

COMMENTS ON THE OPC JUSTIFICATION REPORT (4)

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The Report takes up the matter of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ in part D of the General Introduction. Section D.3 begins with a paragraph that gives us the background for its discussion of the biblical teaching. The Report holds that God demanded a lifetime of perfect obedience from Adam as the meritorious ground for the attainment of eschatological blessing. Since Adam failed to perform as required, “conscientious readers of Scripture would naturally expect their Messiah to satisfy this requirement on their behalf” (italics original). In other words the theological background for the ensuing discussion is the covenant of works and the works principle it embodies. And as the Report notes, “this theological background, which shows the necessity of Christ’s active obedience if we are to be saved, should be kept in mind” (italics original).

(Here the Report means to say more accurately, “the necessity of the imputation of Christ’s active obedience” as the meritorious ground for our justification and salvation. No one questions that his active obedience is necessary for our salvation.)

In other words, before we look at the text of Scripture we know what it must say and will say because our theology requires it. If you have a works principle and a covenant of works, then you must have the imputation of active obedience; and really you must have it whether there are any verses of Scripture that teach it or not. This shows how our theology can drive the exegesis. It is not surprising, then, that the Report finds in Scripture the kind of evidence the prior theology requires.

Ultimately, of course, it must be the exegesis that determines the theology, and my point is that there are good reasons for us to look once again at what the word of God teaches. We have the example of the saints in Berea who examined the Scriptures every day to see whether what Paul said was true (Acts 17:11). Does the Scripture really teach that the active obedience of Christ is imputed to us as the meritorious ground of our salvation as required by the works principle that defines the covenant of works?

Before we look at the biblical material presented in the Report there are two preliminary matters that call for our attention. The first pertains to footnote 56 where four persons including myself are named as persons who have critiqued the imputation of the active obedience of Christ. There are two questions here, the first of which is the matter of imputation itself and its relation to union with Christ. This is a legitimate question that needs to be addressed, but it has not been the question I have sought to address. The second question is the imputation of active obedience as the ground of justification, and that has been my concern.

Footnote 56 states: “Shepherd also makes the untenable claim that Calvin, Casper [sic] Olevianus (1536-87), and the Heidelberg Catechism did not teach the active obedience of Christ (see ‘Justification by Works in Reformed Theology,’ in Backbone, 103-20).”

Of course I have never made such a claim. They all teach the active obedience of Christ as I do myself. The Report consistently uses the expression, “the active obedience of Christ,”

when it really means “the imputation of the active obedience of Christ.” The abbreviated expression used by the Report is misleading and distorts the view it seeks to criticize. This is a problem that can and should be corrected. The question is whether Calvin, Olevianus, and the Heidelberg Catechism teach that the active obedience of Christ is imputed to sinners for their justification. We can consider these three in reverse order.

With respect to the Heidelberg Catechism, my view is that this document does not teach the imputation of the active obedience of Christ as the ground of justification. The Report seeks to show that this view is untenable by quoting a segment of Q&A 60 according to an unspecified translation. In the Christian Reformed edition of the Catechism that I used in the article referenced, the segment reads: “God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me. All I need to do is to accept this gift of God with a believing heart.”

The Report does not comment on these words, apparently assuming that the reference to the “satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ” credited to us is an obvious reference to the imputation of active obedience. This is, after all, what the covenant of works and the works principle require; and the Report started out by asking us to keep in mind the theological background that shows the necessity for the imputation of Christ’s active obedience if we are to be saved.

In my article, however, I develop an argument (pp. 106-9) to show that the three words used by the Catechism in Q&A 60—satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness—are used elsewhere in the Catechism itself to refer to the death of our Lord that secures the forgiveness of sins. For example, the word “righteousness” is used in Q&A 56 that asks, “What do you believe concerning ‘the forgiveness of sins’?” The answer is, “I believe that God, because of Christ’s atonement, will never hold against me any of my sins nor my sinful nature which I need to struggle against all my life. Rather, in his grace God grants me the righteousness of Christ to free me forever from judgment.” Here we see that the righteousness of Christ secures the forgiveness of sins and refers to his atonement for us, his death on the cross. There is no reference to the imputation of Christ’s active obedience.

