

THE SUFFICIENCY OF THE CROSS (II): THE LAW, THE CROSS, AND JUSTIFICATION

J. R. DANIEL KIRK, BIBLICAL SEMINARY, HATFIELD, PENNSYLVANIA, USA

INTRODUCTION: DELINEATING THE THEOLOGICAL QUESTION

In the first part of our study¹ we established a historical and theological context for discussing the issue of the imputation of the active righteousness of Christ: as a nascent and disputed doctrine in the mid-1600s, it was neither clearly included nor clearly excluded in the formulation of the Westminster Standards. We have therefore framed our discussion of the doctrine under the rubric of an intramural debate among Westminster Calvinists. The burden of our study, however, is one of biblical theology not of historical theology. We therefore turned our attention to four major passages, along with several minor passages, around which the debates of this doctrine have orbited. These passages provide the language of Christ's 'obedience' and his 'righteousness', and for that reason have been the flashpoints of contention over whether the 'obedience' and 'righteousness' in view are 'active obedience/righteousness' (i.e., Jesus' obedience to the law of God); or his 'passive obedience/righteousness' (i.e., Jesus' obedience to the specific command given to him to die on behalf of his people). We found that these passages, without exception, point toward the latter.

We now turn to deal with the theological logic of the New Testament as it takes up the question of the interrelationships between Jesus' work, the law, and justification. In pursuing this line of inquiry, we will not be dealing with every theological locus that proponents of the active righteousness position put forward in defence of their case. Instead, we will allow the New Testament writers to dictate the limits of the discussion. It is neither possible nor necessary to delve into the role of Jesus' ontological status as pre-existent Son of God or the complex federal theologies that have supported the active righteousness view.² With respect to Jesus'

¹ J. R. Daniel Kirk, 'The Sufficiency of the Cross (I): The Crucifixion as Jesus' Act of Obedience', *SBET* 24:1 (2006): 36-64.

² For a discussion of the role of the covenant of works in the discussion of active righteousness at the Westminster Assembly, see Chad B. Van

ontological status as Son of God, we can take our cue from John Chrysostom who says the following in his introduction to Galatians:

For had this discourse been addressed to those who had unworthy conceptions of Christ, it would have been well to mention those things; but, inasmuch as the disturbance comes from persons who fear to incur punishment should they abandon the Law, he therefore mentions that whereby all need of the Law is excluded, I mean the benefit conferred on all through the Cross and the Resurrection.³

When dealing with the question of how Jesus embodies saving righteousness and obedience, especially in the face of the failure of the law to bring these about, the NT writers lead us first and foremost to the death and resurrection of Jesus. We can argue similarly with respect to the possible role of a covenant of works in this discussion. The Westminster Confession articulates a *sola scriptura* hermeneutic when it says that the things required for salvation, faith, and life are either expressly taught in Scripture or may be derived from it by 'good and necessary consequence' (WCF 1:6). If, therefore, the NT passages that speak about the question of Jesus' relationship to law, obedience, and righteousness paint a fully intelligible picture of justification without *requiring* recourse to a covenant of works, if they time and again show the sufficiency of the cross and resurrection for bringing humanity justification and entrance into eschatological glory, then the standard of 'necessity' is not met. Thus, when we have come to the end of our current study and shown how the NT writers themselves deal with the questions that the active righteousness position seeks to answer, the very fact that they do not make recourse to the doctrine in dispute, or to a covenant of works, becomes a powerful argument from silence that we should not do so either.

Dixhoorn, 'Reforming the Reformation: Theological Debate at the Westminster Assembly 1643-1652' (Ph.D. Dissertation: Cambridge University, 2004), pp. 313, 316-18; the conjunction of covenantal structures and obedience and righteousness in Turretin is the subject of Benjamin T. Inman, 'God Covenanted in Christ: The Unifying Role of Theology Proper in the Systematic Theology of Francis Turretin' (Ph. D. Dissertation: Westminster Theological Seminary, 2004).

³ Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Galatians* (NPNF¹ 13:3).

