

## ANSWERS TO SOME QUESTIONS

### Rev. Norman Shepherd

In a recent issue of *World Magazine*, the Editor, Marvin Olasky, conducted an interview with the novelist and short story writer, Flannery O'Connor. The odd thing is that she has been dead for over forty years. What Olasky did was to pose some questions to her, and then provide her answers by lifting excerpts from her writings.

Now I am not dead yet, though I sometimes think that some of my critics wish that I were. But the Rev. Ralph Boersema of the Canadian Reformed Churches suggested the possibility of responding to questions that have been raised about my theology by referencing things that have appeared elsewhere, including some private correspondence. He was gracious enough to do most of the work in compiling what follows. Of course I take full responsibility for any mistakes in the form or content. Our hope is that this material will provide some clarification of my views, but even more, that it will deepen our understanding of what our Lord has given to us in Holy Scripture for our salvation. These answers are offered in the spirit of Ephesians 4:3, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

#### ***Do you think that the good works of the believer are an instrument of justification along with faith?***

Early in my reflection on the doctrine of justification I concluded that in our New Testament James was using "justify" in a forensic, soteric sense. He was saying that we are justified by works. Now how can that be reconciled with the Protestant Reformation and our understanding of Paul, that we are justified by faith and not by the works of the law?

To begin, faith is obviously a work. Faith is a response to a divine command and therefore an act of obedience. (Acts 16:31; I John 3:23) I believe Luther thought of faith as our response to the first commandment. To avoid bringing Paul into conflict with himself we simply label faith as an "instrument" rather than a "work." We say that faith is not the *ground* of our justification. It is only an *instrument* by which we receive the justifying verdict of God. "Instrument" is a theological/scholastic term, not a biblical term, but we support it biblically by saying that Paul never says we are justified "on account of faith" (*dia pistin*), but always "by faith," that is, by the instrumentality of faith (*ek pisteus*).

It occurred to me, however, that in James 2, James does not say that we are justified on account of works (*dia erga*). He says we are justified by works (*ex ergwn*). If we escape from saying that justification is on the ground of faith by appealing to Paul's use of the Greek preposition, *ek*, plus the genitive, and by calling faith an instrument, can't we do the same in James, and call works an instrument of justification? In this way we avoid bringing James into conflict with Paul just as we avoid bringing Paul into conflict with himself.

Some brothers were quick to point out, however, that the Westminster Confession speaks of faith as the "alone instrument" of justification, and so according to the Confession there could

not be other instruments of justification. However, they never explain why the Confession makes this point. I sought to take up this question in my article on faith alone in the *Reformation & Revival Journal* ("Justification By Faith Alone," Vol. 11, No. 2, Spring 2002, pp. 75-90). No one to my knowledge has ever responded to the argument I make there, that the Confession was addressing itself to a Roman Catholic error. The Council of Trent says that faith plus baptism is the instrument of justification, and over against this Westminster says that faith alone is the instrument of justification.

These brothers do point out that faith is the alone instrument of justification because faith alone is extraspective. This argument implies that good works are introspective, or that they are by nature self-congratulatory and meritorious. It was never made clear to me why this is so. How could works done in faith be self-congratulatory? How could they be meritorious? Are we supposed to think that in the grace of sanctification the Holy Spirit causes us to produce good works that are introspective, self-congratulatory, and designed to merit eternal life?

It was not a big deal for me to back away from calling works an instrument of justification. I was satisfied to say that the works produced by faith are no more the ground of our acceptance with God than is faith itself. I was willing to say that they are associated with faith in its instrumental function. Otherwise faith is dead faith and dead faith does not save any more than it justifies. But even this was problematic for some, though I am not sure why. To avoid confusion I was certainly willing to avoid all use of the word "instrument" in connection with works. It is a scholastic term that seems to create more problems than it solves.

Beyond that, there is good reason not to use the word instrument at all. It is not a biblical term. It comes out of a pre-Reformation background in which the doctrine of justification is set up in terms of a series of causes. The Council of Trent does this (6<sup>th</sup> Session, Chapter 7) and enumerates for justification a final cause, an efficient cause, a meritorious cause, an instrumental cause, and a formal cause. Even Calvin uses a similar scholastic structure at one point. Later orthodox theologians both Lutheran and Calvinistic did the same. Thankfully our confessions and catechisms spared us from this scholastic invention, with the exception that they spoke of faith as an instrument, and they meant by that faith as an instrumental cause. This causal structure serves the works/merit paradigm well; but I don't think the works/merit paradigm is a biblical paradigm. I do believe that what our confessions have to say about faith as an instrument is right; but our confessions do not bind us to the Aristotelian/Thomistic philosophical scientific structure that lies behind this particular word.

