

A Proposed Resolution to a Justification Controversy

A controversy in Reformed churches about whether or not the active obedience of Christ is imputed to believers for their justification has persisted for centuries, and the debate has received attention once again in North America since the 1980s. In this context active obedience has a special meaning. It does not just mean that Jesus actively and willingly fulfilled his mission on earth. It refers to keeping God's moral law. Of course, all agree that Christ kept the law perfectly. The discussion is about what part this active obedience has in how believers are justified. In what follows a proposal is offered for ways in which some of the classic differences regarding justification can be overcome.¹ All the points it raises have been defended before in Reformed theology. If it breaks new ground—which it does not claim to do—this might only be in the way it brings the arguments together. The proposal is humbly presented here for reflection and correction. In other words, it is no more than a proposal asking to be tested by the Reformed community.

The controversy is wrapped up with the question whether the covenant which God made with Adam at creation should be regarded as a covenant of works or, at least, whether it was on the basis of merit that perfect obedience on Adam's part would lead to eternal life and that this was a matter of justification. It seems that the idea of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ entered Reformed theology in the 1550s and that the term "covenant of works" was first seen in print in the last decade of the 1500s. According to the early Reformed view, even before the fall into sin, man merited nothing from God. The later view speaks of covenant merit and a principle of works and of the imputation of Christ's active obedience as earning the everlasting inheritance. Among those who question the covenant of works idea, some prefer to not speak of a pre-fall covenant at

¹ Contemporary views such as held by N. T. Wright are not included in this discussion, nor are the several points raised in an exchange between Johannes Piscator (1546–1625) and Theodore Beza (1519–1605), as also the controversies that followed or similar discussions among Lutherans. The debate is more nuanced than this proposal suggests; e. g., some include the observance of the ceremonial law (or even the civil law) as part of the active obedience that is imputed. However, I am seeking to make it understandable also to non-theologians and I am concerned that we not fail to see the forest by observing the variety among the trees. Aware that my proposal invites discussion and that often a different perspective is misunderstood, I ask that readers first verify their understandings with me before initiating public discussions. I can be reached at ralph@refmail.net.

When I speak of the early Reformed view, I think particularly of Calvin and Ursinus. Calvin's explanations on justification were in contrast to Rome and Osiander and did not specifically oppose the imputation of Christ's active obedience for justification. Nevertheless, his views did not require this form of imputation, and therefore it is legitimate to find support for the single righteousness view in Calvin. The same can be said of Ursinus, and it can be argued that he consciously maintained this view in distinction from the idea that Christ's active obedience is imputed to us as part of our justification. If it is true that remission of sins is the whole of our righteousness in contrast to Rome's theology, it can also be true over against the proposal that the works-merit of Christ's active obedience is part of justification. For Ursinus, see Gert van den Brink, "Obedience, Punishment, and Merit: The Heidelberg Catechism on the Imputation of the Active Obedience of Christ," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 18 (2024): 279–301.

all, while others suggest a covenant of God's favor, rather than of man's works. I will refer to the different perspectives as the early and the later views and, with these terms, am including opinions of those who still hold these positions today.

Before proceeding, it is important to point out that both sides are Reformed, and it is helpful to be clear about what is not under consideration. First, no one is proposing that repentant believers contribute anything at all to their justification, either before or after their initial conversion. All agree that justification is possible only through the imputation of Christ's righteousness; that is, God counts us as righteous because Christ, our Head, is righteous and makes satisfaction for our sin. Another point that is not being questioned is what level of obedience satisfies God's justice. No one is suggesting that anything less than perfect conformity to the divine law can stand before the tribunal of God. Third, all reject Rome's view that justification is a process, such that a person becomes more justified as he or she becomes more sanctified. Justification is God's declaration that we are righteous because Christ, our Head, is righteous and not because we ourselves are being transformed into righteous people. Further, all agree about the necessity of Christ's life of perfect obedience (Heb 4:15); that is, no one denies the active obedience of Christ. There is also agreement that Adam and his descendants would not remain in the state in which they were created. God would lead them into a higher state of no longer being able to sin and enjoying higher glory in the presence of the Lord.

The Differences

To understand the differences, we can start in Eden. Created in the image of God, Adam was righteous from the beginning and was called to live a life of holiness, gratitude, perfect obedience, and joy in all God's gifts, including the gift of the promise of enjoying God's eternal rest in the future. By nature, man can never merit anything from God; that is, man can never do something for God that requires God to pay him back. The early view is content with this truth.² The later view holds that, although man can naturally not merit anything, God gifts Adam with a covenant by which man can merit eternal life through works, as the second part of two-part righteousness. The first part is Adam's integrity when created, the second is his perfect obedience to the law.