I) GOD'S RESPONSE TO THE FAILURE OF HUMANITY UNDER THE LAW OF MOSES

The NT writers clearly articulate the failure of humanity under the law. Romans 7 speaks of the law working sin and death (7:5-6), provoking 'knowledge' of sin (7:7-8), giving life to sin (7:9), and becoming the instrument of sin (7:13).⁴ Further, in the passage from Romans 8 examined in the first part of this study, Paul addresses the issue of the law's inability to grant life as one facet of the problem of a fallen world that God's action in Christ must overcome (8:1-4). Those who argue for the imputation of the active righteousness of Christ correctly light upon this problem of sinful humanity to keep the law (though they often miss that Paul directs this point to the Jews to whom God gave the law of Moses and not to humanity in general).⁵ They see Christ's obedience to the law of Moses as God's answer to the failure of sinful humanity to keep this law. John Owen states the position as follows:

notwithstanding that their [*sic*] was *no wrath* due to *Adam*, yet he was to obey if he would *enjoy eternal life*. Something there is moreover to be done in respect to us, if after the slaying of the enmity and Reconciliation made we shall enjoy life; *being reconciled by his death*: we are saved by that *perfect Obedience* which in his life he yielded to the Law of God. There is a distinct mention made of *Reconciliation*, through *non-imputation* of sin as Ps. 32:1. Luke 1:77. Rom. 3:25. 2 Cor. 5:19: and *Justification* through an imputation of Righteousness Jer. 23:6. Rom. 4:5. 1 Cor. 1:30 ... and this last we have by the life of Christ.⁶

Owen here acts as spokesman for the active righteousness position in saying that the cross of Christ is insufficient for justification. As Herman Bavinck and others have held, the cross is certainly sufficient for removing God's wrath or a 'reconciliation' that restores humanity to the position from which it fell, but it does not fulfil the requirement of 'perfect

⁴ For a brief summary of Paul's exposition of the failure of the law, see Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith: A Survey of Christian Doctrine* (trans. Henry Zylstra; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 450.

⁵ Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (trans. John Richard de Witt; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 130-58.

⁶ John Owen, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost* (2nd ed.; London: for William Marshall, 1700), p. 223 (italics original).

obedience' that God places upon humanity even in its state of original righteousness.⁷

We must affirm that law-breaking is a real problem and that Christ is the real solution. Each of the following NT passages, then, expressly indicates one or more of the following: (1) what God does in response to the failure of the law; (2) what it is about the work of Christ that justifies humanity; or (3) what it is about the work of Christ that gives humanity eschatological life. In no case does Paul tell his churches that the failure of the law, their justification, or their eternal life find their answer in Jesus' life of law-keeping. Space limitations dictate that the following exegetical surveys must be brief.

a) Romans 3:20-26. Paul's catena of OT Scriptures about the sinfulness of humanity finds its implication spelled out in 3:20: 'By works of law all flesh will not be justified before him, for through law [is] knowledge of sin.' In the face of the failure of the law of Moses, Paul indicates that God has provided a different means for humanity's justification. Romans 3:24 spells out how justification comes to sinners: 'through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus whom God put forward (*proetheto*): a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood'. Paul says that the purpose of God's giving Jesus up in a sacrificial death was 'to show forth his righteousness at the present time in order that he might be just *and the justifier* of the one who is of the faith of Jesus' (3:26). Two points merit attention here. (1) In response to the failure of the law, Paul does *not* say that God sent Jesus to obey the law; rather, Paul says that in response to the failure of the law to accomplish salvation, the law must step back to the role of witness to God's accomplishment of justification in the death of Jesus (3:21). Jesus' death, not the law, brings about justification. (2) Without any reference to Jesus' life of law-keeping, Paul says that the death of Jesus allows God to be the justifier of the one who is of the faith of Jesus (*ton ek pisteos Iesou*). In Romans 3, a passage where Paul addresses the very problem that the active righteousness position intends to overcome, Paul makes no mention of Jesus' active righteousness; instead, he appeals to the passive righteousness of Christ.

⁷ See Bavinck, *Reasonable Faith*, pp. 461-2 (although Bavinck's discussion of righteousness on pp. 452-5 gives such a robust description of Jesus' so-called passive righteousness that the appeal to active righteousness on p. 462 seems out of place); Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (3 vols; ed. James T. Dennison, Jr.; trans. George Musgrave Giger; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), 2:451; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (4th ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 515; Van Dixhoorn, 'Reforming,' pp. 312-13.

b) *Romans 5:9-10; 8:11,17-39; 10:6-10*. As the citation above shows, Owen divides the work of Christ into two parts: a reconciliation that comes from Christ's death and a true righteousness and justification that come from his life of law-keeping. In support of his argument he alludes to Romans 5:9-10. These verses, however, cannot be used in this way.