I do not now refer to works as an instrument of justification, and have not done so for over twenty years. I do say that faith that does not express itself in love (Gal. 5:6) is dead faith and does not justify. This is the point that Paul makes, and James makes the same point in chapter 2. I cannot read my critics any other way than as saying that dead faith justifies and after it justifies it comes alive. What else can be meant by faith alone? In my mind, justification by faith that does not express itself in love denies the teaching of both Paul and James, as well as the teaching of the historic Reformed confessions and the consensus of orthodox Reformed thinking on this point.

Do I say that we are justified by works? Well, I say what James says in James 2:24. How can I do otherwise and be faithful to the Lord who gave us his word? To argue that James uses “justify” in a demonstrative sense is just an evasion of God’s word. What good does it do to say, or what have we gained by saying that we are *justified* by faith alone if we also have to say that we are *saved* by works as James compels us to say in verse 14?

Does this mean that I hold we are justified by faith plus works? That somehow works serve as the ground of our acceptance with God? Not at all! They are no more the ground of our acceptance with God than is the faith that produces them and of which they are the fruit and evidence. The one and only ground of our acceptance with God is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the explicit teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism in Q&A 66 and 67. God forgives our sin and gives us eternal life “by grace alone because of Christ’s one sacrifice finished on the cross.”

By this same death and resurrection we are resurrected, regenerated, renewed, re-created so that we respond to the overtures of the gospel (the gospel promises) with a living and active faith. As Murray writes at the end of his chapter on regeneration in *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied*, “. . . regeneration is such a radical, pervasive, and efficacious transformation that it immediately registers itself in the conscious activity of the person concerned in the exercises of faith and repentance and new obedience.”

Faith that is alone is a theological abstraction. Faith never exists all by itself. It is never alone. This is what Calvin says expressly and it is what the Westminster Confession teaches. On this point the teaching of my opponents differs from that of the Westminster Confession. The WCF says in chapter 11, section 2, that faith is the alone instrument of justification but is never alone in the person justified, and references both Gal. 5:6 and James 2:24. This simple fact needs to be acknowledged.

***Does describing saving and justifying faith as living, active, penitent, and obedient faith suggest ambiguity about the relation of faith and works?***

In *The Call of Grace*, p. 50 I write: “faith looks away from personal merit to the promises of God. Repentance and obedience flow from faith as the fullness of faith. This is faithfulness, and faithfulness is perseverance in faith. A living, active, and abiding faith is the way in which the believer enters into eternal life.”

It has been objected that the word “fullness” suggests that faith is incomplete, unless it includes, in addition, repentance and obedience. The concern of those who raise this objection is that we not obscure the extraspective, fiducial nature of the faith that alone justifies.

It has always been my concern that justifying faith should not be isolated from repentance and good works. This emphasis does not obscure the extraspective or fiducial nature of faith. Neither does calling the repentance and obedience that flow from faith the “fullness” of faith do so.

The faith that looks away from personal merit and looks to Jesus Christ and his righteousness alone for justification and eternal life, is a faith that is never alone and a faith that may not be isolated from repentance and obedience. I cannot see any objection to calling such faith a living, active, and abiding faith. Indeed, I cannot see how we can refer to faith that is never alone and a faith that may not be isolated from repentance as anything but a living and active faith. It certainly is not a dead faith or an inert faith.

In my article, “Justification by Faith in Pauline Theology” (*Backbone of the Bible*, pp. 89-94) I attempt to describe at some length what Paul means by faith in Romans 3:28. My very first point is that justifying faith is faith in Jesus. I cite the relevant evidence in Romans 3, 4, and 5 to demonstrate this point; and not only that, but I also refer explicitly to the last half of the Westminster Confession, chapter 14, section 2, as a summary of this Pauline view. “Faith in Jesus means accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for the pardon of sin and the title to everlasting life” (p. 90). This is surely evidence of no desire or attempt on my part to suppress or obscure the extraspective and fiducial nature of the faith. This remains the case when I go on in the same section to describe justifying faith as a penitent faith and an obedient faith. In my judgment we isolate faith from repentance and good works if we are unwilling to describe the faith that looks away from all personal merit and looks to Jesus Christ alone for justification and eternal life as a penitent and obedient faith. If we cannot describe justifying faith as a penitent and obedient faith, then we really cannot describe repentance and obedience as the fruit and evidence of faith either.

