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Reformation
& REVIVAL
JOURNAL

**THE OBEDIENCE
OF FAITH**

A Quarterly for Church Leadership

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REFORMATION & REVIVAL JOURNAL

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1. To encourage *reformation* in local Christian churches worldwide.
2. To promote the cause of *revival* and spiritual awakening through prayer and the provision of resources to aid Christian leaders.

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The views expressed in this publication should be considered as the personal opinions of the authors and are not to be taken as an official editorial perspective.

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THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH

TABLE OF CONTENTS

REFORMATION & REVIVAL JOURNAL

Introduction

John H. Armstrong 7

Theme Articles

The Obedience of Faith

John H. Armstrong 13

Gospel, Law, and Redemptive History: "Trust and Obey"

P. Andrew Sandlin 23

Imputation or Union with Christ? A Response to John Piper

Don Garlington 45

Another Reply to Counted Righteous in Christ

Daniel P. Fuller 115

A Response to Don Garlington on Imputation

John Piper 121

Articles

Classical Worship for Today

Wilbur Ellsworth 131

Classical Pastoral Practice for Today

Thomas N. Smith 135

Departments

A RRJ Interview with J. D. Douglas 141

Annotated Bibliography 171

Ministry Resources

Book Reviews 177

When Life and Beliefs Collide

The Roots of Endurance

Globalization and the Kingdom of God

Common Objects of Love

Live to Tell

Lord, Have Mercy

Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary

A History of Israel

Engaging God's World

Final Thoughts

John H. Armstrong 203

INTRODUCTION



John H. Armstrong

*E*vangelical theological discussion has historically engaged in debates about sundry doctrinal emphases that grow out of the Bible *and* our Protestant expressions regarding the relationship between faith and works. For example, "How does obedience to the law of God (or to the imperatives of Jesus, in other evangelical traditions) relate to free grace and salvation?" Or, "Is grace infused into the hearts of those who believe, thus helping them to cooperate with God in salvation?" And, "What role does imputation play in my standing before God?" I am convinced that this debate is both helpful and necessary. I believe it has several practical and salutary implications for reformation and revival. I am also convinced that the discussion itself should never be allowed to evolve into a new expression of sectarianism. Sadly, this is quite often much easier said than done.

In recent years evangelicals have been engaging in the discussion of the law and the gospel again. This development is to be preferred over the assumptions of the previous decades in which evangelicals seemed to believe that the one thing we *all* agreed upon was the nature of the gospel. Evangelical theology and theologians are presently debating important biblical ideas that present thoughtful Christians with numerous theological insights that are worthy of their honest debate.

One such doctrinal issue that has received a great deal of attention from evangelicals, and thus in this publication over the past three years, is the “openness of God” debate. Another current theological brushfire, which threatens to pit one evangelical against another in the vortex of an acrimonious debate, is the doctrine of imputation. And connected to that is the debate regarding union with Christ and obedience to Christ. These debates strike at the very heart of what many of us hold dear regarding the gospel recovery rooted in the sixteenth century. When imputation is discussed among pastors and serious lay readers, there is a good deal of confusion. The tendency is to adopt the rhetoric and position of the person you most admire, whether living or deceased. A number of related issues plainly flow out of this debate, thus it seems certain that this discussion will trouble evangelicals for the foreseeable future.

Let it be understood that orthodox Christians have differing ways of understanding *how* the Bible speaks of imputation and the obedience of Christians. (The fact that the Bible teaches imputation is not under debate in the light of passages like Romans 5:12-21.) Contrary to the views of some Reformed and Lutheran writers the “exact” way that we understand imputation has *never been at the heart of confessional theology* in Christian history. This may come as a surprise but wider reading in the field will demonstrate the point.

The term imputation itself is a metaphor that is generally used to refer to theological credit or debit from one person to another. Theologian Gabriel Fackre has noted that St. Augustine gave the earliest impetus to its use in historical theology. The Protestant Reformation, especially in its “later systematic expressions, sought to draw out the meaning and perceived implications of biblical references” regarding the idea of imputation (Genesis 15:6; Psalm 32:1-2; Romans 4:3-11, 22-25; Romans 5:13-17; 2 Corinthians 5:19, 21; and Galatians 3:8).¹

The way imputation has been generally employed is threefold. First, it is employed to answer the question: “How do we share in the sin of Adam?” Second, it is used to answer

the question: “How does the atonement involve the placing of our sin (or the cost of our sin) upon Christ?” And, third: “How in our justification is the reckoning of Christ’s righteousness and its benefits ours as Christian believers?”² The doctrine of imputation traditionally seeks to answer these specific questions that theology must face in reading the Bible.

Certain theologians in the Reformation traditions have developed another idea in this debate, namely the active obedience of Christ to the law. By this law-keeping they wish to argue that no one can keep the entire law but Christ alone and thus his law-keeping is *imputed to us* so that we are saved by the law being fulfilled *perfectly* in Christ. This idea appears in numerous ways in sermons and practical illustrations that few ever think about deeply.

Into this present discussion of imputation a greatly respected Reformed writer, John Piper, has recently directed a small book that has received considerable attention among evangelical leaders. *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness?* (Crossway, 2002) is a polemical book aimed *primarily* at the exegetical work of Dr. Robert Gundry. Robert Gundry’s original work appeared in *Books and Culture* (January/February 2001) in an article titled, “Why I Didn’t Endorse ‘The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration’ . . . Even Though I Wasn’t Asked To.” Thomas Oden responded to Gundry in *Books and Culture* (March/April 2001), and then Gundry responded to Oden in the same issue. Piper picks up the debate of 2001 in his volume and carries it considerably further.

In this issue we will engage several theological issues that presently impact evangelical Christians at the most basic level of our life together. We look at the relationship of faith to obedience, as our starting point, and then engage the subject of imputation by means of two reviews of John Piper’s book. To be fair we also include a response from John Piper to the critique of Don Garlington. Our goal is to edify and to allow serious readers to better understand the trajectory of evangelical debates. The desire is also to strengthen the evangelical theological enterprise in the Church at large. Theology must

never become the special work of experts alone. To do theology is to think and pray with your brothers and sisters in an atmosphere of faith, hope and love. My hope is that you will wrestle with these issues in that spirit.

Notes

1. Richardson, Alan, and John Bowden (editors). *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 289.
2. *The Westminster Dictionary*, 289.