First, Romans 5:9 locates the justification of sinners in the *blood* of Christ: 'having been justified now in his blood (*haimati*)'. It is difficult to imagine a clearer statement to the effect that Jesus' death justifies sinners. Thus, Calvin's commentary on 5:9 is entirely to the point: 'The import of the whole is, —since Christ has attained righteousness for sinners by his death, much more shall he protect them, being now justified, from destruction.'⁸ Then, in conjunction with verse 10, Romans 5:9 undermines the distinction between reconciliation and justification.⁹ Verses 9 and 10 are parallel. Each verse looks first to a past event, brought about by the death of Jesus, an event with a present effect; and then each verse looks to a future effect of his resurrection. In verse 9 the past effect of Jesus' 'blood' is sinners' justification; in verse 10 the change that has already happened is reconciliation to God 'through the death of his son'. We cannot divide these two effects of Jesus' work by assigning the former to Jesus' life. Paul assigns them both to the cross.

Further, Owen glosses 'we will be saved by his life' (5:10) as follows: 'we are saved by that *perfect Obedience* which in his life he yielded to the law of God'.¹⁰ But such a gloss redirects Paul's statement about Jesus' *resurrection* life to Jesus' earthly life; in addition, there is no verse reference to the law in this verse.¹¹ Contemporary scholarship universally

⁸ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (trans. and ed. John Owen; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 196.

⁹ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 1:267, summarizes the NT use of words for reconciliation: 'they are used with reference to the relation of God and men only in the Pauline epistles ... and there they express the quality of personal relationship which is integral to God's justification of men but which the word "justification" does not as such necessarily suggest.... The close connexion that there is between reconciliation and justification—and indeed their inseparability—is shown by the parallelism between vv. 9 and 10' (italics original).

¹⁰ Owen, *Communion with God*, 223 (italics original).

¹¹ See Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:266.

demurs against Owen's reading.¹² Moreover, other passages in Romans similarly look to future, eschatological salvation in the resurrection life of Jesus.

We do not arbitrarily look to Romans 8 for further understanding of Romans 5:1-11. It has often been noted that Romans 5 introduces themes that Romans 8 brings to completion.¹³ We find the basis for the hope of 'life' articulated in Romans 8 to be consistent with our exegesis of Romans 5:9-10. Part one of this study has already shown that Romans 8:2-4 speaks of God's meeting the failure of the law through the death of Jesus. That same discussion climaxes with an articulation of the believer's hope for resurrection life: 'But if the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will also make alive your mortal bodies through his Spirit which indwells you' (8:11). Paul does look 'backward' to ground the hopes of the believer for resurrection life; however, he does not look back to Jesus' life of law-keeping. Rather, he looks back to Jesus' resurrection from the dead (cf. 2 Cor. 4:14; 1 Thess. 4:14). Paul continues to locate the believer's hope for eschatological life in the death and resurrection of Jesus in 8:17. The assurance of being an heir is founded on suffering with Christ in order also to be glorified with Christ. As always in Paul, the movement to glorification is through the cross, not through the law. In a final scene of Romans 8, Paul pictures the believer standing before the eschatological judgment throne. The believer's hope of coming safely through that judgment, and therefore attaining to eschatological life, is that God the judge is the justifier (8:33) and Christ is the one who died and was raised (8:34). Nowhere does Paul place the believer's hope for eschatological, resurrection life on Jesus' obedience to the law.

Likewise, Romans 10:6-10 speaks of the sufficiency of Jesus' death and resurrection for the justification and eschatological salvation of the

¹² In chronological order: John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 1:174; Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:265-6; Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (4th ed.; trans. George W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 139; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (WBC 38a; Dallas: Word, 1988), 260; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 400-1; Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 312; Simon Légasse, *L'épître de Paul aux Romains* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 345-8.

¹³ Nils A. Dahl, 'Two Notes on Romans 5', *ST* 5 (1952): 37-48; see also the helpful chart of comparisons in Moo, *Romans*, 293, and the bibliography there.

believer. Paul takes the message of Deuteronomy 30 to be an indication of his own gospel message: that if one confesses with the mouth 'Jesus is Lord' and believes in the heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, that person will be saved. Here again, the prerequisite for entry into eschatological life and salvation is centred on Jesus as raised from the dead. And once again Calvin is to the point:

As the assurance of our salvation lies on two foundations, that is, when we understand that life has been obtained for us, and death has been conquered for us, he teaches us that faith through the word of the gospel is sustained by both these; for Christ, by dying, destroyed death, and by rising again he obtained life in his own power.¹⁴

The 'two foundations' for overcoming death and attaining life are not Jesus' law-keeping and subsequent death, but rather his death and subsequent resurrection.