Footnote 56 is able to call my view untenable by simply ignoring the contrary evidence. By ignoring this evidence the Committee of Six has done the OPC a serious injustice since many in this Presbyterian denomination are not familiar with the Heidelberg Catechism.

With respect to “Casper [sic] Olevianus,” the article referenced does not deal with this Reformed theologian at all, nor do I deal with his views elsewhere. I have no idea why the Committee of Six introduces his name into footnote 56.

However, I did deal at length with the views of Zacharias Ursinus as the chief author of the Heidelberg Catechism by referencing his Commentary on the Catechism. I summarized the position of Ursinus in three points. First, justification consists in the remission of sins. Second, sins are remitted on the ground of the righteousness of Christ imputed to the believer. Third, the righteousness imputed is the suffering and death of our Lord to pay the penalty for sin. This is

the view of the first generation of reformers, and it does not require the imputation of active obedience. They did not propound a covenant of works that required such an imputation. As the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism makes clear, our salvation resides in the fact that we belong to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. Christ has fully paid for all our sin with his precious blood and has set us free from the tyranny of the devil. This is the double grace of justification and sanctification, forgiveness and renewal.

With respect to Calvin, footnote 56 simply refers us to footnote 57 where Calvin's Institutes are cited, but not quoted or commented on. There are two citations, the first of which is II/17/5. Since the Committee does not comment on this section we are left to guess what it has in mind. In this section Calvin writes, "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' [Lev. 18:5, cf. Comm.]." Again, if we bring a works principle and a covenant of works to this passage then we will find in it the imputation of active obedience. But the context shows that Calvin is thinking of justification in terms of the death of Christ and the forgiveness of sins, not the imputation of active obedience. He says, "Paul commends God's grace in this respect: for God has given the price of redemption in the death of Christ [Rom. 3:24]; then he bids us take refuge in Christ's blood, that having acquired righteousness we may stand secure before God's judgment [Rom. 3:25]." The consistent emphasis throughout the section is on the death of Christ as the means whereby we acquire righteousness and the forgiveness of sins. The editor even gives as a title to this section, "Christ's death the price of our redemption."

The quotation given above begins with the words, "From this." The reference is to the preceding sentence, "And these words of Paul's are very weighty: 'If we are justified through the works of the law, then Christ died for nothing' [Gal. 2:21 p.]" Calvin is saying that we obtain from the death of Christ—not from the imputation of active obedience—the righteousness that the law could give if anyone could fulfill it. Later in the same passage he says that Christ acquired righteousness for us by subjecting himself to law and undertaking to pay what we could not pay. He writes, "For the righteousness found in Christ alone is reckoned as ours. Surely the only reason why Christ's flesh is called 'our food' [John 6:55] is that we find in him the substance of life. Now that power arises solely from the fact that the Son of God was crucified as the price of our righteousness" (italics added). There is nothing in this section about the imputation active obedience, but much about the death of Christ as the ground of our justification. The same can be said about section II/16/5 of the Institutes.

The other passage from Calvin cited in footnote 57 is III/11/2. At the very end of this section we hear Calvin say, "Therefore, we explain justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into this favor as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness." Again, with a prior commitment to the works principle and a covenant of works the Committee of Six apparently hears in this language a reference to the imputation of active obedience.

In fact, the view of Calvin is the same as that of Ursinus. Justification consists in the remission of sins grounded in the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, and the righteousness imputed is his death for us on the cross. This becomes very clear as Calvin unfolds

his view in section 3. Calvin writes, “Therefore, ‘to justify’ means nothing else than to acquit of guilt him who was accused, as if his innocence were confirmed. Therefore, since God justifies us by the intercession of Christ, he absolves us not by the confirmation of our own innocence but by the imputation of righteousness, so that we who are not righteous in ourselves may be reckoned as such in Christ.” The imputation that absolves us from sin (forgiveness) is not the imputation of active obedience, but the death of Christ credited to us and from which we benefit by virtue of our union with Christ. We are reckoned as righteous in Christ because he absolves us from the guilt of sin.

