

Examining the Imputation of the Active Obedience of Christ

A Study in Calvinistic Sacred Cow-ism

By Steve Lehrer and Geoff Volker

Have you ever found yourself simply in awe of someone's intellect and ability to communicate? Have you ever so identified with a person and held him in such high esteem you simply trust what he says is right? If you have, then you are fortunate to have someone like that in your life. But you might also be in danger. You may be in danger of trusting a man to such a degree that you neglect to evaluate everything through the lens of God's Word. His mistakes will inevitably become your mistakes unless you are careful to hold Scripture above your mentor. As we examine the imputation of the Active Obedience of Jesus Christ, the question before us is "What does Scripture say?" Those of us who are of the Calvinistic theological tradition¹ should be diligently seeking to sort out biblical fact from system or tradition driven conclusions. That is, if there is some belief that we hold to be biblically true and its truth is an essential part of our theological system or heritage, yet we cannot establish its validity on any text of scripture, then we must throw that belief out; perhaps even throw out our theological system; or ignore certain parts of our heritage.

Sacred Cows and Biblical Faithfulness

I (Steve) come from a home that is of religiously mixed background. Although my parents do not take their religious professions seriously as adults, my dad identifies himself as Jewish and my mom styles herself a Christian. When I was about 10 years old I began to question my dad's practice of labeling himself as a Jew. I asked him why he did this since he never went to temple, he never celebrated any Jewish holidays, and he never did anything else that was distinctly Jewish. He told me that he was born Jewish and he will always be Jewish "and that is the end of this discussion." Well, thanks be to God that my family was almost always willing to discuss things and ask questions, so we eventually continued the discussion and came to the conclusion that the only meaningful way that my father was Jewish was by his ethnicity. But, looking back, I can see that I had begun to raise questions about what my father considered a "sacred cow." A sacred cow is a doctrine or belief that one cannot examine and weigh to consider its truth claims without upsetting people. My father was a Jew—end of discussion. I can hear that cow "mooring" even now. An example of a sacred cow in Calvinistic theological circles is the imputation of the active obedience of Jesus Christ. It is a doctrine that is a lynchpin of the system of theology known as Covenant Theology.² It has been handed down from one generation to another without being questioned; after the passage of time it has come to be known as fact.

We're Guilty

Both authors of this paper have done their formal training in seminaries that taught Covenant Theology. Geoff Volker received his MDiv from Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis. Steve Lehrer received his Master's Degree in Theology from Westminster Seminary in Escondido, California. We both believed and taught the imputation of the active obedience of Christ countless times. Only after we were challenged by someone to reexamine our understanding of this subject did we (for the first time!) examine all the passages used to defend it. We must admit that when this doctrine was first questioned, we thought it was so obviously biblical that it was a waste of time to discuss. But, after persistent polite prodding from a few patient friends, we examined the issue biblically and the result of our study is the substance of this article. So we are not only guilty of teaching what we now believe to be unbiblical doctrine, but we are also guilty of ignoring those who tried to point it out to us! So we urge you to read on rather than to make the same mistakes we made.

A Theological Disclaimer

Listen up and listen good! We are NOT rejecting the imputation of the work of Jesus Christ on the cross (his passive obedience) to the believer. I hope you caught the emphasis there. But for the sake of clarity, we will say it again but we will say it positively this time—we affirm the imputation of the sin-bearing work of Jesus Christ on the cross to the believer. The believer acquires the results of the sin-bearing work of Christ by faith alone in Christ alone. This faith is the result of God's irresistible grace alone. We are only rejecting the imputation of the active obedience of Christ, and we reject it because we cannot find it in Scripture. We wholeheartedly embrace the imputation of the sin-bearing work of Christ as absolutely essential and foundational for our acceptance with the Father—essential to being declared righteous in his sight. The imputation of Christ's cross work is the *sine qua non* of the Christian faith.

¹ When we use the term "Calvinistic" we are referring to Calvinism only as it touches on soteriology—the doctrines of grace or the five points of Calvinism.

²We explain this connection further when we consider the Covenant of Works later in the paper.

There is a current controversy in evangelicalism that is raging under the heading of the “New Perspective on Justification.” This “New Perspective” seems at some point to be denying the imputation of both the active and passive obedience of Christ. It is therefore rejecting imputation *en toto*. We are as far from the New Perspective as the east is from the west. We believe the New Perspective is a denial of the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone and therefore we believe it is heresy.

Defining Terms

As you examine the biblical foundation of any doctrine, your first order of business is to accurately understand that doctrine. In order to understand it, you must understand the terms used in describing and defending it. The following is a list of terms and their definitions:

Active (or Preceptive) Obedience: The perfect obedience of Jesus Christ to the Mosaic Law.

Passive (or Penal) obedience: Christ’s sacrificial death by which He paid the penalty for the sins of the elect.³

Imputation: Getting something that you did not earn. Imputation, rather abstractly, describes how all that Jesus accomplished for us gets to us. So, one might say that imputation communicates that all that Jesus did on the cross is placed or wired into your “spiritual bank account” when you believe.

Righteousness: Acceptance with God. Righteousness, in the context of salvation, is whatever it is that God requires in order to be accepted by Him.

Making a *Molehill Out of a Mountain*

Before we can begin to discuss the imputation of the active obedience of Christ, we must consider Christ’s passive obedience. The great reformed theologian Louis Berkhof believes that the passive obedience of Jesus Christ imputed to the believer has limitations as to what it does for the believer:

“...if He (Christ) had merely paid the penalty (for the believer), without meeting the original demands of the law (for the believer), He would have left man in the position of Adam before the fall, still confronted with the task of obtaining eternal life in the way of obedience. By His active obedience, however, He carried His people beyond that point and gave them a claim to everlasting life.”⁴

If only the passive obedience of Christ is imputed to the believer, according to Berkhof, this would not give him eternal life. He would have to obey God perfectly and earn eternal life on His own. The man who only has the passive obedience of Christ imputed to him would be in a spiritual Switzerland— stuck in neutral. Is the distinguished Louis Berkhof right? We don’t think so.