So-called ambiguity has also been found in this statement at the end of the previously mentioned article on “Justification by Faith in Pauline Theology:” “Gospel proclamation calls us to a living faith, that is, to a penitent and obedient faith” (p. 101). This is said to leave the impression that repentance and obedience are what make faith living, while, in reality, works do not give life to faith or constitute the vitality of faith.

Is it really the case that my statement in its context gives the impression that works constitute the vitality of faith? Let’s look at the context, the whole paragraph of which the quoted statement is a part.

Jesus is the only *one* through whom we can be justified and sanctified, and faith in Jesus is the only *way* by which we can be justified and sanctified. Gospel proclamation calls us to living faith, that is, to a penitent and obedient faith. The response of faith, repentance, and obedience to the gospel call is possible only because of the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

In the last sentence I make quite clear that faith, repentance, and obedience all have their source and therefore their vitality from the regenerating and sanctifying work of the life-giving Holy Spirit. The faith that the Holy Spirit gives to us in regeneration is a living faith and this living faith is a faith that has as its fruit and evidence repentance and obedience to Christ.

James says that the body without the spirit is dead. In the same way faith without deeds is dead (2:26). He compares faith to the body, and just as the body without the spirit is dead so also faith without deeds is dead. Is it the spirit, then, that gives vitality to the body? That is certainly the impression that James leaves us with. If so, then works give vitality to faith.

Now I am not concerned to press this point, and it may well be that there is some nuanced exegesis of which I am not aware that would enable us to avoid this conclusion; but in that case the same charge would have to be laid at the door of James that has been laid at my door. The language of James is ambiguous because it suggests that works constitute the vitality of faith.

What is troubling to me in the current discussion of the nature of saving faith however, is the apparent reluctance and even unwillingness to embrace with enthusiasm the teaching of James 2:14-26 as an authentic, clear, and accurate presentation of the gospel of sovereign grace. Undoubtedly my Reformed brothers believe this passage to be the inspired word of God; but frequently it is with a certain reluctance and only by way of concession that it is quoted and alluded to. This attitude toward James 2:14-26 belongs to a long tradition stemming from Luther and found among Reformed people beginning with John Calvin himself. Even J. Gresham Machen writes, "If James had had the epistles of Paul before him he would no doubt have expressed himself differently" (*Machen's Notes on Galatians*, p. 221). I consider this statement of Machen to be an indictment of the Holy Spirit who inspired James.

James does not offer a discourse on the nature of the vitality of faith, but he does say very plainly that faith without works is dead (v. 17). Faith without deeds does no good (v. 14). Faith without deeds is useless (v. 20). Faith without deeds cannot save (v. 14) and it cannot justify (v. 24). Even if we adopt the view that in my mind is exegetically untenable, that James is using "justify" in a demonstrative sense, we still have to answer the question whether faith without works can justify in the forensic/soteric sense. But if faith without deeds is useless and cannot save, if it is really dead, there is no way we can say that it will nevertheless justify the sinner. There is nothing obscure or mysterious about this plain teaching. This is the point of the passage. The example James offers of the exercise of faith alone is that of the demons. The demons are not saved by this faith alone. They shudder because of the judgment to come. Their example is hardly one to be imitated.

Why is it so hard for us to embrace with enthusiasm this plain teaching of the word of God? Because we have been taught for years that it conflicts with Paul's insistence that we are saved and justified by faith without works of the law as in Rom. 3:28 and Gal. 2:16. Now this is not the place for me to offer an exegesis of "works of the law" in Paul. I have tried to do this in "Justification by Faith in Pauline Theology" (*Backbone of the Bible*, pp. 94-100). I would simply appeal to Machen who has correctly resolved the apparent contradiction between Paul and James. (See *Machen's Notes on Galatians*, pp. 220-1.) It is essential to note that Machen does not resolve this apparent contradiction by resorting to an exegetically indefensible distinction between Paul's use of "justify" in a forensic, soteric sense, and James' use of it in a demonstrative sense. Instead, he makes the following two points.