Both views confess that in the first covenant "life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience" (Westminster Confession of Faith 7.2). The early view understands that God promised life to man so long as he did not lose his righteousness by disobeying the Lord. The later view agrees that man was righteous at creation, but it considers this righteousness to be no more than innocence. Man was good, but he was not yet perfectly righteous. The obedience he

² In representing the early view (as held by some today), I describe the one I find to be most cogent and to best show the differences. There are those who reject the imputation of the active obedience of Christ for justification who hold views on protology that are the same as or similar to the views of those who defend it as well as of others who diverge on some aspects. I could address only the point that unites all who reject the imputation of the active obedience of Christ for justification, namely, that the Bible does not teach this doctrine. However, this would make the argumentation more involved and too lengthy. At the same time, by describing this particular position I am already presenting part of the proposal for how to overcome the controversy.

performed made him righteous on the basis of merit.³ It would earn or purchase approbation and eternal life.⁴

Both views can agree that Adam was counted as righteous according to his obedience. In the early view, God made man fully righteous, and his obedience showed that he continued to be upright. He did not become righteous because he obeyed but obeyed because he was righteous. In the second view, man's obedience was the ground for his righteousness. For the earlier view, innocence is righteousness—a matter of justice, that is, right-standing regarding God's law. To be righteous is to not be unrighteous, to not break the law. In the later view, on the other hand, righteousness is produced by human work and is an accomplishment that makes him justified.

We can compare the differences to a race. In the early Reformed view, the runner is counted as righteous so long as he abides by the rules of the race. The later view regards this as insufficient. To be counted as righteous, the athlete must also complete the race and win the prize. The earlier view does not deny the importance of completing the race, but asserts that even before the fall into sin, the reward is of grace and not of merit, and that observing the rules is different from finishing the work; pre-fall justification (being counted as righteous) is not a human accomplishment but God's gift in creating man as very good.

The differences carry over into the understanding of how we are justified after the fall. For the early view, after Adam's disobedience the problem is sin. Righteousness is lost because of sin, and justification consists in the forgiveness of the guilt of sin (Rom 4:6–8).⁵ Forgiveness is made possible by Christ's sacrifice, which atones for both the wrongs

³ Cf. R. C. Sproul: "Adam's state in the garden of Eden before his fall helps us understand the covenant of works. First, the Lord made Adam 'good' when he was first created (Gen 1:31), so at that point he was rightly related to God. Yet Adam's original goodness does not mean that he was in the best relationship with God that he could be. Through obedience, Adam was able to reflect God's image more deeply. Had Adam followed the command he was given—to refrain from eating the forbidden fruit (vv. 16–17)—he would have earned for himself and his progeny a positive record of righteousness in the eyes of God Almighty." <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/covenant-works-ii/>, retrieved April 9, 2017.

⁴ The Westminster Confession states: "The Lord Jesus, by his perfect obedience, and sacrifice of himself, which he, through the eternal Spirit, once offered up unto God, hath fully satisfied the justice of his Father; and purchased, not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for all those whom the Father hath given unto him" (WCF 8.5). Charles Hodge, for example, in discussing the imputation of the active obedience of Christ, writes, "Heaven is always represented as a purchased possession." *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3 (Eerdmans, 1940), 164. The early view also speaks of Christ purchasing eternal life and agrees with the Confession on this point, but it does not link this to meritorious law works. The Bible speaks of the purchase of redemption by the blood of Christ and not the purchase of heaven by good works.

⁵ In *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin writes, "Let us now consider the truth of what was said in the definition, viz., that justification by faith is reconciliation with God, and that this consists solely in the remission of sins.... It is evident, therefore, that the only way in which those whom God embraces are made righteous, is by having their pollutions wiped away by the remission of sins, so that this justification may be termed in one word the remission of sins" (3.11.21). The Belgic Confession (1563) starts Article 23 with the following: "We believe that our blessedness lies in the forgiveness of our sins for Jesus Christ's sake and that therein our righteousness before God consists...." In his *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (P&R Publishing, reprint of 1852 edition), Zacharias Ursinus states, "Justification and the forgiveness of sins are...the same: for to justify is that God should not impute sin unto us..." (327). In Lord's Day 25 the Heidelberg Catechism affirms "that our entire salvation rests on Christ's one sacrifice

we do and the failure to perform the right we should do. Theologians call Christ's suffering and death his passive obedience. "Passive" is derived from the Latin verb "to suffer."