Rather than turning to another brilliant theologian to give a contrary opinion, let’s consider what Scripture actually says that Jesus accomplished by His death on the cross— His passive obedience. Hebrews is a great book to turn to when considering the passive obedience of Christ because it is the book of the Bible that spills the most ink concerning Christ’s sacrificial work. Hebrews chapter 10 extols the greatness of the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ in contrast to the repetitive but ineffective sacrifices offered by the Levitical priests:

³ Some folks object to our limitations on the definition of passive obedience. They do not think it should be thought of “solely” as a sacrificial concept. Louis Berkhof, in his classic volume on systematic theology, seems to be in agreement with this objection when he writes: “...it was also part of Christ’s passive obedience, that He lived in subjection to the law. His moving about in the form of a servant constituted an important element of his sufferings” (379-380). We can certainly understand wanting to take all of our Lord’s suffering into account in this doctrine, but a problem arises when we relate his sufferings before the cross to the doctrine of imputation. Were ALL of Christ’s sufferings were imputed to us, even those that were not sin-bearing? It would be interesting to find Scripture to support this...Berkhof doesn’t make any attempt to say such a thing or support it biblically and maybe he doesn’t even believe that all of what he terms “passive obedience” is imputed. This broad understanding of passive obedience *when it relates to imputation* muddies the water and is not biblically supportable. Happily, Berkhof later also says, “His passive obedience consisted in His paying the penalty of sin by His suffering and death, and thus discharging the debt of all His people” (381). It is simpler to work with this more limited understanding of Passive Obedience *when thinking about imputation*.

⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 381.

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy (Hebrews 10:11-14).

This passage speaks only about Christ's priestly sacrifice for the sins of His people. It says nothing about His righteous life. The sacrifice of Christ or the imputation of the passive obedience of Christ does two things for the believer. First, it makes the believer perfect—that is the believer is viewed as though he had obeyed the law perfectly (v. 14a). Second, it purchases a work of the Spirit in the life of the believer that guarantees that he will grow in holiness (v. 14b). Our concern here is for the perfect status the believer is given because of the imputation of the passive obedience of Christ. In the context of the book, "perfection" is referring to the state of moral innocence that allows one to be accepted by God—to stand in the presence of God and to approach Him boldly for grace and mercy in times of need. Consider the verses that immediately follow the passage above:

The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds." Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more. "And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin. Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water (Hebrews 10:15-22).

The one priestly sacrifice of Christ on the cross is identified here as the New Covenant. It gives us complete forgiveness of our sins—past, present, and future—making us perfect in God's eyes. Christ's passive obedience imputed to us allows us into the very presence of God! Notice that there is no mention of the active obedience of Christ anywhere and yet the passive obedience of Christ is said to be the sum and substance of the New Covenant and a guarantee that those who get this passive obedience imputed into their account are right with God, perfect—justified. What more could you possibly need to have eternal life? If God loves you and welcomes you into His presence because of Christ's vicarious death and if no sin can ever be charged against you because of Christ's sacrifice, then what more is necessary for God to fully accept you and to give you eternal salvation?

Some argue that sinners not only need their sins forgiven to have eternal life, but they need a "positive righteousness" to obtain eternal life with God. Consider Wayne Grudem's thoughts on this:

"Christ had to live a life of perfect obedience to God in order to earn righteousness for us. He had to obey the law for his whole life on our behalf so that the positive merits of his perfect obedience would be counted for us. Sometimes this is called Christ's 'active obedience,' while his suffering and dying for our sins is called his 'passive obedience.' Paul says his goal is that he may be found in Christ, 'not having a righteousness of [his] own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith' (Phil. 3:9). It is not just moral neutrality that Paul knows he needs from Christ (that is, a clean slate with sins forgiven), but a positive moral righteousness."⁵

Grudem is clearly saying that the brand of righteousness that the imputation of Christ's passive obedience obtains for the believer is not enough. We need to consider this objection in light of the primary teaching passage on righteousness in the New Testament⁶ which is Romans 3:21-26:

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. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 570-571.

⁶For a fuller treatment Romans 3:20-4:12 as it relates to the imputation of Christ's righteousness, see the appendix to this paper entitled "Interpreting Scripture With Nothing Up My Sleeves."

Earlier we defined “righteousness” as: “Acceptance with God. It is, in the context of salvation, whatever God requires in order to be accepted by Him.” The wrath of God against sinful man is the big problem highlighted in Romans up through chapter 3 and verse 20. The law simply makes it clear that sinful man is utterly and justly condemnable before the God of heaven and earth. The solution that this passage gives us to that problem is the cross, which results in the believer becoming “righteous” or “justified.” Does this “righteousness” or “justification” necessitate a “positive” or “law-keeping” element that goes beyond payment for sins? If so, the passage in the New Testament that speaks most directly to this issue makes no mention of it.