Furthermore, it is essential to note that the witness to Christ that Paul finds in Deuteronomy 30 *replaces* the chapter's own statement about the law.¹⁵ Whereas Deuteronomy 30:12-14 warns the Israelites not to search high and low for the law, Paul uses it as a witness to his gospel and as a warning not to search high and low for the completed work of Christ. Paul's reinterpretation of Deuteronomy 30 itself indicates that the law's end is to witness to Christ instead of indicating that Christ's end is to obey the law. As Romans 10:4 puts it: *telos gar nomou Christos* (Christ is the goal of the law) not *telos gar Christou nomos* (the law is Christ's goal).¹⁶

Paul paints a consistent picture throughout Romans that eschatological life is attained by union with Christ in his death and resurrection. At times, he maintains this over against the impossibility of attaining eschatological life through the law. Paul's solution is not that Christ

¹⁴ Calvin, *Romans*, 389-90.

¹⁵ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale, 1989), 73-82; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:524.

¹⁶ Dunn's interpretation of the passage, in which Jesus is somehow connected with obedience to the law of Moses, falls short at precisely this point: Christianity is not eschatologically-charged covenantal nomism; rather, it is the confession of a way of salvation other than the law (*Romans 9-16*, 615). See the discussion of Romans 10 in James R. Daniel Kirk, 'Resurrection in Romans: Reinterpreting the Stories of Israel in Light of the Christ Event' (Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke University, 2004), 205-43.

obeyed the law in our stead. In the theology of Romans, the cross of Christ together with his resurrection is sufficient to secure eschatological life before God.

c) *2 Corinthians 5*. Another claim that Owen makes in the citation above is that 2 Corinthians 5:19 witnesses to reconciliation through the non-imputation of sin rather than to justification that requires the imputation of righteousness.¹⁷ In discussing the myriad questions that swirl around 2 Corinthians 5, we should note that Paul lays out the structure of Christ's work as he has it in view in this particular passage in 5:15: Christ is the one who died and was raised.¹⁸ This movement from death to resurrection embodies the movement from sin, flesh, and death to reconciliation, new creation, and life (cf. Gal. 6:14-15).¹⁹ Again, this passage nowhere mentions Jesus' life of perfect law-keeping, and it pays no exegetical dividends to introduce it. The passage instead highlights the cosmic scope of Jesus' death and resurrection. Moreover, it states that we become the righteousness of God in Christ (5:20).²⁰ The passage goes further than Owen suggests inasmuch as it holds forth the righteousness requisite for justification but it does so through participation in Jesus' death on the cross and the new cosmos wrought by God in Jesus' resurrection from the dead.²¹

d) *Galatians 2:19-21*. These verses explicitly take up the relationships between righteousness, the law, and the death of Jesus.²² Paul

¹⁷ Owen, *Communion with God*, 223.

¹⁸ In keeping with this observation is the exposition by Philip Edgecumbe Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), e.g., 201-2.

¹⁹ On the relationship between cross and resurrection and the new aeon and new creation, see Ridderbos, *Paul*, 91-3.

²⁰ Frank Matera, *II Corinthians: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 143-5.

²¹ See Ridderbos, *Paul*, 58-9. The reader should note in Ridderbos's summary of 'union with Christ' statements that Paul speaks of union with Christ in his death, resurrection, ascension, session, return, and glory – but not in his keeping of the law of Moses, the moral law, or any other activity prior to his passion. Ridderbos' summary is true to the content of the NT.