The first point is, "the faith James is condemning is not the faith that Paul is commending." The faith James condemns "is a mere intellectual assent which has no effect upon conduct." Over against this, "The faith about which Paul has been speaking is not the idle faith which James condemns, but a faith that works." Machen is saying that justifying faith is a faith that works and therefore it is not the "faith alone" that James condemns.

Machen's second point is that just as "the faith which James condemns is different from the faith which Paul commends, so also the works which James commends are different from the works which Paul condemns." He goes on, "Paul is speaking about 'works of the law'—that is, works which are intended to earn salvation by fulfilling the law through human effort. James says nothing in chapter 2:14-26 about the works of the law. The works of which he is speaking are works that spring from faith and are the expression of faith. Abraham offered Isaac as a sacrifice only because he believed God. His works were merely evidence that his faith was real. Such works as that are insisted upon by Paul in every epistle. Without them no man can inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:21)."

***Do you reject the idea that works are only the fruit and evidence of faith?***

There can be no objection to calling good works the fruit and evidence of saving faith. In Gal. 5:6 Paul speaks of justifying faith as faith expressing itself through love; and James says in 2:18 that the believer shows his faith by what he does. At the same time we must say no less clearly and no less forcefully, and not simply by way of reluctant concession, that "Undeniably, 'faith without works is dead' (James 2:26)," and that, "True, 'faith without its fruits and evidences is neither true nor lively.'" (Citations are from the OPC 2006 Report on Justification, footnote 89) The reason for this is simply that faith without its fruit and evidence will not save and it will not justify. Even if we were to insist (as Lutheranism consistently does) that faith first justifies and then has works added to it after justification, we still have to say that if there are no works (no fruit and evidence) then the faith is not true faith. And if it is not true faith at a later point, it never was true faith to start with, and could never have justified the sinner at any point.

This does not mean that works are the ground of our salvation or of our justification any more than faith itself is the ground of our justification and salvation. Neither faith nor the works that are the invariable accompaniment of true and living faith are the ground of our acceptance with God. The Westminster Confession is quite correct in making this point. Faith is extraspective. It does not gaze at its own navel, and it does not gaze at its own fruits and evidences. Faith looks to Christ alone for justification and eternal life. True faith is not meritorious and the fruits and evidences of this faith are not meritorious. Machen is right in saying that the works that James commends are not the works of the law that Paul condemns.

The reason why these matters are important is signaled by Machen when he quotes Gal. 5:21 to say that without the works "insisted upon by Paul in every epistle . . . no man can inherit the kingdom of God." We cannot take comfort in a formulation of the doctrine of justification by faith alone that in the end leaves us outside of the kingdom of God.

If indeed it is undeniable that faith without works is dead, then when we proclaim the gospel we do not want to call sinners to a dead faith. We do not want to call them to a faith without works. We want to call them to put their trust in Christ for the forgiveness of their sins and for the new life that can say "no" to ungodliness. We want to call them to repent of their sins. We want to tell them not only to be sorry for their sins but also to turn away from them. We want to call them to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins as Peter did on the day of Pentecost. And we want to teach them to obey everything that Jesus has commanded. If our

theology does not permit us to preach this way there is something wrong with our theology. There is something wrong with a theology that does not permit us to evangelize in the way that Christ commands us to evangelize in the Great Commission.

I believe this is a significant source of powerlessness in the evangelical world today. I also believe that the majority of our pastors are carrying out the Great Commission as Christ gave it to us. For example, I have never heard a pastoral prayer in which the pastor prays that the Lord would give his people “faith alone,” but I have heard prayers in which pastors ask the Lord to give their people both repentance and faith. Consider the thief who is listening to the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and asks whether he will have to stop being a thief if he believes in Jesus. No pastor would respond by telling him, “No, you don’t have to stop being a thief because you are justified by faith alone and we don’t want to mix faith with works.”

The Westminster Confession of faith provides an instructive description of saving faith in chapter 14, section 2:

By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein; and acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come. But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.

Here the Confession clearly distinguishes between saving (justifying) faith in the narrow sense (the principal acts) and faith in the broader sense including believing all that is revealed in God’s word and acting differently according to the teaching of the particular passage. These acts of faith include yielding obedience to the commands and trembling at the threatenings. The latter are not the *principal* acts of saving faith, but they are acts of saving faith nevertheless. The Confession does not isolate faith from repentance and good works. Rather, it binds them together in a single definition of faith. There are not two different faiths, one faith that yields obedience to the commands of Scripture and a different faith that rests upon Christ for justification. There is one saving faith consisting of a multiplicity of acts, some of which are called principal acts. These principal acts are not true and lively apart from the fruits and evidences of them, namely, yielding obedience to the commands of Scripture. At the same time the language of the Confession at this point does not obscure the extraspective, fiducial nature of the faith, faith that is never alone and that alone justifies. We see, then, that the Confession makes good works integral to faith in its definition of saving faith.