The righteousness from God is revealed apart from law. This means that we can become righteous without perfect obedience to God. In fact, we can become righteous even after having transgressed God’s holy law. How is this done? The first thing that is revealed to us is that it is done “by faith.” We acquire this precious righteousness simply by believing or trusting in Jesus Christ. That is, by trusting in Him alone to save us from God’s wrath because of His substitutionary work on our behalf, His work is then imputed to us. But what is the work of Christ that is spoken of here that has such a close connection to the believer becoming “righteous”? This passage is solely concerned with the imputation of Christ’s passive obedience. Paul speaks of “redemption,” “sacrifice of atonement,” and “faith in his blood.” If you get your sins forgiven because of the sacrifice of Christ, according to this passage you are “righteous.” This is in perfect harmony with Hebrews chapter 10. It is interesting that in this passage, which is the clearest passage in the New Testament about the acquisition of the righteousness of God, there is nothing about the imputation of the active obedience of Christ. Perhaps Berkhof and Grudem are portraying the imputation of the passive obedience of Christ as being less effective than the Scriptures actually say that it is. Perhaps they are unwittingly making a theological molehill out of the theological mountain that is the passive obedience of Christ imputed to the believer.

Making a Mountain out of a Molehill

If some believers who affirm the imputation of the active obedience of Christ seem to make a theological molehill out of a theological mountain, they also seem to be doing the opposite and making a theological mountain out of a theological molehill. Allow me to begin my explanation by asking a question: If the imputation of the passive obedience of Christ makes the believer unconditionally accepted by God and therefore completely righteous, then what more does he need? Again, if the sacrificial death of Christ is in fact so wonderfully powerful and efficacious as to completely justify sinners and ensure their claim on eternal life with God, what more would the imputation of the active obedience of Christ give you?

In my experience, the sacred cow called the imputation of the active obedience of Christ is a litmus test for orthodoxy. If you deny this, it is as if you have denied the faith. This is making a mountain out of a molehill. We have just shown that in Scripture the passive obedience of Christ secures eternal life for the believer, allowing him direct access to the God of heaven and earth. Even if the imputation of the active obedience of Christ is biblical, since it gives you nothing that the imputation of the passive obedience of Christ does not give you—righteousness and eternal life—it would seem that it is not essential to the faith.

Before we even get to the exegetical portion of this paper, I would like you to consider whether the imputation of the active obedience of Christ even qualifies as a molehill. We have shown that righteousness is gained for the believer by the substitutionary death of Christ. Eternal life is the result of this amazing and merciful cross work. It would seem that the imputation of the active obedience of Christ is a theological redundancy. Theologians claim that it brings positive righteousness, but a believer has that with Christ’s imputed death. They claim it secures eternal life, yet a believer has that as well through Christ’s cross work on his behalf. Finally they claim that the imputation of Christ’s active obedience brings one beyond any relationship Adam ever had with God so that there is no need to work to earn anything. Praise God, the believer has this too, through the imputation of Christ’s passive obedience. If the imputation of the active obedience of Christ is biblical, I will embrace it. But since it is a theological redundancy at best, it should barely qualify as a theological molehill. Therefore it should never be used as a test for orthodoxy and should be left in the shadows of the mountains, where all molehills belong.

Wag The Dog

Many moons ago when I (Steve) graduated from high school, I had the privilege of being able to pick the college I wanted to attend. At that time I was as lost as the devil. Rather than thinking about what educational advantages one college had over another, I only took into consideration the climate, recreational opportunities, and the ratio of males to females. My decision process had the tail wagging the dog. The most important issue driving my decision making process in picking the right school should have been getting a solid educational foundation laid for further studies or career opportunities. But my main purpose for going to college was...well let’s just say that it had far more to do with the tail of the dog rather than the dog itself. Much of the interaction we have had with people about this issue of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ has been strange. The objections people

have raised to us have rarely had anything to do with Scripture. It gives us a sneaking suspicion that this theological doctrine is a direct result of the tail wagging the dog.

Why is the imputation of the active obedience of Christ such a big deal? It is a big deal first and foremost because it is a lynchpin in the system of theology known as Covenant Theology. The verses used as proof-texts and the exegetical work done by Covenant Theologians over centuries *on this issue* is shockingly sparse and void of sound biblical spade work. That is because the tail (the system of theology) is wagging the dog (Scripture itself). The imputation of the active obedience of Christ has to be in Scripture, according to Covenant Theology, because it is the foundation of how the Bible fits together and how salvation works.

The Covenant of Works

Just what is the Covenant of Works and why is it so important to Covenant Theology and the imputation of the active obedience of Christ? Strangely enough, Wayne Grudem, who is not a Covenant Theologian, has perhaps the best description of the Covenant of Works and its relationship to the imputation to the active obedience of Christ:

“In this statement to Adam about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil [‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you eat of it you shall die’ (Gen. 2:16-17)] there is a promise of punishment for disobedience—death...In the promise of punishment for disobedience there is implicit a promise of blessing for obedience. This blessing would consist of not receiving death, and the implication is that the blessing would be the opposite of receiving “death.” It would involve physical life that would not end and spiritual life in terms of a relationship with God that would go on forever. The presence of the ‘tree of life...in the midst of the garden’ (Gen. 2:9) also signified the promise of eternal life with God if Adam and Eve had met the conditions of a covenant relationship by obeying God completely until he decided that their time of testing was finished. After the fall, God removed Adam and Eve from the garden, partly so that they would not be able to take from the tree of life ‘and eat, and live forever.’”⁷

The way this works in Covenant Theology is that just as the first Adam represented a people and was under a Covenant of Works, so also, the last Adam—Jesus Christ—represents a people and is under a Covenant of Works. Adam failed to obey God perfectly and earned condemnation for His people. But where Adam failed, Christ succeeded. Jesus Christ succeeded in obeying God perfectly when He lived a sinless life under the Mosaic Law. In doing so, He earned justification or righteousness for His people. Dr. Grudem states this component of Covenant Theology quite well:

“If Christ had only earned forgiveness of sins for us, then we would not merit heaven. Our guilt would have been removed, but we would simply be in the position of Adam and Eve before they had done anything good or bad and before they had passed a time of probation successfully. To be established in righteousness forever and to have their fellowship with God made sure forever, Adam and Eve had to obey God perfectly over a period of time. Then God would have looked on their faithful obedience with pleasure and delight, and they would have lived with him in fellowship forever.