In the same section, commenting on Luke 18:14, the justification of the publican, Calvin says, “This, therefore, is what is said: after pardon of sins has been obtained, the sinner is considered as a just man in God’s sight. Therefore, he was righteous not by approval of works but by God’s free absolution.” That is, we are justified, not by the imputation of the active obedience of Christ, but by the forgiveness of our sins grounded in the death and resurrection of Christ for us and made over to us by faith.

This brief critique of footnote 56 shows that it is not so much my view, but the claim of footnote 56 that is both inaccurate and untenable. Neither Calvin, nor Ursinus, nor the Heidelberg Catechism teach the imputation of active obedience.

The second preliminary matter calling for our attention pertains to the statement that “These writers affirm the active obedience only in the sense that Christ’s sinless adherence to the law qualifies him to be the spotless sacrifice for sin.” This statement indicates a tendency in the Report to minimize the importance of sinlessness in Christ for the fulfillment of his calling to offer his life as a sacrifice for sins. More broadly it indicates a tendency to minimize the importance of forgiveness as belonging to the essence of justification, or at least as a component in the justifying act.

In “Justification by Works in Reformed Theology” (Backbone, p. 117) I wrote, “It is interesting to see how in a doctrine of justification based on a works/merit paradigm, the merit of works moves into the foreground and the Cross of Christ retreats into the background.” I illustrated this point by reference to the work of R.C. Sproul. The OP Report now gives us a further example of this phenomenon. At the end of section D.3 we read, “To conclude this section on active obedience, it is worth recalling that God repeatedly affirms that he desires obedience, not sacrifice—understood comparatively, in relation to each other. Sacrifice is necessary, but God desires much more, he desires obedience.” The Report tells us what it means with a citation from the southern Presbyterian theologian, Robert L. Dabney, who comments, “Pardon would release from the punishment of its breach, but would not entitle to the reward of performance.”

Here the Report makes the astounding claim that the death and resurrection of Christ do not really save us. What saves us is the imputation of active obedience. The death of Christ does nothing more than to leave us “in a state of moral guiltlessness and unconfirmed righteousness like Adam before the Fall.” By his agonizing death on the cross Christ gave us “simply that with which God is unsatisfied (sacrifice).”

The note sounded by the Report is quite different from what we read in the Bible and from what is preached, as I believe, from the pulpits of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Paul writes in Romans 4:25, “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.” We are justified by the blood of Jesus (Rom. 5:9). We are reconciled to God by the death of his Son (v. 10), not by the imputation of active obedience. Again and again both the Old and New Testaments lead us to the Christ crucified whom Paul proclaimed. Who can read Isaiah 53 and conclude that the death of Christ only puts us back to where Adam was before the fall?

We have two sacraments, both of which focus our attention on Christ who died to save us from sin and its consequences. We have no sacraments that celebrate the imputation of active obedience, and by the testimony of this Report itself very, very few texts that can even be thought of as lending any kind of plausible support to the doctrine of the imputation of active obedience. Anyone who reads through the hymnology of the Trinity Hymnal certainly does not come away with the idea that the sacrifice of Christ on the cross is “simply that with which God is unsatisfied.”

The sinless righteousness of Christ as a qualification for his sacrifice of atonement is not something that ought to be minimized as of little consequence next to the imputation of active obedience. I Peter 3:18, “For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.” Heb. 7:26, 27 shows us our need for a high priest who is “holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners.” When the Heidelberg Catechism asks the question, why must our mediator and deliverer be truly righteous (Q&A 16), the answer is not so that his lifelong, perfect obedience could be imputed to us as the ground of our justification. The answer is, he must be truly righteous because “a sinner could never pay for others.” The sinless righteousness of Christ as a qualification for the fulfillment of his priestly office is in the foreground in both Scripture and confession. The righteous one died for the unrighteous.

We come now to the biblical material presented in support of the imputation of active obedience as the ground of our justification and salvation. In view of the importance ascribed to this doctrine we would expect a body of scriptural evidence at least equal to and even surpassing the evidence we have for the death and resurrection of our Lord as the ground of our justification and salvation. The OP Report profoundly disappoints this expectation. The scriptural evidence offered is minimal, indirect, and of dubious validity.

