

A Review of “The Obedience of Christ,” subtitled “A Response to Steve Lehrer and Geoff Volker,” by Gregory A. Van Court, New Covenant Media, Copyright 2005 by Gregory A. Van Court.

By redefining terms, it's quite easy to make light work of another position. Once the straw man is dutifully propped up, little effort is required to topple it. Van Court insists that Christ's "active" and "passive" obedience are inseparable; thus any time the Bible mentions Jesus' righteousness as being imputed to the account of a Christian, he has redefined this righteousness to be all of Christ's earthly work, including His perfect keeping of the Mosaic code. Having recast the terms — without any apparent Scriptural warrant — Van Court can summarily sweep the issue aside as a non-event.

Unfortunately, this back door approach will not bolster what is traditionally understood by Christ's "active" obedience — namely, that Jesus' perfect Mosaic law-keeping life is imputed to the believer's account, as is His "passive" work on the cross. One cannot Biblically assert a truth via mere semantics. Van Court presents little by way of solid Scriptural evidence to support the point under discussion, namely that Christ's keeping of the Mosaic Law is an integral part of the righteousness imputed to the believer. You cannot carry the day by the following simple equation:

- (1) Jesus' righteousness includes both His "active" (perfect life) and "passive" (cross work) obedience (a point asserted but not Biblically proven).
- (2) Christ's righteousness is imputed to the Christian.
- (3) Therefore, Christ's perfect life ("active" obedience) is imputed to the believer, as well as His sacrificial death ("passive" obedience).

To some degree, Van Court undercuts his case with an historical review, showing that the doctrine of "active" obedience is not clearly forwarded until much later in the Reformation. Indeed, Van Court shows that early in his life, Calvin himself does not appear to posit or defend Christ's "active" obedience. It's not until the later promulgation of the "covenant of works" that the doctrine of "active" obedience comes to the fore. In his essay on "Systems of Continuity" (in Continuity and Discontinuity, JS Feinberg, ed, 1988), Van Gemeren makes plain that Covenant Theology really took its current form in the later systematics of Voetius and Turretin. In these 17<sup>th</sup> century writers, the framework for Covenant Theology's "covenant of works" is established; and Turretin especially became entrenched via Princeton Theological Seminary, thus becoming the touchstone for Reformed Theology in the USA. If the "covenant of works" and its concomitant "active" obedience are the dogma of later covenant theology, how can one assert that these are an integral part of soteriology?

Lacking space, we cannot extensively investigate the "covenant of works" — that Adam was to earn life eternal by keeping God's Law. However, Lightner's comments quoted by Van Court show many of the fallacies contained therein. Was Adam promised eternal life for perpetual obedience? No, since he was already sinless and in a perfect relationship with God. Adam did not gain anything by abstaining from the forbidden fruit; he merely avoided consequences for himself and his posterity. Where are we told that Adam earned anything positive by his obedience to God's command? Adam's failure to perfectly obey this supposed "covenant of works" sets up the need for the second Adam's perfect legal obedience, according to Covenant Theology (a la Turretin). Indeed, the system demands that the "abiding moral law" (the 10 commandments) be projected back to the Garden of Eden as an essential part of this "covenant of works" — another system driven view that's Biblically provable only if the Covenant Theology framework is first assumed (the a priori). If the "covenant of works" — that Adam earned eternal life by keeping God's Law — is a mistaken outlook on God's single commandment to Adam, then the conclusions drawn from it ("active" obedience) are likewise in error.

Covenant Theology's view on the "covenant of works" with Adam in the Garden and it's bearing on Christ's "active" obedience — Jesus' perfect Mosaic Law keeping being imputed to the Christian — can thus be distilled to the following formula:

- (1) The Lord told Adam that he was obligated to perpetual, perfect Law obedience as the requirement for eternal life.
- (2) The Lord's method of salvation is time invariant — we need the same perfect obedience required of Adam.
- (3) Sinful men are unable to provide said perfect legal obedience due to their fallen condition.
- (4) Therefore, Christ's life of perfect conformity to the Mosaic code must be imputed to the Christian's account if he's to be righteous before God.