The two-part righteousness view holds that more is needed. Christ's death only removes guilt, but there also must be positive righteousness in order to merit eternal life. This is supplied by the imputation of Christ's active obedience in keeping the law during his life on earth.

The first perspective answers that in Scripture to be guiltless is to be righteous (see Rom 4:6–8, where righteousness is equated with the non-imputation of sin). This agrees with scriptural language that describes the righteous as blameless, innocent, and without blemish (Col 1:21–22; Heb 7:26; 1 Pet 1:18–19). The concept of righteousness is like that of cleanliness. Something is clean or not clean, or even almost clean, but it is never more than clean. Similarly, when Adam was created righteous, he was fully righteous. The idea of positive righteousness as something more than being righteous contradicts the concept of being righteous. Righteous standing with God is the absence of moral defects, not the production of merits or the accomplishment of works produced by the righteous. It is always a gift of God, both before and after the fall. Also, even in the beginning, before Adam sinned, eternal life was a gift promised by God. If Christ's active obedience is understood to earn the eternal inheritance, then he makes a purchase rather than receiving a gift, and this kind of purchase of heaven is not taught in the Bible. Christ purchases our freedom from slavery, but he does not purchase heaven by being righteous.

A Way Forward

It is here proposed that the church can move beyond this debate. The way forward is not that of compromise. Rather, there can be a recognition that both views appeal to Scripture and that the biblical teachings can be brought together in such a way as to address important concerns that each view highlights. Specifically, the one view maintains that Adam was counted as righteous from the beginning and that man always is dependent on God's gifting. The other is concerned to show that Christ's obedience leads us into the eternal inheritance. It must be understood, however, that corrections are needed. The two views cannot be brought together in the form in which they are commonly presented. This proposal is not a middle way, but a different one. In it the early view is maintained regarding how we have right-standing with God only through the forgiveness of sin and then proposes that the obedience that leads into God's eternal rest is not the attainment of righteousness but the righteous completion of the stewardship of the earth.

for us on the cross." In this light Lord's Day 23 should not be interpreted as teaching the imputation of the active obedience of Christ for justification (in a works/merit sense) when it says that the "perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness" of Christ are imputed to us. Here the satisfaction refers to the atonement for sin, while Christ's righteousness and holiness refer to his nature, as we can read where Ursinus says, "Christ fulfilled the law by the holiness of his human nature, and by his obedience, even unto the death of the cross. The holiness of his human nature was necessary to his obedience; for it became our mediator to be holy and righteous in himself, that he might be able to perform obedience, and make satisfaction for us." *Op. cit.*, 328. Cf. also *Heid. Cat.*, Lord's Day 6.

Merit?

The proposal begins by asking about merit. In general, Reformed theology holds that, having been created by God and being altogether dependent on him, man merits nothing from him. God does not owe him anything in return for work done (Luke 17:7–10; Rom 11:35–36; 1 Cor 4:7). Is there, then, any compelling reason to introduce merit or earning or purchasing into the first covenant? Further, why should merit be integral to being counted as righteous? It is true that early Reformers consider Christ's atonement to be meritorious. That makes sense, because it pays the penalty of our guilt. His death earns restoration to right-standing before the law. However, does obediently expressing the righteousness God gave Adam earn justification and eternal life? Does the Bible teach that God promised eternal life to Adam as wages for remaining righteous?⁶ It must be understood that in the order of justice (as distinct from that of commerce or labor), the concern is about penalties for wrongdoing and not about payments for law-keeping.⁷ Justice does not deal with such payments. By way of illustration, the law does not give cash or other compensation to all who do not steal.

Consider what the first covenant looks like as a covenant of undeserved favor. From such a perspective, the covenant with Adam is a gift from the Lord, not only in its establishment but also in its execution. For man to fulfill his part in the covenant, God is at work in him, both to want to please the Lord and to do what glorifies him. Man trusts in the Lord and believes that his law is good. In this faith he accomplishes the good deeds that God has prepared beforehand for him to walk in them. He obeys because that is the right thing to do, and it honors his Creator. In a spirit of joyful thanksgiving for his Father's love, he expresses his own love in obedience to the perfect law of liberty. The Lord God is Adam's Master and also his Father (Mal 1:6). As a son rejoices to labor on the family properties, so man works diligently and righteously in the Lord's estate and, in due time, his Father leads him into God's rest and glory. In this picture, God's children are highly favored by their Father, accomplish all in dependence on him, and are blessed by one gift after another. Surely this perspective is biblical!

