those great Reformation truths that there is no other way to salvation than through Christ by grace alone.

Lastly, the new insights gained by interpreting the Phil. 2 passage with reference to Christ as the second Adam, point to some interesting areas for further investigation. In passing we noted the significance of this insight to our understanding of the eighth Psalm, especially as this is explained in Hebrews 2:5-9. The idea that the full meaning of Christ's Lordship over creation must be seen against the background of the dominion that was offered to the creature made in God's image is something that that is not often expressed. For Christ's fellow-heirs, who will share in his reign, this is something worthy of further study.