The system driven nature of this reasoning is obvious, which is why the conclusions are so mystifying to those unschooled in Reformed systematics. On a personal note, I was a follower of Jesus Christ for 17 years before I even encountered the notion of Christ's "active" versus "passive" obedience. I suppose you could be pejorative; "Well, you were just an ignorant Christian!" OK, that may be so; but if this dogma is so central to the gospel, why is its promulgation so localized to the Presbyterians and their progeny?

Isn't it interesting that this Covenant Theology outlook opens the door to the current debate on salvation by faith plus works? "You need perfect legal obedience to be saved!" can clearly be twisted to, "You need to contribute your own legal obedience to be saved!" Norman Shepherd, *New Perspectives on Paul (NPP)*, and *Auburn Avenue Theology / Federal Vision (FV)* all forward a version of faith plus works soteriology, and they all share the same Presbyterian root. We are not saying that "guilty by association" is a valid doctrinal refutation. However, the focus on a believer's need for justification via the fulfillment of the Law provides a rich soil from which these errors can and do spring.

Van Court does us a fine service by highlighting some of the Westminster Divines who didn't subscribe to the covenant of works, and thus to Christ's "active" obedience being imputed to the believer. This fact should not be lightly overlooked. At least a few godly men who partook in establishing Covenant Theology's foundational document could not Scripturally support the "covenant of works" supposedly established in the Garden with Adam, hence undercutting their support for the doctrine of Christ's "active" obedience. Forwarding the early Dispensationalists who also subscribe to Christ's "active" obedience is a non-starter, since many of these were schooled in Presbyterianism. In short, then, the historical evidence points to the "active" obedience doctrine being a later outworking of Presbyterian theology, nearly unknown outside these circles (e.g., Lutheranism), and intimately tied to Covenant Theology's Edenic "covenant of works".

Quoting Luther as favorably viewing the imputation of Christ's righteous to those born again, Van Court apparently assumes that Luther therefore supports the outlook that both Jesus' perfect life as well as His vicarious sacrificial death are imputed to the Christian. Of course, Luther actually says exactly nothing about Christ's "active" obedience. Nowhere in the quotes offered for our consideration does Luther posit and defend that Jesus' perfect, Law-keeping life is put to the account of those who by faith are in Christ. Indeed, there's no apparent reason (outside of a preconceived notion) to suppose that the great early Reformer was speaking of anything but Jesus' work on the cross — His so-called "passive" obedience.

Interestingly, Van Court gets nearly halfway through his short treatise before actually engaging the Scriptures. This alone should raise a red flag about the doctrine of "active" obedience. If it's so clear and necessary in the Scriptures, why begin with history?

We cannot parse all of the passages quoted in Lehrer and Volker and supposedly refuted by Van Court. One, however, cannot be bypassed — Rom 5:18-19. How many acts of iniquity caused the fall of the race in Adam? One. And thus how many acts of righteousness were required to offset and overcome the Fall? One. The cross was sufficient to secure our righteousness, holiness, and redemption before God. Positing that the Greek could mean all of Christ's perfect Law keeping life does not prove that it does mean this. Indeed, the parallelism is destroyed if the one-to-one correlation is negated.

To bolster his argument on Rom 3:21-26, Van Court brings up a few passages that seem to teach that salvation includes works (e.g., Rom 2:6-8). He also quotes Lehrer and Volker to the same effect, that, "Salvation can "theoretically" be earned by perfect heart-act obedience to God." This cannot be true, though it's appealing to our individualistic age. "If you commit one act of sin, you will be condemned forever!" cries today's evangelist; but Rom 5 clearly puts this to the lie. We are already condemned in Adam. You need not commit any personal act of sin to be condemned — Adam has already done this for you! The race was cursed upon Adam's disobedience, and thus you need to commit no personal disobedient act to secure your condemnation. A better evangelistic statement would be, "Adam's one act of sin has already condemned you forever!"