²² The exegesis offered here of vv. 19-21 can be applied also to vv. 16-18 if the infamous *pistis Christou* debate falls out in favour of the 'subjective genitive' interpretation. (See Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11* [2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], with its bibliography). That is to say, if *pistis Christou* in v. 16 connotes Jesus' act of faith in going to the cross for sinful humanity, then v. 16 counterpoints justification by the death of Christ

reflects on his own movement from death to life, and he claims that this movement is grounded in his union with Christ in Christ's own death: 'For I, through the law, died, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. But that which I now live in the flesh, I live in the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me' (2:19-20). For our purposes two things bear pointing out: (1) Paul here contrasts his life in the law with the new life that he now enjoys in Christ.²³ (2) The union with Christ that Paul claims for himself, which enables Paul to live his new life, is union with Christ precisely in Jesus' death on the cross.²⁴ In constructing an argument against the necessity of law-keeping as a necessary element for human salvation, Paul does not turn to or imply the vicarious law-keeping of Jesus. He turns instead to the death of Jesus which brings an end to the old aeon, with its life lived under the power of the law (cf. 4:1-7; Rom. 6:1-7:6). Consistent with Paul's articulations of the law in relationship to the work of Christ throughout his letters, Paul does not say that the impotence of the law of Moses is overcome through Jesus' keeping of the law. Rather, he appeals to Jesus' death to redeem humanity from the law's reign.

Paul thus concludes his argument in Galatians 2 with a statement that categorically contrasts a system of salvation by law-keeping with a confession of salvation through Christ's death: 'I do not set aside the grace of God. For if righteousness is through the law (*dia nomou dikaiosune*), then Christ died for nothing' (v. 21). In all of Paul's letters, Galatians 2 (and, indeed, Galatians in general) is *the* place where the active righteousness of Christ should be highlighted: 'Peter, you fool! We don't need to strive to keep the law, because Christ kept the law for us!' Instead,

with justification by law-keeping in a manner congruous with the counterpoints between Jesus' death and law-keeping that one finds in the latter verses of the chapter.

²³ See J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33a; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 257. Martyn highlights the shocking divorce that Paul makes between the law and life. He then continues: 'The antinomy *to live to the Law / to live to God* is a thoroughly apocalyptic antinomy created at the cross.'

²⁴ Calvin's comments on v. 19 (and, indeed, vv. 17-19) are particularly helpful in contrasting the life Paul finds in dying with Christ with the death Paul finds in living with the law (*Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* [trans. William Pringle; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], 70-5),

however, Paul argues that keeping the law is folly because it is in the *death* of Jesus, not in righteousness of law, that God has brought salvation to his people and fulfilment of his covenant promises to Abraham (3:1-14). If righteousness comes through the law, then Christ comes to keep the law – but this would render his death vain.²⁵ Christ must die because the law cannot give the righteousness needed to stand before God. Righteousness, Paul insists, comes not through the law but through the death of Christ. ‘If we could produce a righteousness of our own, then Christ has suffered in vain; for the intention of his sufferings was to procure it for us.’ In these words Calvin accurately summarizes Paul’s intention to locate saving righteousness in the sacrifice of Christ.²⁶ In Galatians 2, where Paul takes up the very question of how the law is related to the righteousness by which believers can stand before God, he not only highlights the death of Jesus, but excludes the righteousness of the law altogether.²⁷ The passive righteousness of Christ is sufficient.

e) *Philippians 3:9-11*. In this chapter we find Paul, yet again, reflecting on the interaction between law, righteousness, salvation, and the death and resurrection of Christ. And, yet again, we find Paul dissociating the righteousness that leads to salvation from the law and focusing intently on the death and resurrection of Jesus. In verse 9 Paul contrasts two kinds of righteousness: my righteousness which comes from law (*emen dikaiosunen ten ek nomou*) and the righteousness which comes from God (*ten ek theou dikaiosunen*).²⁸ This latter righteousness is also described as that which is through the faith of Christ (*ten dia pisteos Christou*). First, we must note the stunning claim that God’s righteousness and the law’s righteousness are not identical.²⁹ Then we see that Paul renounces the

²⁵ “[T]hrough the law” and “Christ crucified” are noncomplementary. To affirm the one is to deny the other, and vice versa’ (Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* [WBC 41; Dallas: Word, 1990], 95).

²⁶ Calvin, *Galatians*, 77.

²⁷ See Martyn, *Galatians*, 259-60: ‘For Paul, however, the locus of God’s grace is defined by the locus of God’s rectifying power... [H]e returns to the vocabulary of v. 16, and specifically to the antinomy showing God’s deed of rectification to have been enacted in Christ’s faithful death, not in the Law ... Rectification does not come from the Law.’

²⁸ Calvin, *Philippians*, 97.

²⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letters to the Philippians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 323-4.

law's righteousness for God's righteousness – and this latter righteousness comes through Christ.³⁰

Paul then defines what it means to possess this latter righteousness by being found in Christ: 'to know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings' (Phil. 3:10). Paul defines the fellowship with Christ that brings the believer into communion with God's righteousness as righteousness that comes from union with Jesus in his death ('his sufferings') and resurrection. Thus Calvin can say in reference to the death and resurrection: 'Now all things are there furnished to us—expiation and destruction of sin, freedom from condemnation, satisfaction, victory over death, *the attainment of righteousness*, and the hope of a blessed immortality.'³¹ Paul is answering the question that the active righteousness theologians are themselves addressing: what is the nature of the righteousness by which humanity can stand before God? Paul parts ways with the active righteousness position in his finding the death and resurrection to be the sufficient answer to that question.

Finally, Philippians 3:10-11 also shows us that the hope of eschatological life is founded not on Jesus' life of law-keeping for humanity but rather on his death and resurrection and the Christian's participation therein: 'being formed together with his death, if somehow I might attain to the resurrection from among those who are dead'.³² When Paul wants to assure himself and his readers of eschatological life, he looks to their union with Christ in his death and resurrection, to the time of the cross and after it rather than the time before it.³³ Although these two verses do not indicate that a reward based on law-keeping is impossible, they fit with the consistent manner of speaking in Paul, including those passages that do, in fact, say that life cannot be attained through the law. The death of Jesus, coupled with his resurrection, is sufficient for the eschatological blessing of humanity.

f) 1 Thessalonians 5:10. This final verse also illustrates the sufficiency of Jesus' death to usher humanity into eschatological life. Its logic stands in contrast to the theological structure with which Owen is working, as seen in the following quotation: 'Something there is moreover to be done in respect to us, if after the slaying of the enmity and

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 324, adds that Christ's death is the particular event that establishes humanity's relationship with God. My point stands whichever way one takes the genitive in the prepositional phrase *dia pisteos Christou*.

³¹ Calvin, *Philippians*, 98 (emphasis added).

³² Fee, *Philippians*, 329-36.

³³ Calvin, *Philippians*, 99.

Reconciliation made we shall enjoy life; *being reconciled by his death*: we are saved by that *perfect Obedience* which in his life he yielded to the Law of God.³⁴ Paul says that salvation comes to believers through Jesus Christ ‘who died for us so that whether we are awake or whether we sleep we will live together with him’ (1 Thess. 5:10). The hope of salvation and eschatological life is not found in Jesus’ law-keeping on humanity’s behalf, but in his own death and resurrection. Believers will live with Jesus because Jesus’ death was for them.³⁵ Whereas Owen sees the death of Jesus functioning negatively, merely overcoming the death that sinners deserve, Paul sees it functioning also as the guarantor of the positive element of life. Such life was the purpose (*hina*) of Jesus’ death, and Jesus’ death is sufficient in this passage to ground the hope of the Thessalonian church for resurrection life with absolute certainty.³⁶ No appeal to Jesus’ life of law-keeping is necessary.³⁷

These NT passages should not be viewed as randomly chosen proof texts. They represent Paul’s articulations of the relationships between law, righteousness, salvation, and the death of Jesus. Therefore, these passages must be appreciated more than they are in the Reformed defence of active-righteousness and in its frequent dismissal of the passive-righteousness view. Taken together, these texts are in significant tension with the notion that humanity must have something in addition to Jesus’ obedience in death (with his subsequent entry into glory) in order to merit eternal life and justification. Rather, they stand as clear testimony to the sufficiency of the cross of Christ, that we must not look beyond the cross of Christ for salvation’s requisites due to some supposed ‘theological necessity’. When the NT writers take up our questions, we do well to follow the advice of Calvin:

³⁴ Owen, *Communion with God*, 223 (italics original). See also Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:448.

³⁵ Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (rev. ed.; NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 161-2.

³⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians* (trans. John Pringle; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 290, makes precisely this point in his comments on v. 10.

³⁷ Thus, Paul’s approach to Christian assurance stands in some tension with the recent statement by the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary in California to the effect that the doctrine of the imputed active obedience of Christ is part of the gospel message that is ‘foundational to all Christian assurance and holy living’ (‘Our Testimony on Justification’, May 2004, n.p. [cited 3.8.04]. Online: www.wscal.edu/resources/Justification.htm).