In such a covenant context, man's work is worthy, God-honoring, and meaningful. However, it is not meritorious in the sense that it earns or purchases eternal life. This wonderful life of glory can be received only as a gift. Here we remember that, in the classical sense, something is meritorious if it needs to be repaid because of its inherent value; that is, something of worth is exchanged for something of equal value as payment

⁶ John Murray comments: "From the promise of the Adamic administration we must dissociate all notions of meritorious reward. The promise of confirmed integrity and blessedness was one annexed to an obedience that Adam owed and, therefore, was a promise of grace. All that Adam could have claimed on the basis of equity was justification and life as long as he perfectly obeyed, but not confirmation so as to insure indefectibility. Adam could claim the fulfillment of the promise if he stood the probation, but only on the basis of God's faithfulness, not on the basis of justice. God is debtor to his own faithfulness. But justice requires no more than the approbation and life correspondent with the righteousness of perfect conformity." *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol. 2 (Banner of Trust, 1977), 56.

⁷ As Ursinus explains, "And even if our works were perfectly good, yet they could not merit eternal life, inasmuch as they are due from us. A reward is due to evil works according to the order of justice; but. . . not unto good works, because we are bound to do them as the creatures of God; but no one can bind God, on the other hand, by any works or means to confer any benefit upon him. Evil works, again, in their very design oppose and injure God, whilst good works add nothing to his felicity." *Op. cit.*, 335.

of a debt owed.⁸ Some argue that God's covenant makes man's work meritorious; that is, since God promises eternal life on the condition that man not sin against him and, therefore, the Lord obligates himself to repay man's obedience, this obedience thereby becomes meritorious. It is a matter of covenant obligation and thus of covenant merit. The problem with this is that the obligation that binds God is not man's work, but his own promise.⁹ Consider the case of a father promising his daughter a special gift for her birthday and adding the condition that she must keep her room neat. Does the condition turn a gift into a repayment of merit? Note that the requirement to keep the room neat is a proper expectation, independent of the gift, something that the daughter is already required to do apart from the promise. In relation to their righteousness, Adam and his descendants owe God perfect obedience independent of any promise or reward. A limiting condition does not turn a promised gift into a wage. Further, if man depends on God for everything and God is at work in man to enable him, can it make sense to think of this relationship as one in which man merits blessings from God? If a mother says that a child may take a cookie and then lifts him up so that he can reach the cookie jar, does that suggest that, with the cookie, the mother repays a debt to the child for service he performs?

Defining Justification

The next point that needs clarification is how justification is defined. Both views tend to describe it as God's work in Christ by which a sinner is counted as righteous in him and made an heir to eternal life. To help resolve the differences it is better not to include heirship to eternal life as a part of the definition of justification. Including it often leads theologians to extend its meaning to embrace the fulfilment of law as work that merits repayment. Is it not more accurate to understand justification simply as judging that a person is law-abiding than that he or she has completed all work that the law assigns? Certainly, God has commanded man to fulfill assigned tasks and when he disobeys these commands he is judged to be unrighteous. However, it does not follow that fulfilling a task makes one more righteous, given that only those who are already righteous can obey. It suggests that Jesus was not yet completely righteous before his crucifixion, since he had not yet completed the work the Father had given him to do (John 5:36). This is problematic, illustrating that difficulties arise when we regard being righteous as based on obedience, rather

⁸ Ursinus explains: "That is meritorious to which a reward is attached by obligation..." Ibid., 334. And "...where there is no benefit, there is no merit; for merit presupposes some benefit received." Ibid., 486. From this perspective he also clarifies how he understands Christ's merit: "...man can merit nothing from God, for it is said, 'When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, "We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do" (Luke 17:10).' Nor is the obedience of Christ meritorious in this respect, as though it added anything to God, but it is called meritorious on account of the dignity of his person, because he who suffered was the Son of God." Ibid., 328.

⁹ See John Murray's observation in note 6, above.

than obedience as the expression of being righteous. Further, defining justification as gaining title to an inheritance confuses justification with adoption.¹⁰

While it is true that everyone who is justified in Christ has eternal life and that justification is absolutely necessary for entrance into that life, it is not the cause or ground for receiving the inheritance. Rather, this gift of eternity with the Lord is based on God's covenant promise in Eden. The promise is conditional, but it is a limiting condition, that is, it is not fulfilled if man does not remain righteous, faithful, and obedient (Gen 3:17). The condition is not meritorious. Since it is called an inheritance, it is related to sonship rather than to justification (Rom 8:13–17; Gal 3:26–29; 4:4–7).