Van Court's use of the Net Bible for Rom 3:21-26 is a bit unnerving, since it appears to support the faith plus works equals salvation concept in its translation. The passage is more traditionally translated as follows; please note the underscored translation of the Greek "pistis Christou":

<sup>21</sup>But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, <sup>22</sup>even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. ... <sup>26</sup>to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (NKJV)

The Net Bible, however, translates thusly:

<sup>21</sup>But now apart from the law the righteousness of God (which is attested by the law and the prophets) has been disclosed — <sup>22</sup>namely, the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who believe. ... <sup>26</sup>This was also to demonstrate his righteousness in the present time, so that he would be just and the justifier of the one who lives because of Jesus' faithfulness.

Clearly the Net Bible, in its translation of the Greek "pistis Christou," helps promote the outlooks of the New Perspectives on Paul (NPP) and of the Auburn Avenue Theology / Federal Vision (FV). Apparently Van Court believes that the Net translation supports the doctrine of Christ's "active" obedience, since the "faithfulness of Jesus Christ" implies (but doesn't positively assert) that His whole obedient life is imputed to the believer, and not just His "passive" cross work. Unfortunately, this is a skewed and historically unsupportable translation — can you locate any major version of the Bible that so translates "pistis Christou"? Clearly the Net translation is a boon to help secure the NPP and FV equation of faith plus works equals salvation, a concept any Catholic theologian would heartily approve. NPP and FV must negate this crucial passage, since Rom 3:21-26 clearly teaches that faith in Christ imputes an alien righteousness to our accounts. If instead this passage is translated to mean the faithfulness of Christ, we can thus easily dispatch Reformed soteriology. No doubt Van Court intended to prove from this one-off translation that Christ's imputed righteousness includes His perfect Law keeping life; but he doth prove too much, since it instead unlocks Pandora's box to various formulations of works righteousness.

The appeal to Old Testament types of sacrifices that are a "sweet smelling savor" and ones that are not is an engine that won't start, since we argue from what's clear in the New Testament to what is less obvious in the Old, not the other way around. A picture or type in the Old Testament should not be carefully parsed and then foisted upon the antitype in the New. If Christ's "active" obedience — as traditionally taught as His perfect keeping of the Mosaic Law imputed to the believer's account — cannot be clearly forwarded from the New Testament, then one should not seek to read it back into the Old. Moreover, the Old Testament sacrificial types can easily be marshaled to refute the imputation of Christ's "active" obedience to Christians. For example, was the spotlessness of the Passover lamb what kept the Israelites from the wrath of the destroying angel? Did this physical perfection in any way benefit the Exodus Israelites and grant unto them positive righteousness? No, it was only the blood that saved. The parallel to Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away our sins, should not be missed. Indeed, where in the Old Testament is the spotless perfection of a sacrificial critter said to be atoningly applied to the Old Covenant worshiper? This silence is fatal to the belief that Christ's "active" obedience is an integral part of our salvation.

In sum, Van Court's arguments do not positively prove the doctrine of Christ's "active" obedience. He begins by redefining Christ's obedience to be both His work on the cross ("passive" obedience) and His perfect Law keeping life ("active" obedience) — a semantic slight of hand. He then claims that every time the imputation of Jesus' righteousness to the believer is mentioned, it thus includes both His "passive" and "active" obedience. The circular nature of Van Court's thesis is therefore obvious; he has proven what he has asserted. More directly, Van Court appears unable to produce any clear and unequivocal Scriptural passages articulating that Christ's perfect legal obedience is imputed to the Christian's account. This deafening silence rather serves a contrary purpose; for it seems to strengthen the argument against this Covenant Theology dogma. Additionally, the historical case proves that the doctrine of Jesus' "active" obedience is a system driven conclusion not based on any particular text of Scripture. Van Court himself shows that history is not on the side of this outlook, since the "covenant of works" with Adam and its associated doctrine of Jesus' "active" obedience are conclusions of later (17<sup>th</sup> century) Covenant Theology. It is strange, then, that the paper ends with an appeal that the "covenant of works" is unnecessary to support the doctrine of Jesus' "active" obedience — a clear non sequitur, a supposition not supported by the reasoning within this paper, nor by the historical evidence. One would almost like to ask, like a 5 year old trying to knock dad over, "Is that the best you can do?"