There is no objection to speaking of good works as the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith; but I do express a caveat with an analogy as follows. An apple tree is still an apple tree even if at a given moment it doesn’t have any apples hanging from its branches, that is, even if there is no evidence in terms of fruit that it really is an apple tree. But faith that has no works is not true faith. I do not suggest that faith derives its vitality from works, but, in terms of the analogy when applied to faith, the apple tree that does not have apples has no vitality. It is dead. This is not necessarily true in the realm of biology, however, and that is why I feel compelled to offer the caveat.

We remember how Jesus cursed the fig tree that gave evidence of vitality (lots of leaves) but had no fruit, no figs (Mark 11:12-25). Jesus taught us that our heavenly Father “cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit” (John 15:2). Jesus pronounces his judgment, “unless you repent, you too will all perish” (Luke 13:3, 5). If our theology does not permit us to tremble at this threatening we do not understand either the gospel or the Westminster Confession at chapter 14, section 2.

We need to be sensitive to a host of biblical passages that in some way or other make eternal weal or woe dependent on what we do. Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Paul writes in Gal. 6:7, 8, “Do not be deceived. God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.” Heb. 10:36 urges us, “You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised,” and then quotes Hab. 2:4 as a proof text, “But my righteous one will live by faith.” We have James 2:14-26 saying that dead faith, faith without works, will not save; and we have the judgment scene so vividly described by our Lord in Matthew 25. This list of texts could be expanded to include references to virtually every book in the New Testament with the possible exception of Philemon.

None of us want to say with Roman Catholicism that these texts prove justification and salvation by the merit of good works. They don’t. But on the other hand we cannot simply dismiss them with a reference to good works as the fruit and evidence of faith. Then they cease to function in the way they are obviously designed to function, as exhortation, encouragement, and warning to keep us moving through the narrow gate and along the Way of Holiness (Isaiah 35:8) that leads to eternal life. “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). My view is that of Calvin in the *Institutes*, III, 11, 20, “Indeed, we confess with Paul that no other faith justifies ‘but faith working through love’ [Galatians 5:6]. But it does not take its power to justify from that working of love. Indeed, it justifies in no other way but in that it leads us into fellowship with the righteousness of Christ.”

In spite of the many charges against my views, I don’t believe there are substantial differences between the views of most Reformed pastors and myself on the relationship between faith and works in the matter of justification. There is no more ambiguity in my view than there is in the Westminster Confession itself. If there are differences they are the kind that can be profitably discussed among brothers and sisters of like precious faith, people who look to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ alone for justification, salvation, and eternal life, who believe the Bible to be the inspired word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice, and who share a common adherence to the Reformed faith. For some this faith is best expressed in the Westminster standards. For others it is best expressed in the Three Forms of Unity, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dordt. We all labor together under the command of our Lord to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3).

***When you call attention to Christ's faith, are you suggesting that his work during the course of his earthly life consisted primarily in being an example of faith for us?***

On p. 19 of *The Call of Grace* I wrote that the promises God made to Abraham years before were now being fulfilled in the days of Paul with the ingathering of the nations. This fulfillment was made possible through the covenantal righteousness of Jesus Christ. "His was a living, active, and obedient faith that took him all the way to the cross." We are saved by the righteousness of Jesus Christ, his obedience to the will of his heavenly Father that he should give his life to save his people from sin and condemnation. This righteousness is a faith righteousness. It is the obedience of faith.

Several Reformed brothers have inferred from this that my purpose was to present Jesus simply as an example of faith, and that I teach that his redemptive work was primarily that of giving us an example of faith. This is manifestly not the case.

Neither in the statement quoted nor in the surrounding context did I say anything about Jesus as an example of faith, although it would not have been wrong to do so. Christ did furnish us with an example of faith and obedience.

The Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster standards are correct in summarizing the redemptive work of Christ as the work of prophet, priest, and king. Jesus came as a prophet and functioned as a prophet throughout the course of his public ministry calling Israel, the ancient covenant people, to repentance and to faith in himself for the forgiveness of sins. This work was climaxed by his work as priest, his death on the cross and the resurrection of the third day to accomplish their salvation. Actually he suffered the humiliation of a sin bearer throughout the course of his life, though he was himself without sin. He was the spotless Lamb of God.