The proposal suggest that justification can be limited to having right-standing before the tribunal of God. It gives a right to life and God's approval, but it does not establish entitlement to a higher life than Adam experienced at creation.¹¹ The higher life of glory in God's rest into which the Lord leads his people after they fill the earth, subdue it, and defeat Satan, was promised to Adam as an inheritance that was his through sonship and is ours today through adoption in Christ. Adoption and entitlement to eternal life are gifts that accompany the gift of justification. Just as we distinguish justification from adoption, we can also distinguish justification from the work the just are called to do, the work that leads to everlasting glory.

The Lord leads the justified in Christ in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake, that they may dwell in the house of the Lord forever (Psalm 23). These are the same paths on which Adam walked before the fall, by the Shepherd's leading. They led to eternal life, not because this walk made him righteous, but, because he was righteous, he followed the Lord's leading, trusting him to keep him on the path to the promised eternal life. This was the same way of faith that righteous Jesus followed on our behalf, even as he also made atonement for our sins.

Understanding God's Covenants

Context is important. Before continuing our discussion on justification, let us pause to briefly reflect on the meaning of God's covenants. Covenants are sometimes summarized as promises based on conditions. While there are certainly promises and conditions in God's covenants with his people, there is much more. These covenants are sworn bonds of loving union and communion between the Lord God and his people. The heart of God's covenants with us is expressed in such texts as Leviticus 26:12, "And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people," and Psalm 136, "His steadfast love endures forever." The Lord swears to be with his people as their God. They swear to be faithful to him as his people, upon penalty of eternal death for disloyalty. God expresses his unmerited and loving covenant loyalty in blessings, promises, gifts, and protection for his children. They show their faith and faithfulness in their loving respectful obedience to his commandments, thus glorifying him and delighting in him

¹⁰ Charles Hodge treats this distinction too lightly when he virtually identifies the two, writing, "The second consequence attributed to the imputation of Christ's righteousness, is a title to eternal life. This in the older writers is often expressed by the words "adoption and heirship." Op. cit.

¹¹ See note 6, above.

and his bounty. In these covenants, under the threat of death for disobedience, being righteous must prevail, that is, the righteousness supplied by the Lord himself: first in creation and then in redemption. God gives righteousness, and man is called to walk in it and not turn away from it.

Jesus Christ is the center of our history. This is a reflection of the fact that love is at the center of God's covenants. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. God's covenants are like marriage covenants. Spouses do not vow to love each other according to their merits. So also, the Lord's covenant promises are not based on merit but are expressions of the Father's love. In return, although God encourages us with rewards, our obedience to him is not driven by a quest for wages but by love. This is no less true in the pre-fall covenant than in the covenant of grace. The reward is not of merit but of grace. Picture yourself climbing a mountain. As you follow your friend who has done this before, you think the challenge is too difficult for you, but your friend assures you that you can do it and that the view from the top is incredibly rewarding. You trust your friend and persevere, and when you reach the peak, behold, the reward is so amazing that your effort seems altogether unworthy of the reward. You feel so small as you admire the greatness of what lies before you and of the Creator of it all. It is all about God and not the merit of your achievement.

The covenant of works construction can be questioned not only for including entitlement to the eternal inheritance as part of justification but also for regarding the inheritance as something to be purchased by good works. Wasn't Adam counted as righteous from the beginning, before he was even given any work to do? Is it work that makes a person righteous? Should we not make a distinction between justice and labor? For example, someone who has never driven a car in his life can be just as righteous regarding speed limits as another who has done the work of driving 400,000 miles. Work can only be accomplished righteously when a person is already righteous and remains so in the performance of his labor. Shouldn't obedience be understood to follow being counted as righteous rather than being the means for attaining that status? Regarding this status, fulfillment of the law is to be law-abiding, not the fulfillment of a work assignment. For Adam before the fall, being righteous was one thing and his task was another. After naming the animals and some days of loving the Lord with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving Eve as he loved himself, he was still righteous in the same way as when created. His obedience did not make him more righteous or righteous in a different way. That is not how righteousness works. One is either righteous or not righteous.

Justification and Works

If Adam's approbation as righteous came before any works of obedience to God's law, one might ask why we will all be judged according to works (see, e.g., Eccl 12:14; 1 Cor 3:12–15; 2 Cor 5:10). Shouldn't man rather be judged according to either the righteousness of his heart (Adam before the fall) or the righteousness of Christ imputed to repentant sinners? The judgment about whether one is righteous is indeed about a person's heart, but judgment is based on evidence (Matt 7:15–20). Works are the fruit and evidence of the condition of the heart. This is true not only of redeemed sinners who express their repentance and faith in Christ through their works (Jas 2:14–26), but also of

Adam and Eve before the fall and of righteous Jesus Christ. On the other hand, unrepentant sinners are duly punished according to their evil works. One reason, then, for judgment according to works is that works demonstrate and express what is in the heart.