For this reason, Christ had to live a life of perfect obedience to God in order to earn righteousness for us. He had to obey the law for his whole life on our behalf so that the positive merits of his perfect obedience would be counted for us.”⁸

This understanding of how Scripture fits together sounds so clear and so right. It shows not only the importance of the relationship between Adam and Christ, but it makes the futility and even the *hubris* of trying to earn our own salvation by works so clear. But there is one big problem. Although there are many individual truths in this scheme, Scripture does not seem to teach the scheme as a whole.

What Will The Weather in Be Like in Heaven?

“What will the weather be like in heaven?” I am fairly sure that there will have to be some form of weather on the new heavens and new earth. Certainly we will have physical bodies that can enjoy it. Will it be sunny or rainy? Will it be a winter wonderland or a Mediterranean paradise? Perhaps since hell will be hot (or is that just a metaphor?), heaven will be cold. The answer for all of us who have not yet been to heaven is simple: “I don’t know what the weather in heaven will be because Scripture doesn’t tell us!” Scripture does speak about heaven, but God never tells us anything about the weather. Much of what Grudem said above is like this question about weather in heaven—any answer is pure speculation. The entire argument might be correct, but if what he says is not clearly

⁷ Ibid., 516.

⁸ Ibid., 570.

stated in Scripture, then it is just pure speculation. It can neither be confirmed nor denied. It is uncheckable. In fact, if God does not deem important enough even to tell us about issues like the weather in heaven or the so-called probation period of Adam, it is a safe bet that we don't need to know. All that Dr Grudem wrote is the standard understanding of the Covenant of Works and its relationship to the work of Christ. As we said earlier, we embraced this understanding without question for many years. But we would ask that you would entertain some of our questions about this understanding of Scripture and just mull them over as you look at Scripture.

Those who believe in the Covenant of Works understand that within the arrangement between God and Adam there was an "implicit promise of blessing for obedience." But our question is, "How can you be certain if it is not stated explicitly?" Above, Dr. Grudem along with Covenant Theologians, posit that the tree of life is that which "signified the promise of eternal life with God if Adam and Eve had met the conditions of a covenant relationship by obeying God completely until he decided that their time of testing was finished." Does Scripture tell us that the tree signified this? Does God's Word say that there was a "time of testing" or "probation period" anywhere in the text of Genesis? Does God ever say that Adam only had to obey the command for a certain period of time? Does God ever say that if Adam did obey the commandment that God would allow him to eat from the tree of life? Does the text say that if Adam and Eve obeyed that they would be "established in righteousness forever and...have their fellowship with God made sure forever"? Where in Scripture is forgiveness of sins ever said to be insufficient to gain acceptance with God, or as Grudem puts it, "If Christ had only earned forgiveness of sins for us, then we would not merit heaven. Our guilt would have been removed, but we would simply be in the position of Adam and Eve before they had done anything good or bad and before they had passed a time of probation successfully"? There might have been a probation period. But if Scripture doesn't tell us this, then it is just an interesting idea and nothing more.

Perhaps it will be beach weather in heaven. I wonder if I'll need sunscreen...

The Covenant of Works—What's in a Name?

We do not believe that it is wise to refer to God's relationship with Adam as a "covenant." We do believe that God gave Adam a command with a promise of punishment if broken. But if this command and this promise is not called a covenant by the authors of Scripture, we must think twice about describing it by that name ourselves. The reason using the word "covenant" to describe events in Scripture that are not called covenants should be rejected is because of the importance of the word "covenant" in Scripture and the place of prominence the concept has in our theological systems. The danger of calling something a covenant that Scripture does not refer to as a covenant increases the likelihood of making something a cornerstone of our theology that in fact is not an emphasis in Scripture. This of course would lead to an unbalanced and unbiblical theological system.

We want to be very clear. We are not saying that you always have to use biblical terms to describe biblical concepts (even when those concepts are foundational to our theological systems). The Bible never uses the term 'person' when referring to the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, Christians are justified in this application because the concept of the personhood of the Holy Spirit is clear in Scripture. We find that we are forced to acknowledge the personhood of the Holy Spirit from the clear teaching of Scripture. The evidence in Scripture does not allow us to believe that the Holy Spirit is simply an impersonal force. Some of these evidences are actions of the Holy Spirit that are driven by purpose and intelligence as well as the fact that the authors of Scripture referred to the Spirit by using personal pronouns like "him" and "his." So the concept of the "personhood" of the Holy Spirit is an important doctrine although the term is never used to describe Him in Scripture. Thus, I think it can be a valid practice to understand a person or event in Scripture by using a term that Scripture does not in fact use to describe that person or event.

So, the fundamental problem is *not* in assigning the word "covenant" to events in Scripture that Scripture itself does not call covenants, but rather the problem is the place you give those events in your theological system precisely *because* you designate them "covenants." I think this happens very naturally because the term "covenant" in Scripture, unlike the term "person," is a high profile and extremely important term. Almost invariably covenant theologians use the concept of covenant, whether it is the Covenant of Redemption, the Covenant of Works or the Covenant of Grace, to illustrate the continuity of Scripture and God's work in salvation. But Scripture uses the term, almost without exception, to illustrate discontinuity.