At the beginning of D.3 two texts are mentioned in one sentence without further explanation. “Thus, when Jesus says that he must fulfill all righteousness (Matt 3:15) and when Paul announces that Christ was born ‘under the law’ to redeem us (Gal 4:4-5), it is very difficult to imagine that only passive obedience is in mind or active obedience simply in the sense of qualifying Christ to be an acceptable sacrifice.”

Well, is it really all that difficult?

Paul writes in Gal. 4:4 that Christ was born under law to redeem those under law. How does he redeem them? He tells us in 3:13 that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’” Christ redeems us from the curse of the law, and he does that by dying for us on the cross. He was born

under the law in order to secure the justification and salvation of those who were born under the law by his substitutionary death for them on the cross. This death is efficacious because he did not die for his own sins. The righteous one died for the unrighteous. Christ did, indeed, fulfill all righteousness, and the Lamb of God who died for us was a Lamb without spot or blemish.

It is not at all difficult to think that Paul has the passive obedience of Christ in mind in Gal. 4:4. The Report does not acknowledge that this much is actually required by the context, and the Report does not demonstrate that anything more is required.

In the succeeding context the Report cites two more passages without exploring them in any detail. “Thus, if our problem is lack of righteousness, understood in moral terms, then the righteousness of God must provide the solution. More specifically, however, what is this righteousness of God and how does it provide for our lack of righteousness in justification? Two passages just mentioned, Phil 3:9 and 2 Cor 5:21, speak very significantly of the righteousness of God for our justification coming to us ‘in Christ.’ The righteousness of God provides for our lack of righteousness only through Christ and his work. Christ mediates and communicates the righteousness of God.”

Phil. 3:9 reads, “and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.” The assumption of the Report is that the righteousness coming from God is the active obedience of Christ imputed to us as the ground of our salvation. But is this necessarily the case? What is “the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith?”

Paul uses this expression in Rom. 3:21, 22. “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.” Paul tells us what this righteousness is in verse 25. “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.” The righteousness that comes from God is the death of the Son of God on the cross, and it is ours by faith, faith that is faith in his blood. Rom. 3:21, 22 is the background for understanding Phil. 3:9. The background is not a works principle or a covenant of works.

This conclusion is confirmed by vs. 10, 11 following immediately on v. 9. “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.” Paul acknowledges his own failure in trying to achieve righteousness by the merit of his own works. He had been wrongly using the law of God in the Old Testament as though it embodied a works principle. Through the revelation of Jesus Christ he realized that righteousness was not something to be achieved by works, but was a gift to be received by faith, the forgiveness of his sins. Now with his sins forgiven by the death of Christ he longs for the power of Christ’s resurrection. It is through union with Christ in his death and resurrection that he will enter into eternal life, not through the imputation of active obedience. There is nothing in Phil. 3:9 about the imputation of active obedience. The passage directs us to the death and resurrection of Christ as the source of life for us.

The other text, 2 Cor. 5:21, reads, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” The Report does not exegete this passage. The assumption, again, seems to be that we become the righteousness of God through the imputation of the active obedience of Christ. But is that really the implication of this text?

Vs 18, 19 tells us that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, and explains how this reconciliation takes place, not through the imputation of active obedience but through the non-imputation of sin. The non-imputation of sin is forgiveness. Through faith in Christ God does not count the sins of men against them. He forgives their sins.

On what basis does God forgive human sin? V. 21 says that God made his Son who had no sin to be sin for us. Our sins were taken away from us and laid upon our Savior who died because of them. In that way, through the forgiveness of sin, we become the righteousness of God in Christ. There is nothing in the text or context about the imputation of active obedience. Our attention is focused on Christ who bore our sins so that we might be reconciled to God through the forgiveness of our sins.

We may also note the relevance of this text for a matter dealt with earlier in these comments. Paul accents the importance of the sinlessness of Christ. He had no sin. Paul does this not with a view to telling us that the perfect, lifelong righteousness of Christ is imputed to us for our justification, but to point out that Christ bore our sin. His sinlessness qualifies him to be the sin bearer for those whom he would save. This is in line with the emphasis in Hebrews 7:26, 27 and 1 Peter 3:18.

The Report deals with the four texts mentioned to this point in a rather cursory fashion. The text receiving the most attention is Rom. 5:16-19, especially v. 18. The Report’s case for the imputation of active obedience appears to rest primarily on this one passage.