I have repeatedly stressed the centrality of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the sole ground of our redemption. (See the Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 67.) The sin of Adam left us with the problem sin, both its guilt resulting in death and the corruption of sin. There is no way that a sinner can deliver himself from the guilt of sin by making atonement, nor can he deliver himself from the corruption of sin. The Lord God has done this for us by sending his Son to die and rise in our place. "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Rom. 4:25). Following his resurrection he ascended into heaven where he reigns as king applying his accomplishment of redemption through the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is a gross and deliberate distortion of my view to suggest that I see Christ's redemptive work for us as residing "primarily" in the example of faith that he sets for us.

***Don't you undermine the biblical doctrine of justification when you deny that the Adamic covenant was a covenant of works? Doesn't the rejection of a works principle imply that God's justice does not require perfect obedience to his law?***

Most Reformed theologians today hold that the Reformed doctrine of justification rests upon an understanding of the covenant made at creation with Adam as a covenant of works.

They endorse the declaration of the Westminster Confession (chapter 7, section 2): “The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.” They understand this language to be saying that perfect obedience is the basis upon which Adam would attain to eternal life. “Attaining” here means “earning” or “meriting” eternal life. This is often referred to as a “works principle.” Geerhardus Vos described this works principle as “value received” for “work rendered.” Many would agree with Meredith G. Kline who writes, “Since the works principle is thus foundational to the gospel, the repudiation of that principle . . . stands condemned as subversive of that gospel.”

Of course perfect obedience was necessary in Paradise, but did God intend that man’s works would *earn* eternal life? My difficulty with the covenant of works is that there is no exegetical basis for it. The difficulty becomes apparent when we place Gen. 2:16, 17 and the WCF, chapter 7, section 2, side by side in parallel columns. I do not see how we can get from the biblical text to the confessional text by means of exegesis. There is no “works principle” present in Gen. 1:26-28 where Adam created in God’s image is simply assigned the task of ruling over the creation. There is nothing there about earning or meriting eternal life on the ground of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience. There is no “works principle” in Gen. 2:16, 17 where God does not tell Adam to do something in order to earn or merit eternal life, but not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil lest he die. How does a command not to do something demonstrate that by a lifetime of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience Adam will earn or merit the right to eternal life?

The works principle does not arise out of the text of Genesis 1 and 2, but is imposed on the text from outside. I would like to offer two examples of how this happens drawn from the work of two very capable Reformed theologians. The first example is found in a series of theological lectures by James Henley Thornwell, a southern Presbyterian theologian of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (*Collected Writings* [rpt. Banner of Truth, 1974], Vol. 1). Lecture XII deals with “The Covenant of Works.” This lecture is preceded, however, by Lecture XI, a lecture on “Moral Government.” In this lecture Thornwell lays the groundwork for the covenant of works. He deals with “the essential principles of moral government,” and then with “what is implied in the relation of a servant.” He writes, “The characteristic principle of a moral government, therefore, is the principle upon which rewards and punishments are distributed. That principle is distributive justice. When men are rewarded and punished in precise proportion to their merits and demerits, then the government is strictly and properly moral” (p. 252).

Here Thornwell lays out what can be called a “works principle,” and he does so without reference to the word of God. For him the works principle is a “primitive cognition.” “The notions of justice, and of merit and demerit, are primitive cognitions of our moral nature, or of that practical understanding by which we discriminate betwixt a duty and a crime” (p. 252). Lecture XII then begins with this sentence: “Having considered the essential principle of moral government, and what is involved in the relation of a servant, we are prepared to understand and appreciate the peculiar features of the dispensation under which man was placed immediately after his creation” (p. 264). In other words, we bring the works principle to the text of Scripture so that we can understand what the Bible says. In Lecture XII Thornwell will go on to show how grace is added to nature in order to raise the servant Adam to the level of a son.

Those who are familiar with the work of Cornelius Van Til will immediately recognize in Thornwell an example of the two-storey, nature-grace scheme inherited from pre-Reformation scholasticism against which Van Til so vehemently argued in developing his consistently biblical and Reformed apologetic method. What Van Til did for Reformed apologetics we ought to be doing as well for Reformed theology, building our theology in a consistently biblical and Reformed way. We are certainly thankful for what our Reformed fathers accomplished for the kingdom of God as Van Til respected the work of William Henry Green at Princeton. But we can do better. As Van Til used to say, if we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us we ought to be able to see a little further.