We return again to the most basic question, "Is it biblical?" Even if the relationship between God and Adam in the Garden is technically a covenant, God places no importance on that fact. If Scripture does not use the term "covenant" when referring to God's relationship to Adam but uses it of other pivotal events, perhaps we should reserve the term for those events God calls covenants.⁹ Consider whether refraining from calling the arrangement a

⁹ Hosea 6:7 is often cited as biblical proof that God call's the relationship between God and Adam a covenant: "Like Adam (or "as at Adam" ; or "Like men"), they have broken the covenant- they were unfaithful to me there." Using this text to support the massive weight of the covenant of works seems unwise. Not only are there other interpretive options for this text such as taking Adam as the name of a location (Joshua 3:16) at which some rebellion occurred,

covenant would do damage to your theological system and whether your system in turn drives you to label the arrangement a covenant.

Rejecting the “Covenant of Works” Without Rejecting the Principle of Works

Salvation can “theoretically” be earned by perfect heart-act obedience to God. In addition, even the smallest act of disobedience earns God’s infinite and eternal wrath. We do not need the “Covenant of Works” schema to embrace these facts. These statements actually have clear biblical foundations that can be verified by simple exegesis.

If we turn our attention to the Old Covenant and examine the nature of that covenant under which Christ was born, we will find that it was a “covenant of works.” That is, we find that the condition for blessing was perfect obedience to the commands of that Covenant and cursing and wrath followed violation of any of those commands:

Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites" (Exodus 19:3-6).

If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God...(Deuteronomy 28:1-2).

However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you...(Deuteronomy 28:15).

Although there are many places one could turn in the New Testament to support this doctrine, the book of Galatians is the *locus classicus*. The book of Galatians is the great antidote for any fool who desires to earn God’s acceptance by works. Now, Paul does not rebuke the Galatians because salvation by works is an unbiblical concept. He rebukes them because it takes perfect obedience in order to gain eternal life by works and they should know this and also realize that they are unable to achieve such a thing:

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith." The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them." 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" (Galatians 3:10-13).

If you desire to be saved, even just in part, by earning or meriting your salvation, then your salvation will not be gained by faith but by obedience to the law. But make no mistake—you actually have to “do” the law to be saved in this manner (v.12). James tells us that even one violation of God’s law is treated by God as if you violated every law: “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it” (James 2:10). Even in this context where Paul is clearly writing about Christ’s work in relation to salvation by faith and by law, Paul does not mention the active obedience of Christ. Paul does not write that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by obeying the law perfectly on our behalf. But Paul does write about Christ “becoming a curse for us” by His work on the cross—His passive obedience.

The fear of many believers is that if you deny this Covenant of Works schema, you will have to abandon the crucial biblical understanding of the relationship of salvation and works as well as the seriousness of sin. But notice that establishing the biblical foundations of the relationship of salvation and works of the law, as we have done above, can be done without any reference to the Covenant of Works said to have been made by God with Adam in the Garden. Establishing the biblical truth concerning our accountability to God for keeping His commands in the New Covenant era can also be done without reference to God’s relationship with Adam. Consider Romans 6:23:

but also within the ranks of covenant theology there are many who do not see this text as supporting the existence of a covenant of works in the garden (As an example of this see “The Adamic Administration,” in *The Collected Writings of John Murray* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977], 47-59). Even if one were to grant that this text does call the relationship in the garden between God and Adam “a covenant,” can this rather obscure verse bear the full weight of the doctrine? We leave this matter for the reader to decide.

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Paul is simply saying that when you break the commands that apply to you in the New Covenant era, what you earn from God is eternal wrath in hell or spiritual death. You get the curse of God unless the Son takes the curse on your behalf. Unlike the Covenant of Works, the biblical foundations of this doctrine can be examined and verified by reading and interpreting clear texts of Scripture.

Considering Scriptures Used to Support the Imputation of the Active Obedience of Christ

Romans 5:18-19

This text is one of the most commonly cited in support of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ. For Robert Reymond, in his most excellent one volume systematic theology, the “fact” that these verses refer to the active obedience of Christ is almost self-evident and without need of argumentation. His view comes under the subtitle “Christ’s Entire Life Work ‘One Righteous Act’ of obedience” which gives us a sneak preview of his understanding of Romans 5:18. His comments simply amplify the subtitle:

“...it is necessary first to note that under girding all the rich and variegated terminology that the Scriptures employ to describe Christ’s cross work, there is one comprehensive, all-embracing, unifying feature of his entire life and ministry, which is so essential to his cross work that without it none of the things that the Scriptures say about it could have been said with any degree of propriety. That feature is *the obedience of Christ* (see Romans 5:18).”¹⁰

This passage is the premier teaching passage on imputation. If Reymond is correct, and these verses are referring to Christ’s entire life of obedience, then the imputation of the active obedience of Christ is a biblical doctrine. But if this text does not refer to His obedient law keeping life, then we must look elsewhere for its biblical foundation. Let’s examine this passage:

Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. 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 (Romans 5:18-19).

The tight argument that Paul makes about the method by which God saves begins in verse 12. But Paul sets the stage in the beginning of chapter 5 where he speaks about the passive obedience of Christ:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!¹¹ Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (5:6-11).

¹⁰ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 629.

¹¹ The reference here to being “saved through His life” (v.10) is often understood by Covenant Theologians to refer to the imputation of the active obedience of Christ—that would make life refer to the obedient life of Christ prior to His work on the cross. But if you notice, verse 9 begins an argument from the lesser to the greater in which there is a temporal aspect. Here is my paraphrase of verse 9: “If *now* we have been justified through Christ’s blood, how much more shall we *finally* be saved through Him since he is resurrected and at the right hand of God in Heaven?” The contrasting is between all that Christ’s death does for us with all that His resurrected life will do for us in the future. It is amazing, but Christ’s resurrected life will actually do “more.” With this in mind, consider my paraphrase of verse 10: “If God reconciled us to Himself by the death of Christ while we were still God-haters and His enemies, How much more will God save us utterly and completely in the last day by the resurrected life of Christ now that we love Him and He loves us!” This is a wonderfully comforting verse that points to power of Christ’s resurrected life rather than His obedient suffering life. Romans 6:5 is another great example of this death to resurrection life pattern that Paul writes about: “If we have been united with Him like this in His death, we will certainly also be united with Him in His resurrection.”