The Report’s treatment of this passage begins with these words: “Paul fills in the picture in Rom 5:16-19. Here he speaks specifically of our righteousness as the obedience of Christ, the Second Adam. That Paul’s concern in this passage is with justification and the covenant of works is clear.”

It is clear that Paul is dealing with justification, but it is not at all clear that his concern is with a covenant of works. The covenant of works and the works principle that lies behind it is the contribution of the Committee of Six. As they have told us from the beginning, this covenant necessitates the imputation of the active obedience for our salvation, and so it is not surprising that the Committee finds this doctrine in the text. This explains why the treatment of the passage is not so much a positive development of what the passage says, but a defense of the imputation of active obedience over against what others have said about the text. The covenant of works prescribes the exegesis. Really, the exegesis should have called into question the whole idea of a covenant of works.

The Committee is especially sensitive to the objection that can be brought to its position on the basis of v. 18. “The more likely reading of 5:18 contrasts the ‘one sin’ that brings condemnation with the ‘one righteous act’ that brings justification. Objectors claim that

reference to 'one' act seems odd if Paul was intending to point to Christ's active obedience, and therefore they believe that the scope is limited to the crucifixion, that is, his passive obedience."

The Report then goes on to specify three "serious weaknesses" in the objectors' interpretation of Rom. 5:18.

The first serious weakness is that "the crucifixion itself was not really one act of Christ." It was "a series of actions rather than a single act." Now if this reasoning is sound it is difficult to see how any act could qualify as a single act. Every act of righteousness can be analyzed in terms of component acts. It is then meaningless for Paul or anyone else to speak of one act of righteousness, or one righteous deed.

The second serious weakness is, "even on the assumption that the crucifixion was a single act, Christ's passive obedience cannot be equated with the crucifixion. His passive obedience was no more a single act than his active obedience was, since he suffered throughout his life and thereby learned obedience in order to become a perfect high priest (e.g., Heb 2:10, 17-18; 5:7-10). Therefore, even if Rom 5:18 refers only to passive obedience (as the objectors wish to understand it), it must refer to much more than the crucifixion."

It is difficult to know exactly what we are supposed to understand by this "weakness." By "passive obedience" we do mean the suffering of Christ as sin bearer, and as the Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 37, rightly points out, Christ sustained the anger of God against the sin of the whole human race during his whole life on earth, "but especially at the end." By "one act of righteousness" Paul is directing our attention to what happened at the end, the sacrifice of atonement. We must remember that it is not suffering that atones for sin, but specifically the death of our Lord. He died for our sins (Rom. 4:25). No amount of suffering apart from death can atone for sin. That is why Paul says that we are justified by the blood of Christ (Rom. 3:25; 5:9). We can say that Christ's passive obedience includes much more than his death on the cross, but it is his death that atones for sin, and it is his death that Paul has in view in Rom. 3:18 with the expression, "one act of righteousness," or "one righteous deed."

The third weakness is, "it is unwarranted to understand the crucifixion only in terms of passive obedience. Christ's going to the cross was a supreme act of love toward God and neighbor, and therefore was an aspect of his active obedience as well, the positive fulfilling of the law of God" (italics original).

The weakness pointed out here is really the weakness of the scholastic distinction between active and passive obedience, a distinction that like the covenant of works is a later development in Reformed theology. Of course Christ was actively obedient in laying down his life in submission to the will of his Father in heaven! But we are still far removed from saying that the lifelong perfect fulfillment of the law is imputed as the meritorious ground of our justification in terms of some works principle. In laying down his life Jesus is not operating in terms of some works principle. He is atoning for our sin. That is why we are justified by his blood.

If Paul is not referring to the death of Christ as the “one act of righteousness,” what does the Committee of Six think he has in view? How does the Committee seek to explain Paul’s choice of words? The Report finds it plausible to conclude that by one act of righteousness Paul “refers to the whole course of Christ’s obedience.” Here the Report appeals to the view of John Murray who held that Paul is referring to the whole of Christ’s obedience in its “compact unity.” That is to say, one act of obedience really means all his acts of obedience. I don’t find this plausible unless there is powerful warrant for it, and I don’t see the powerful warrant either in the Report or in the text of Scripture.