Another reason why man's works are brought into judgment is that the King rewards or punishes the works performed. The rewards for those who live by faith in union with Christ are not payments of merits earned; that is, with a reward God is not repaying a favor man has done for him. They are covenant blessings, gifts that God bestows on those he loves, encouragements and expressions of divine delight in and approval of those who work righteousness. On Judgment Day the Lord will vindicate the redeemed by rewarding their works of faithful stewardship of his gifts. Their works are the result of justification, not the cause. They do not contribute to righteous status before God, but are blessed, even though they are not perfectly righteous. This is because we are covered by the blood of Christ poured out for all our sinful shortcomings.

Christ's Death and Resurrection

Jesus Christ's death and resurrection are the only hope for the justification of sinners. "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit" (1 Pet 3:18). "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'" (Gal 3:13). Jesus was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification (Rom 4:25). Christ made atonement for our sins, so that we might be justified by the forgiveness of all our sins (Heb 9:25–27).

Christ's blood was shed for our redemption, but no one is saved without his resurrection. A dead man cannot save. Christ's resurrection on the third day certifies that the penalty for sin is paid in full and that therefore the justice of God is satisfied, and this not for his sin but ours. He was accused by Satan and the world, and condemned to death. By raising him from the dead, the Spirit openly declared that he was righteous and was falsely accused. Thus Christ was declared righteous, as a judicial declaration for himself¹² as well as for his people. Christ's obedience unto death and subsequent justification are not, however, to be understood as obtaining for himself the status of righteous before God, as if he did not previously have that status. He obtained it for his people by bearing the curse for them, but not for himself. This is because he always was righteous and never personally lost that status. Christ's obedience did not make him righteous. Rather, it flowed from and was an expression of his inherent righteousness. His reward of exaltation (Phil 2:9) was not for producing his own right-standing through obedience, but for the work accomplished righteously.

¹² Following the lead of Geerhardus Vos and Herman Ridderbos, Richard B. Gaffin Jr. develops the theme of Christ's own justification in his resurrection as follows: "I Timothy 3:16, Romans 4:25, and I Corinthians 15:17, then, show that the enlivening of Christ is judicially declarative not only...in connection with his messianic status as son, his adoption, but also with respect to his (adamic) status as righteous. The constitutive, transforming action of resurrection is specifically forensic in character. It is Christ's justification." Gaffin holds to the imputation of active obedience for justification, but I am not convinced that his exegesis requires this position. See his *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology* (P&R Publishing, 1987), 124.

Christ's resurrection established our justification, adoption, and sanctification (Rom 4:25; 6; 8:14–17). And it did more. His resurrection was a profound transformation. It was not like that of Lazarus, who returned to the same state as before his death. Christ's resurrected body is glorious, heavenly, spiritual, imperishable (1 Cor 15:42–49). He is the firstfruits of the new creation, having immortal eternal life, in which there is neither sin nor the possibility of sinning (Rom 2:6–7; 1 Cor 15:20; 2 Tim 1:9–10). His resurrection brought the fulfillment of the Lord's promises made in the Garden of Eden. This glorification is the consummation into which the Lord God leads his people from Eden to the new heavens and the new earth, as he promised in the Sabbath ordinance and the tree of life (Gen 2:2-3, 9). According to this proposal, the basis for this fulfillment, which is only for the righteous, is not justification through the merit of works, but God's promise of gifts, rewards for completion of the stewardship and dominion to which Adam and his descendants were called (Gen 1:28; 2:15). It was not justification, because in Eden man was reckoned as righteous before doing any work. The accomplishments were not meritorious, because nothing in this creation has value comparable to the glory of the new creation. In their union with Jesus Christ, redeemed sinners have entrance into the same eternal life he received, and this through his accomplishments, not theirs. The justification of the ungodly through Christ's redemption is a prerequisite for inheriting eternal life, but it is not the ground for receiving it.

Imputation of Christ's Righteousness

After the fall into sin, it is only possible to be counted as righteous on the basis of having Christ's righteousness imputed to us when, by his grace, we are united to him and he becomes our Head. There is more than one way in which Christ's righteousness is counted as ours.

By his death on the cross, Jesus righted a serious wrong. Our sin against the Almighty deserved the penalty of eternal death, and Jesus suffered that death to pay the legal debt we owed. This obedience of suffering was righteousness, and it is imputed to all who believe in Jesus Christ. It is the righteousness of God (Rom 3:21–26; 4:6–8; Phil 3:8–11).