The only connection that Paul has made between Christ and our justification is Christ's death on the cross. There is nothing in the text up to the beginning of the argument in verse 12 that would lead the reader to consider Christ's law-keeping in relation to the justification of sinners.

As we make our way into the passage at hand, the contrast is made between Adam's "one act" and Christ's "one act." Everyone who has read the book of Genesis understands that Adam's one act of disobedience refers to when he ate the fruit from the forbidden tree. It was not a reference to his entire life. One of the simple keys that tell us this is when Paul writes "one act" in reference to Adam's sin. I know of no interpreter who takes Adam's "one act" to refer to his entire life before God.

So as we consider verses 18 and 19, the question before us is, "What does Christ's 'one act of righteousness' (5:18) and his 'obedience' (5:19) refer to?" Some argue that although the "one act of righteous" might point to a single event, the use of the word "obedience" to describe this act opens it up to the possibility that Paul is referring to the entire life of Christ. Consider John Piper's words on this: "does not the word 'obedience' in Romans 5:19 without any limitation itself provide that clue? ...it seems arbitrary to draw the line at some point in the final hours or day of Jesus' life and say that the obedience before that hour was not part of the righteousness that 'leads to justification' (v. 18) or part of the 'obedience' that constitutes many righteous (v.19)."¹² Now this logical argument would be a powerful argument if it weren't for the context that surrounds the word "obedience." Let's look at the text one more time:

Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. 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 (Romans 5:18-19).

Notice that Adam's sin is referred to as 'disobedience' in verse 19 "without any limitation." Using Piper's own argument we would need to consider the events surrounding Adam's fall. Adam's sinful intentions before he ate and perhaps when he inevitably sinned against Eve after he ate. But isn't it simpler and clearer to simply work with the those things that are obvious in the passage: the clear parallels between Adam and Christ; the near context in which the passive obedience of Christ is mentioned in relation to justification; and the reference to 'one act' concerning both Adam and Christ? Is it really that "arbitrary" to limit Christ's obedience to His obedient substitutionary death in this context, especially since the only Pauline reference to the obedience of Christ is His obedient death (Philippians 2:8)?

We think this text clearly favors the interpretation that Christ's "one righteous act" or his "obedience" refers to his sacrificial death. But even if you are not convinced of our point of view, this text is not unambiguously speaking about the imputation of the active obedience of Christ. If it does not speak clearly to the issue, then it cannot serve as the textual foundation for this doctrine.

Philippians 3:9

In this passage Paul is looking at the religious achievements in his life and comparing them to knowing Christ and His righteousness and seeing the latter as being of incomparably greater value:

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ--the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. 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 (Philippians 3:7-11).

This text is often cited in support of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ.

Although there is no mention of a covenant of works and there is no mention of Christ's perfect law-keeping on behalf of sinners, the text does speak of righteousness. Paul does not want a righteousness of his own "that comes from law." Righteousness certainly can come from perfect law-keeping, but Paul knows that obtaining such a righteousness is a fruitless and faithless endeavor. Paul wants the righteousness that comes from God and is acquired by faith in Christ. What is Christ's righteousness? One interpretive option is that Christ's righteousness refers to Christ's perfect obedience to the Mosaic Law which He imputes to all those who trust in Him as Savior and Lord. Another interpretive option is that Christ's righteousness refers to the payment for sin which He made by His

¹² John Piper, *Counted Righteous In Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness?*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002), 111-112.

death on the cross and imputes to all those who trust in Him as Savior and Lord. Which interpretation is right and how do we decide?

In order to arrive at the correct conclusion we must go to the *locus classicus* regarding the righteousness the believer acquires through faith in Christ. This passage is Romans 3. Since we have already spent time in this passage above, we can come to some swift conclusions. We found in Romans 3 that Paul only writes about the imputation of the *passive* obedience of Christ—the payment for sins. Therefore, since the only place in Scripture where Paul defines the righteousness of Christ is in reference to his passive obedience, it would follow that this should naturally be the default interpretation of the righteousness of Christ in Philippians 3. Once again, even if you are not convinced of our point of view, this text does not seem to be unambiguously speaking about the imputation of the active obedience of Christ. If it is not an unambiguous text, then it seems that it should not serve as a biblical foundation for this doctrine.

1 Corinthians 1:30

This passage is frequently cited in support of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ and is once again written by the hand of Paul. In this passage Paul is contrasting the “wisdom” of the world with the “foolishness” of the gospel: “It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, **our righteousness, holiness and redemption**. Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”

This verse clearly speaks of imputation, as did the previous verse. But is there anything in the text that causes us to think that this is a reference to the imputation of the *active* obedience of Christ? When Paul speaks of preaching the gospel he talks about preaching “Christ crucified” (v. 23) which is an explicit reference to passive obedience. The text says that we should boast in the fact that Christ is our “righteousness.” We have already belabored the fact that Paul defines the righteousness Christ gives the believer in terms of His passive obedience. Without something in this text causing us to question that clear definition found in Romans 3, we should assume this would be Paul’s meaning here. In addition, conservative scholars almost universally agree that Paul uses the term “redemption” exclusively in reference to Christ’s payment for sin. But what does it mean for Christ to be our “holiness,” which can also be translated “sanctification”? Paul often uses this term so that it has a moral connotation. But in this case it has a forensic flavor similar to “righteousness.” You can see this same use in 1 Corinthians 6 in the midst of Paul’s loving rebuke for the Corinthians:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were **sanctified**, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