The Report develops its argument in terms of the analogy between Adam and Christ, an analogy that is surely in the text. But once again this analogy is laid out in terms of a covenant of works grounded in a works principle. “Adam was born righteous and continued in that state for a time, but God required a course of obedience to his law, the passing of a probationary test, for Adam to attain to a state of irreversible judicial approbation and eschatological life.” The death of Christ secures only forgiveness resulting in moral guiltlessness. “But that was not enough for justification resulting in eschatological life.” Thus the covenant of works requires us to understand “one act of righteousness” as all of Christ’s acts of righteousness in their compact unity.

Once again the Committee of Six is telling us that the death and resurrection of Christ do not really save us. They only get us back to square one, to where Adam was before the fall. Now eternal life has to be merited by the perfect performance of good works. We lose the centrality of the death and resurrection of Christ and yield to the centrality of the imputation of active obedience for our salvation. None of this is in Rom. 5. The covenant of works and the necessary imputation of active obedience is a theological mechanism imposed on the text of Romans 5 from outside and without warrant from the text itself.

Taken together the three “serious weaknesses” noted above exhibit the cramped, scholastic type of reasoning that betrays the weakness of this Report as a whole. The real question in connection with Rom. 5:18 is whether there is anything in the context of this verse that would help us to understand what Paul has in view with his reference to the one act of righteousness, and of course there is. Briefly I would point out just three things.

First, there is the analogy between Adam and Christ within v. 18 itself. We read there about the one trespass of Adam. No one is going to argue that this one act of transgression is really a composite of many acts. It is not talking about a lifelong failure to keep the law of God seen in its “compact unity” that is now imputed to us for our condemnation. The one trespass of Adam is his eating of the forbidden fruit contrary to the command of God. Now comes the analogy with Christ. The one righteous deed is not a lifetime of perfect obedience exhibited as a “compact unity,” but the death of Christ that secures our release from the curse of sin and death into which the one unrighteous deed of Adam plunged us. The analogy between Adam and Christ is perfectly understandable entirely apart from the mechanism of a covenant of works based on a works principle.

Second, the broader context of Rom. 5:18 repeatedly focuses on the death of Christ as that which secures the forgiveness of our sin, and forgiveness is what Paul means by

justification. I developed this point at length in Backbone of the Bible, pp. 87-89. Beginning in chapter 3 Paul describes the righteousness from God that secures the forgiveness of our sin as the sacrifice of atonement (3:25; 4:7, 8). We are justified by the blood of Christ (3:25; 5:9). “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (4:25). This is the background for understanding what Paul means by the one act of righteousness. The background is not an imported covenant of works rooted in a works principle. The great weakness of the Report’s treatment of Rom. 5:18 is its failure to take this contextual background into consideration.

Third, the movement of the argument in Romans points in the same direction. In chapters 1, 2, 3 Paul is concerned to convince us that we all stand under condemnation because of our sin, especially those who have the law and who have made their supposed sinlessness their boast. In chapters 3:21 through the end of chapter 5 Paul shows us that we are righteous not because we have kept the law—we haven’t—but because God has forgiven our sins in the blood of Jesus. If so, then why don’t we sin all the more so that the grace of forgiveness might abound? This is the question at the beginning of chapter 6. Paul goes on to show that by his death and resurrection Jesus has not only done away with the guilt and penalty of sin (3:21-5:25) but also with the corruption and power of sin (6, 7, 8). Justification and sanctification through Jesus Christ and faith in him is the sum and substance of the gospel. In the words of Lord’s Day 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism, “He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.”

The discussion in D.3 of “The [Imputation of the] Active Obedience of Christ” concludes with a discussion of Phil. 2:5-11, drawing attention to the obedience of Christ throughout his life even to the point of death on the cross in v. 8, and the connecting word at the beginning of v. 9, “therefore,” or “wherefore.” The argument is that “Christ offered a true human obedience that was accepted by the Father and deserved an eschatological reward.” Further, “Crucial for the present discussion is that Paul describes Christ’s exaltation as the consequence of his obedience and his obedience as the cause of his exaltation.” In other words, what the Report finds in this passage, not surprisingly, is a works principle. It quotes the words of Geerhardus Vos who described this works principle as “value received” for “work rendered.”