The question in dispute is whether this imputed payment of our debt renders a believer completely righteous in the judgment of God or only forgiven, without being fully justified. In the earlier view, righteousness consists entirely in the forgiveness of sins, based on the atonement (see, e. g., Belgic Confession, Art. 23, first paragraph, and Q. and A. 67 of the Heidelberg Catechism). In the later view, the believer's righteousness comes through the imputation of meritorious righteousness that Christ produced by keeping the law of God. When justification is defined more accurately by limiting it to being counted as just, then works of active obedience as a means of receiving eternal life are excluded from justification (but not from the work Christ does for us).

To satisfy for our sin, Jesus was made for us the perfect Lamb of God, conceived and born as righteous, and perfectly obedient to the law. His entire obedience was essential to his being the perfect Mediator, High Priest, and Sacrifice. If he had not kept the law

perfectly, he would have become unrighteous and unqualified to pay our debt. Together, his faithful observance of the law and his suffering of the curse for us are integral to our deliverance through his death and resurrection. His unified obedience accomplished the atonement for all our sins, including the failure to produce righteous works. This last point is important. As far as justification is concerned, which is not about completing a job, the punishment of sins of omission is just as necessary as paying for sins of commission. In this proposal, then, Christ's justification does not provide "merits" to earn heaven, and this because such merits neither make anyone just nor purchase the gift of citizenship in heaven.

Essential to justification (and to our complete deliverance) is union with Christ. It is "in him" that we receive all the benefits of his salvation work (cf. Eph 1–2). We benefit from his person as our representative head. In union with him, we are identified with him. As he is judged to be righteous, so are we. The guilt of our sins and sinfulness are imputed to him, and his righteousness is counted as ours (2 Cor 5:21). Thus we can say that his right-standing, his holiness, the righteousness of his person, is imputed to us together with his priestly work for the removal of our guilt. Note that this righteousness of Christ is his legal status and his holy nature, not the performance of works of the law. Calvin speaks of this righteousness when he says, "He justifies not partially, but freely, so that they can appear in the heavens as if clothed with the purity of Christ" (*Institutes*, 3.11.11). Such imputation of righteousness can be seen or is implied as part of the meaning in passages such as 1 Cor 1:30, 2 Cor 5:21, and 1 John 2:1, 2:12, 3:7, 4:17. Christ's person and work, his right-standing as holy and his work of atonement, are so completely one and inseparable that we can speak of the imputation of a single righteousness.

There is another point to be made about Christ's law-keeping. Although it does not *earn* justification, it is counted to us as giving *evidence* of righteousness. We can say, "Look at Christ's perfect observance of God's law. It testifies to his righteousness—and to mine as well. Since Christ is my righteousness, the evidence of his righteousness witnesses to my righteousness in God's court." This concept is implied in Heb 4:14–16, for example.

Christ's Obedience for More Than Justification

At this point the proposal focuses on the issue that the imputation of Christ's active obedience for justification is meant to address. It suggests another way to view how we receive the eternal inheritance. In union with Christ we experience blessings that extend beyond justification. Many things that are true of Christ are counted as true of all who belong to him and are represented by him (cf. Heb 7:9–10). Together with Christ, for example, we are made alive, raised up, and seated in the heavenly places (Eph 2:5–7).

In this way we also inherit eternal life. It is not an aspect of justification, but it does come to us through union with Christ: "In him we have obtained an inheritance..." (Eph 1:11). An inheritance is, of course, not purchased. It is a benefit of sonship and, even so, a father can disinherit a son. Nevertheless, work is commonly considered when a father distributes an inheritance. He often takes into account (among other factors) the work his children are doing, as a reflection of their sense of responsibility and stewardship. A faithful son can be expected to act as a responsible steward of what he inherits, and a father rejoices in graciously rewarding faithfulness (Matt 25:14–30).

As Christ is the Son of God, we are adopted children in him and share in his inheritance (Gal 4:1–7), which is a promise to the children of God from the beginning (Matt 25:34; Titus 1:2). Adam was entitled to receive the eternal inheritance before he sinned, but he did not yet have possession of it. The weekly pattern of six work days to attend to the mandate to fill the earth and subdue it, followed by a day of rest, was a sign and seal of the promise that his work would lead to entering God’s rest, that is, eternal life in a blessed inheritance (Gen 2:2–3; Heb 4:9–10) and in wondrous fellowship with God in his heavenly glory. The tree of life also spoke of this promise of life eternal (Gen 2:9, 3:22; Rev 2:7). Here Adam’s work was regarded differently than frequently promoted in the covenant of works paradigm. Man’s work in fulfillment of the dominion mandate did not have in view the attainment of justification. He was judged to be righteous from the beginning. God made him so when he created him in his own likeness. Consequently, man’s work was performed righteously, unless he rebelled and then also lost the inheritance.