The term “sanctified” in 1 Corinthians 6 doesn’t seem to have any clear reference to Christ’s imputed law-keeping, nor does it have anything to do with the Holy Spirit’s work in the life of the believer causing Him to put away sinful patterns of living. If it had to do with growth in moral purity he could scarcely have said that about the Corinthians at this point in the letter. Instead, consider the words that Paul uses with “sanctified” in this verse. It is being used with two synonyms: “washed” and “justified,” which it stands in-between. Notice that 1 Corinthians 1:30 has that same pattern. Paul writes that Christ has become for us “wisdom from God—that is our “righteousness, holiness, and redemption.” The “wisdom from God” spoken about in this passage is the gospel—how a sinful man is accepted by a holy God. If both “righteousness” and “redemption” are clear references to payment for sin—which we found to be the case in Romans 3—then we have two synonyms that enclose the word in question. It is doubtful that holiness refers to a different concept entirely while being enclosed by two synonyms. It is far more likely that this is a three-fold word description of what the believer gets because he is “in Christ.” They are not three different things, but it is a three-fold way of describing the same thing—the believer’s complete innocence before a holy God because of the death of Christ. It is a beautiful way of describing the believer’s ability to come right into the presence of God because of the imputation of the *passive* obedience of Christ.

2 Corinthians 5:21

This text is quoted, almost without fail, when the imputation of the active obedience of Christ is being taught or defended. It is a clear and wonderful declaration of the imputation of our sin to Christ and His righteousness to us: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Of course the argument turns on one’s definition of “righteousness.” Since Paul uses this term to refer to the imputation of the passive obedience of Christ, this text is best read as a statement of that wonderful truth. Christ makes it so that we are declared innocent of any transgression or “perfect” (Hebrews 10:14) because of Christ’s one sacrifice. Christ took the punishment of our sin so that through faith in Him we become acceptable and perfect—that is, “righteous in His sight” (Romans 3:20). There is no reference in this text or in the surrounding context to the imputation of Christ’s perfect life, so we are constrained not to speculate further.

Romans 8:3-4

These verses are frequently quoted in support of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ. Ironically, these verses serve to undermine any theological necessity for this doctrine. This should become evident as we closely examine this important passage of Scripture. In Romans chapter 8 Paul is making the case that if you are a believer, then you are no longer a slave to sin. If you are yoked to Christ, then you are set free from both the penalty and the enslaving power of sin:

“For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:3-4).

In this text it says that “God did” something. That “something” was sending His Son to die on a cross as a “sin offering.” That is a clear reference to the passive obedience of Christ. Through the imputation of the passive obedience of Christ “the righteous requirements of the law” are “fully met in us.” Isn’t that amazing! There is absolutely no hint of the imputation of the law keeping of Christ. There is only reference to His passive obedience and yet that “sin offering” which served to have our sins condemned in Christ, allows us to stand before God as people who have fully met the righteous requirements of the law. The imputation of the passive obedience of Christ unambiguously accomplishes everything that the so-called imputation of the active obedience of Christ was supposed to do!

This passage has another gem that we cannot pass by without picking it up and examining its beauty. In verse 4 Paul describes the group of people that fully meet the righteous requirements of the law as those “who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.” This is a reference to something else that the one “sin offering” of Christ does for every believer. We mentioned it earlier in relation to Hebrews 10:14 “because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.” The one sacrifice that Christ made, not only purchased perfection for the believer—described in Romans 8 as having fully met the righteous requirements of the law—but also progress in holiness. That is a work of the Spirit in the life of the believer that causes the believer to serve God and put sin to death. The verses that follow contrast the life of the man who has this work of the Spirit of God and the man who does not have the Spirit. This is all purchased by the passive obedience of Christ that is imputed into the account of everyone who repents and believes.

There are other verses that are used to defend the imputation of the active obedience of Christ. We do not want to be redundant but we desire to be thorough. So we decided to give you categories within which all other verses cited in systematic theologies in defense of this doctrine seem to fall. We have done this so you might be able to more easily examine them on your own. They seem to fall into four broad categories for which we have provided obvious textual examples: 1) verses that defend the sinless life of Christ (Hebrews 5:8); 2) verses that refer to the imputation of righteousness (Romans 4:4-6, 10:3-4); 3) verses that say that Christ was under law (Galatians 4:4-5); 4) verses that seem totally unrelated other than some key words (Matthew 3:15). Our response to these verses by category is as follows: 1) We believe Christ had a sinless life, but without reference to imputation in relation to that sinless life in Scripture we are left to understand it to refer to His sinless life that qualified Him to be the perfect Savior. 2) We believe that Christ’s righteousness is imputed to the believer, but that righteousness is defined in Scripture as His sacrificial death in payment for sin, which grants the believer acceptance from God for all eternity. 3) We believe that Christ was under the Mosaic Law and His perfect obedience to it qualified Him to be the perfect Savior. 4) Scriptures that are unrelated to the doctrine do not and cannot serve to give it a biblical foundation.

As we finish the examination of the Scriptures used to defend and support the imputation of the active obedience of Christ, it is important to mention again that we have chosen those Scriptures that we believe are the strongest arguments in defense of the doctrine. But we found even the best attempts at exegetical arguments for this doctrine to be wanting of clear biblical support. We also found that some of their most frequently cited texts, upon closer scrutiny, actually undermine the need for the doctrine entirely.