The second example comes from a contemporary and able spokesman for the Reformed faith, Michael Horton, in his book, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Baker Books, 2006). In chapter 1 Horton describes his project this way: “First, as I hope to make clear in the opening chapters, this covenantal structure can be seen to arise naturally from the ordinary reading of the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation” (p. 14).

But does it really arise naturally from Scripture?

In Chapter 2 (“God and Foreign Relations”) Horton does not take us to Genesis as we might have expected, but to Mendenhall, and Hillers, and especially to Meredith G. Kline whose view of suzerain-vassal treaties in the ancient Near East is expounded in great detail. Horton tells us that this is what we need to know in order to understand the Bible. “God adapted the international treaty as the template for his relationship to creatures” (p. 29). In other words, we find the works principle operative among people in the ancient world outside of the covenant community, and we bring this principle to the text of Scripture in order to understand the text. In the succeeding chapters Horton shows how this works principle is to be consistently applied as the hermeneutical key to understanding the Bible.

Clearly Horton is moving in a different sphere from Thornwell. Thornwell brings neutral philosophical and moral principles to the text whereas Horton, following Kline, brings pagan social and political principles to the text. But in both cases it is the same scholastic two step process that is at work. Of course not everyone agrees with Thornwell or with Kline; and most of us have not reflected on the origins of the works principle as carefully and thoroughly as these men have. It is easy for us simply to bring a works principle to the text of Genesis just because it is so natural for fallen, sinful human beings to think of their eternal welfare as dependent on what they can do for themselves. This is a matter of simple justice, and justice is understood as giving to each his due. A works principle as foundational for achieving salvation is built into our sinful human nature.

The only way we can get a works principle out of Genesis 1 and 2 is by first imposing it on the text. This is not exegesis but ventriloquism.

The covenant of works, embodying a works principle, is the doctrine of the Westminster standards. It has a long history in mainstream Reformed theology, both continental and insular.

We find it in Bavinck and Geerhardus Vos as well as in Thornwell and Hodge. People who hold this view are certainly confessionally orthodox and Reformed.

But this doctrine as presented in the Westminster standards was a later development in Reformed theology. It took shape in the latter part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There is no covenant of works in the Belgic Confession (1561) or Heidelberg Catechism (1563). A person who confesses his faith with these classic Reformed confessions and without a covenant of works must be considered orthodox and Reformed just as much as one who confesses his faith with the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. They may differ on whether the Adamic covenant is to be construed as a covenant of works; but that is a matter for further reflection and discussion within the broader context of the evangelical Reformed faith. The covenant of works is not an *articulus stantis aut cadentis ecclesiae*.

My own view happens to be that there is no covenant of works in Genesis 1 and 2. And along with that I would say that the Mosaic covenant should not be construed as a republication of a covenant of works. We cannot appeal to passages like Galatians 3: 10 and 12 where Paul is talking about the Mosaic covenant to prove that the Adamic covenant is a covenant of works, and then turn around to say that Gen. 2:16, 17 proves that the Mosaic covenant is a covenant of works. (I refer the reader to my lecture, “Law and Gospel in Covenantal Perspective,” available in print from the author free of charge.)

God created Adam sinless. There was nothing in the way he was created that would prevent him from enjoying whatever eschatological blessing the Lord had in store for him. But Adam was created not merely sinless; he was created in true righteousness and holiness just as believers in Jesus Christ are re-created in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:24). As John Murray taught us, what holds first place in re-creation held first place in the original creation. Righteousness and holiness were not something to be achieved by human effort as the meritorious ground for further blessing. Adam was created with the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. This righteousness was the fruit and evidence of his faith, because without faith we cannot please the Lord. By faith, a living and active faith, the only kind of true faith there is, he would receive the life promised to him. Adam was a just man, created in covenant with his Lord, and created to live by faith.