From my perspective Phil. 2:5-11 should not be understood in terms of a works principle any more than the vast array of passages in the Bible that link blessing to obedience and curses to disobedience should be understood in that way. The obedience that the Lord requires of his people is the obedience of faith, not the obedience of meritorious achievement as the Pharisees thought. Without faith it is impossible to please the Lord. The fact that obedience is the fruit and evidence of faith is made plain for us in a passage like Hebrews 11. The obedience of Christ throughout his life and even to the point of death is also the obedience of faith. With his dying breath on the cross Jesus cries out, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). As Peter tells us, “he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (I Peter 2:23). He trusted his Father in heaven throughout his life and even in death.

We should not trivialize the suffering and death of Christ by thinking that it wasn’t so bad because he knew he would rise from the dead on the third day anyway and be exalted to heaven. He trusted the Lord God, and he received by faith what his Father promised to him. “After the

suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied” (Isaiah 53:13). “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2). We are reminded of the faith of Abraham who looked forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God (Heb. 11:10). The connection with Phil. 2:5-11 is immediately apparent. This is not an abstract works principle of “value received” for “work rendered,” but the obedience of faith that receives what the Father promises.

In any case, there is nothing in the passage about the imputation of the active obedience of Christ for the justification of sinners, and that is the issue of concern in this section of the Report. What we do have is an application to our situation that quite escapes the attention of the Committee of Six. In v. 5 Paul admonishes us, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” Does Paul mean, then, that we should try to work for our salvation the way Christ did according to a works principle? Does he mean, in the words of Vos, “work rendered and value received”? Is that why Paul goes on to say in v. 12 that we should continue to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, because we are saved by works? Does he combine grace with works when he says in v. 13 that God works in us to will and to act according to his good pleasure?

The unwarranted introduction of a works principle into Phil. 2 clearly leads us far astray from the gospel of sovereign grace. There is no works principle in the passage, and there is certainly no doctrine of the imputation of active obedience.

What Paul is commending to us as exemplary is the humility of Christ in his faith and submission to the will of God, even to the point of death. He makes the application in v. 12 when he says, “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” Paul is not urging the obedience of meritorious performance but the obedience of faith.

Believers should humble themselves in faith and submission to the will of their Father in heaven as Christ did. And sometimes believers are persecuted for their faith, even to the point of death. The Lord will not forget about them anymore than he forgot about his Son. They will receive what he has promised to them, the crown of life (James 1:12); and promises are always received by faith. The thought is similar to what we have in Heb. 10:36. “You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.”

The Report’s discussion of the imputation of active obedience began by pointing to the theological background of this doctrine in the covenant of works and the consequent necessity for the imputation of active obedience. The death and resurrection of Christ is not enough to save us. Without the imputation of active obedience there is no gospel, and that is of course true if our point of departure is the works principle and the covenant of works.

My point is that this is not where the text of Scripture takes us. The evidence provided by the OP Report on Justification is neither convincing nor compelling. Justification is the forgiveness of sins grounded in the death of Christ. His sacrifice of atonement is the

righteousness that is the ground of our salvation. In Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven (justification) and we are renewed in righteousness and holiness (sanctification). He saves us from sin and all its consequences so that we can face the final judgment with confidence, the assurance of faith. The mechanism of a covenant of works based on a works principle and necessitating the imputation of active obedience is neither necessary nor warranted.

I certainly recognize that at the present time my view concerning the imputation of active obedience is not the prevailing view in the evangelical Reformed community of which the OPC is a part. I would certainly not want to exclude from the evangelical Reformed community those to hold to the prevailing view based on a works principle and a covenant of works as represented in the OP Report. At the same time I believe the view the OP Report seeks to refute is one that cannot be dismissed quite as summarily as happens in the Report. There is still plenty of room for further study of God's word, for discussion, and for learning. Like the saints in Berea, we must have the patience to examine the Scripture to see whether our theological traditions are true. As John Murray taught us, "When any generation is content to rely upon its theological heritage and refuses to explore for itself the riches of divine revelation, then declension is already underway and heterodoxy will be the lot of the succeeding generation" (Collected Writings, Vol. 4, p. 8).