Adam was entitled to eternal life by virtue of the covenant God made with him, but first there was much to be done in the course of the history that was just beginning. Since he was already righteous, the job assignment given to him and his descendants could not be that of making themselves righteous or more righteous through moral obedience. The righteous moral obedience was required as the right way to fulfill a great stewardship of God’s gifts, and this by faith, not by merit. In his name, God’s earth had to be guarded from the evil one, filled with people, preserved and cultivated, and dominion had to be exercised over all the living creatures. The heavenly Father’s kingdom was meant to shine ever more brilliantly throughout the world as his children rejoiced to fulfill their calling. Adam, however, exalted himself, rebelled, surrendered the Lord’s handiwork to Satan, and did not complete the work that would lead to entrance into the eternal inheritance.

Adam failed, but Christ did not. He accomplished the work in order to obediently complete the historical process of filling the earth and subduing it—a process that would lead to joining God in his rest (Heb 4:9–10), a gift promised from the beginning.¹³ In this process that includes filling the (new) earth, not only natural multiplication, but especially, the discipling mandate would be the instrument for providing this great population, a mandate under the authority of Christ. Our Lord and Savior does much more than justify and save us. The second Adam also binds the strong man, Satan, establishes the Kingdom of God, and fulfills the original dominion and stewardship mandate that the first Adam failed to accomplish. The Father “put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:22–23). It is in fulfillment of the Genesis mandate to man that “our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who

¹³ I am indebted to Dr. Edmund P. Clowney for the perspective that Christ fulfills what is commonly called the cultural mandate. He spoke of this from time to time in class discussions when I studied at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia (1968–74.) Although I do not follow G. K. Beale in categorizing Christ’s fulfillment of the Adamic commission as justification, he develops the same theme in chapters 2 and 15 of *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Baker Academic, 2011).

will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (Phil 3:20–21).

Now we can return to our earlier illustration of running a race. Christ not only perfectly kept the rules of the race, but he also completed it and received the crown of glory. At the same time, he led us in union with him. Because we were disqualified, he paid our penalties and then led us on to victory. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:1–2).

Conclusion

The first covenant that the Lord God made with man was one of loving, undeserved favor.¹⁴ It contains a historical dynamic that leads human beings from earthly glory to heavenly exaltation and entrance into God’s eternal rest, that is, eternal life. In that covenant history, the Good Shepherd leads his sheep in the path of righteousness, for his name’s sake. Regarding righteousness, we observe the following points: (1) Justification should be understood to refer only to being counted as having right-standing before God and his law. (2) Adam was created in the image of God and was therefore righteous from the beginning, as God’s doing, not man’s (Eph 4:23–24). (3) Adam was not called to attain righteousness, but to remain righteous. By continuing in obedience, man expressed his righteousness and so continued to be counted as righteous until he sinned, making him and us unrighteous. (4) Justification is governed by principles of justice, which are different from those of labor. To be righteous is a matter of justice, while doing righteous work is labor. (5) Right-standing with God comes before works, since one needs to be righteous to be able to perform obedience. (6) In union with Christ, sinners are counted as righteous as he is, because he made satisfaction for their sins (through unified obedience), and his righteousness is imputed to them to acquit them from guilt. (7) Along with justification, Christ restores the eternal inheritance to believers through adoption and leads them into this eternal rest by establishing the Kingdom of God, fulfilling the original mandate of filling the earth and subduing it, guarding it from evil, preserving it, and cultivating it in filial stewardship.

In this reading of the Bible, we see the Lord’s abundant gifting and man’s complete dependence on him. We see a covenant of love, wonderful promises, and a perfect law of liberty. We also see Jesus, the Christ, made to us wisdom from God, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption—the one who restores all things, righteously fulfills all

¹⁴ It is common for critics of those who today reject the imputation of the active obedience of Christ for justification to suggest that this rejection has in mind to open an opportunity for the works of the redeemed to contribute to their justification in the final judgement. This is, for example, a frequent criticism made of the teachings of Norman Shepherd. See Ralph F. Boersema, *Not of Works: Norman Shepherd and His Critics* (NextStep Resources, 2012), 11, 103–04, 158. In reality, this criticism does not even fit in this paradigm, which holds that in relation to God, man can never merit anything. Undeserved favor and love of God to man, and man’s life of trust, dependence, and thanksgiving does not start with redemption. It is from the beginning and is expressed already in the first covenant, when there was, as yet, no need for salvation from sin.

God's purposes for creation, and leads his brothers and sisters into eternal glory with God.