We must not fail to appreciate the distinctiveness of the command with respect to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We must not (because of the works principle) see this command simply as another example of a command in a long row of commands to be obeyed in order to merit eternal life. We should see the tree as specifically a test of Adam’s faith touching at the very heart of his covenant relationship with the Lord. God does not ask Adam to *do* something, but *not* to do something. As Van Til taught us, the tree served as a reminder that in all of his work (the cultural mandate) Adam was to respond in faith to the word of the Lord. He would live by “every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” These words from Deut. 8:3 do not embody a works principle, but a faith principle. The issue when Satan confronted Adam was whether Adam would receive life as a gift by faith, not whether he would earn the right to life by doing something to achieve merit for himself. Of course, living faith would express itself in perfect obedience, and sin was both faithlessness and unrighteousness. Faith is not to be

contrasted with perfect obedience. Rather it is to be contrasted with earning eternal life as a worker earns wages.

***Do you deny that the active obedience of Christ is necessary for our salvation?***

No one questions that Christ's active obedience is necessary for our salvation. However, in agreement with the doctrine of the Reformers prior to the rise of the works principle in Reformed theology toward the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, I reject the necessity of the imputation of Christ's active obedience as the meritorious ground for our justification and salvation.

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?

I embrace the Heidelberg Catechism on this matter. In the Christian Reformed edition we read in Q&A 60: "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."

In an article in *Backbone of the Bible* ("Justification by Works in Reformed Theology," pp.106-9) I develop an argument 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, and not to the imputation of active obedience. 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.

The views of Zacharias Ursinus, the chief author of the Heidelberg Catechism, as expressed in his *Commentary* on the Catechism can be summarized 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.

Calvin's position is the same. In his *Institutes* some have found the works principle in II/17/5 when he 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.]." 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 in the same paragraph, "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*.

Another passage from Calvin that has been cited in support of the imputation of Christ's active obedience 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 one could hear 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.

Christ’s sinless adherence to the law qualifies him to be the spotless sacrifice for sin. The importance of sinlessness in Christ for the fulfillment of his calling to offer his life as a sacrifice for sins must not be minimized. We must resist any tendency to minimize the importance of forgiveness as belonging to the essence of justification. The importance of Christ’s sinless sacrifice does not receive due attention if we argue that his death and our forgiveness only render us innocent (like Adam when first created), but not justified or righteous.

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 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*, for example, 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 citation is from the 2006 OPC Report on Justification.)

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 may consider now the biblical material that has been 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 might 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. We find, however, that the scriptural evidence offered

is minimal, indirect, and of dubious validity. Texts are chosen that speak of Christ's obedience and its implications for our salvation, but they provide no indication that this obedience is imputed to us as the meritorious ground of our acceptance with God in addition to the death and resurrection of Christ.

Jesus says that he must fulfill all righteousness (Matt 3:15) and Paul declares that Christ was born under the law to redeem us (Gal 4:4-5). These references are often thought to teach the imputation of Christ's active obedience.

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. He did all that his Father in heaven commissioned him to do, 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. This much is actually required by the context. I have not seen it demonstrated that anything more is required.

Phil. 3:9 is another text often used to show that meritorious law-works performed by Christ are reckoned to our account. It 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 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.

Similarly, 2 Cor. 5:21 is often assumed to teach the imputation of active obedience. It reads, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Does this text really imply that we become the righteousness of God through the imputation of Christ’s active obedience?

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. 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.

Because it speaks of the obedience of the Second Adam, Rom 5:16-19 is also thought to deal with justification and the covenant of works. 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. Really, the exegesis of these verses calls into question the whole idea of a covenant of works.

The more likely reading of 5:18 contrasts the ‘one sin’ that brings condemnation with the “one righteous act” that brings justification. Christ’s active obedience cannot be said to be one act. This is also true of his passive obedience, but not of the crucifixion. By passive obedience we 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. 5:18 with the expression, “one act of righteousness,” or “one righteous deed.”

Actually, our concern is not to distinguish between active and passive obedience. This is a scholastic 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.

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” (as John Murray and others argue), 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 Romans 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.

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.”

Defenders of the imputation of Christ's active obedience as meritorious ground for our justification on the basis of the works principle have also appealed to 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. Paul describes Christ's exaltation as the consequence of his obedience and his obedience as the cause of his exaltation.

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" (1 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" (the language of Geerhardus Vos), but the obedience of faith that receives what the Father promises.

There is nothing in the passage about the imputation of the active obedience of Christ for the justification of sinners. What we do have is an application to our situation. 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.”

For many Reformed theologians 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. 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. I would certainly not want to exclude from that community those who hold to the prevailing view based on a works principle and a covenant of works. At the same time I believe the view I support is one that cannot be summarily dismissed. 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).

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