Stirred to Reconsider

The imputation of the active obedience of Christ seems to be a doctrine without biblical foundations. It would seem that to hold and defend a doctrine with a traditional foundation rather than a biblical foundation is to begin your trek down the hermeneutical road to Rome, where Scripture and tradition hold equal authority. The vast majority of those who hold this doctrine are studious believers who know their Bible well. They firmly believe and teach *Sola Scriptura*. That is what makes this issue so difficult. In our own lives, the imputation of the active obedience of Christ had become part of the fabric of our understanding of what Jesus Christ had done for us. It was a precious doctrine that we taught often. It was difficult to let go of. But if God has not revealed it, we must not go beyond what is written by teaching it. We have written this paper in hopes that those who read it will be stirred to reconsider the Scriptures.

Some Questions and Objections Considered

Do you mean to say that you actually need a specific text from the bible to establish a biblical doctrine or practice?

Yes. For if by “establish a biblical doctrine or practice” you are saying that this is something God wants me to believe or do, then you must have the clear and unambiguous witness of Scripture to back that up. If you don’t have a text from scripture to establish your view, you have no word from God and therefore no view worth defending.

I’m not a Covenant Theologian and yet I embrace the Imputation of the Active obedience of Christ. Therefore, your accusation that it is a system driven doctrine is false.

I understand why you might say that, but that is not necessarily true. It is possible that you embraced the doctrine not knowing that its invention and continued existence depends on and is driven by Covenant Theology. You may simply believe the doctrine is true because someone you trust taught it to you and you never thought to question it. Many evangelicals who are not of the Covenant Theological stripe wisely embrace the doctrine of salvation that Covenant Theologians also hold. That is, many—though not enough—non-covenantal evangelicals embrace the doctrines of grace. But when covenant theologians expound the doctrines of grace, the imputation of the active obedience of Christ is woven into the fabric of the doctrines of grace so that the two are inseparable. That is why, if you are not a Covenant Theologian, you probably still believe in the imputation of the active obedience of Christ. Covenant theologians and the many garden-variety evangelicals who embrace the life-giving doctrines of grace unwittingly embrace the imputation of the active obedience of Christ.

Can’t you lump the active and passive obedience of Christ together under one heading—Christ’s imputed obedience that makes us righteous?

You certainly can if you have a passage that clearly does that. You need to find a passage that clearly teaches the imputation of the active obedience of Christ alongside the imputation of His passive obedience. We have many clear passages that teach the imputation of Christ’s passive obedience but we do not have even one text that clearly teaches the imputation of His active obedience. Scripture defines our righteousness in terms of the imputation of Christ’s passive obedience and so when we find passages about this topic what justification do you have to use both? The Bible defines righteousness in terms of cross work. If righteousness is tied to his law keeping then there must be some passage to tell us that.

Do believers have to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law?

Yes. But, according to Scripture, this can only be done through the death of Christ. The reception of his payment for sins makes it just as if we had already perfectly obeyed the righteous requirements of the law. Consider our comments on Romans 8:1-4 above.

John Piper defines justification differently than you do in this paper. He writes: “The Greek word for ‘justify’ (δικαιοω, *diakioo*) does not mean “forgive.” It means to declare righteous, usually in a court of law. A prisoner who is found guilty and is forgiven would not be called ‘justified’ in the ordinary use of the word. He is justified if he is found not guilty. Forgiveness means to be found guilty and then not have the guilt reckoned to you but let go. So we should be careful that we not assume justification and forgiveness are identical” (*Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness*, Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2002), 115. In your paper you say that forgiveness of sins is synonymous with justification. How do you respond to Piper’s argument?

John Piper is an amazing scholar, author, and teacher. It is likely that he has an I.Q. that could boil water. I love reading his books and I have been greatly encouraged and spurred on to love and good deeds by his ministry. But, unfortunately it appears that his argument is philosophical rather than biblical. The problem that Paul raises in Romans 3 is that men need righteousness that cannot be earned. How, then do we get it and what does it consist of? Paul tells us that we get righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ and that the righteousness or justification we need to be accepted by God is equivalent to redemption which is the forgiveness of sins: “and are justified (δικαιούμενοι) freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood” (Romans 3:24-25). The author of Hebrews tells us that the imputation of Christ’s sin-bearing work makes believers perfect: “But when this priest had offered for all time **one sacrifice for sins**, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because **by one sacrifice** he has made **perfect** forever those who are being made holy” (Hebrews 10:12-14). We may have our theories on the differences between justification and forgiveness, but Scripture seems quite clear on the subject and we must not let our philosophical ideas drown out the clarity of God’s Word.

If you deny the imputation of the active obedience of Christ, aren't you watering down the doctrine of justification?

That is a good question. We think that we are actually lifting the priceless sacrificial death of Christ to its rightful position within the incredibly important doctrine of justification. What does the death of Christ give the believer? Some say that the sacrificial death of the sinless Son of God procures for believers no better standing than Adam had before the fall. They say that the sacrificial death of Christ is insufficient for eternal life. But Scripture says that when believers receive the results of the death of Christ they have been made perfect forever (Hebrews 10:14). This language that the Holy Spirit uses gives us the clear picture that as the result of the death of Christ the believer is viewed as though he has obeyed God's law perfectly, when in reality he has simply received the full forgiveness of his sins. God is telling us that in order for someone to be accepted by God, that person must have no black marks on his record. One can get a clean record in two ways: 1) obey God's law perfectly or 2) have all of your transgressions of God's law perfectly paid for through Christ's sacrificial death. A clean record or being perfectly forgiven is equivalent to perfect obedience—it makes the believer righteous in God's sight. That is exactly what the death of Christ gives to the believer according to Hebrews 10:14. If you deny the imputation of the active obedience of Christ while you affirm the imputation of what the Scripture says about the amazing sufficiency of the Sacrificial death of Christ you lift the cross high and the theological significance and meaning of justification remains unchanged.

Appendix

Note: This Appendix is a separate on-line article and can be found at:
http://www.ids.org/pdf/imputation_append.pdf