Let us, I say, permit the Christian man to open his mind and ears to every utterance of God directed to him, provided it be with such restraint that when the Lord closes his holy lips, he also shall at once close the way to inquiry. The best limit of sobriety for us will be not only to follow God's lead always in learning but, when he sets an end to teaching, to stop trying to be wise.³⁸

2) THE RIGHTEOUSNESS REQUISITE TO STAND IN THE JUDGMENT OF GOD

We must now take our cue from the NT evidence just analyzed to determine what indications there are about the nature of the law that makes it ineffectual for bringing salvation to fallen humanity. Once again we find the testimony about the law pointing in one, unified direction: the law does not provide the *kind* of righteousness requisite for obtaining eschatological life. In the next section we will look at one indication for why the law and the work of Jesus came to be two mutually exclusive options in the writings of the apostles.

a) Philippians 3. The law can foster righteousness, but not the right kind of righteousness to stand before God. This is what we might call the 'positive' side of the law's shortcoming: it can, in some instances, provide righteousness, but not the right kind of righteousness to enable humanity to stand before the judgment seat of God. A crucial aspect of Paul's description in Philippians 3 of the righteousness he spurns comes in his catalogue of possible boasts. He culminates his list with 'according to the righteousness which is in the law (*kata dikaiosunen ten en nomo*), being blameless' (3:6). In this case, Paul does not view the law as setting an impossible standard of perfection; rather, he views the law as holding forth a standard of righteousness that is not only hypothetically attainable but that he himself actually obtained. He was blameless. This is the righteousness that he goes on to contrast in verse 9 with the righteousness of God in Christ.³⁹ It is with this in mind that we must assess Owen's active righteousness reading of this passage:

So also, Phil. 3:9. *And be found in him not having my own Righteousness which is of the Law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the*

³⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols; ed. J. T. McNeill; trans. F. L. Battles; LCC; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1960), 3.21.3.

³⁹ See E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), 43-5.

Righteousness which is of God by faith. The righteousness we receive is opposed to our own obedience to the law; opposed to it, not as something in another kind, but as something in the same kind excluding that from such an end which the other obtains. Now this is the obedience of Christ to the law, – himself thereby being ‘made to us righteousness’, 1 Cor. 1: 30.⁴⁰

Owen argues that Paul has one kind of righteousness in mind, law-righteousness, and that humans cannot obtain this righteousness because of their disobedience to the law. Paul, however, claims in verse 6 that he does, in fact, have blameless law-righteousness (*genomenos amemptos*, v. 6). Owen’s reading leaves no room for Paul’s claims about himself as a Jew under the law. As we have argued above, Paul contrasts his own righteousness with the righteousness that comes from God in the death of Christ. Owen points to obedience to the law by importing it into Philippians 3 – and that from a passage (1 Cor. 1:30) that does not itself speak of the so-called active righteousness of Christ.

Fee provides a reading of the passage that makes sense of the text without recourse to foreign theological loci: ‘Obedience under [the old] covenant could issue in blameless Torah observance, but it lacked the necessary power – the gift of the eschatological Spirit (v. 3) who alone brings life (2 Cor. 3:6) – to enable God’s people truly to know him and thus bear his likeness.’⁴¹ The problem in Philippians 3 is not that obedience to the law (and hence righteousness derived from the law) is an impossible standard for humans to attain; the problem is that obedience to the law does not provide the powerful transformation, and status of righteousness, requisite for being made partakers of heavenly glory. The law is the wrong kind of entity to provide the right kind of righteousness to stand justified and exalted in the presence of God. Although Paul had such law-righteousness he renounced it for a wholly different kind: the righteousness that comes not from the law, but from God himself.

Such a reading of Philippians 3 is not limited to biblical interpretation of the past twenty years. Herman Ridderbos highlights the way in which Christ’s death and resurrection themselves cause Paul to reinterpret the significance of his law-righteousness:

When in the light of Christ’s death and resurrection Paul came to the conviction that the law cannot be the means of life and the ground of man’s righteousness before God, this is not a dogmatical-theoretical premise or conclusion, but it rests on the redeeming significance of Christ’s death and

⁴⁰ Owen, *Communion with God*, 222 (italics original).

⁴¹ Fee, *Philippians*, 326-7.

resurrection themselves, or, as Paul himself expresses it, on the revelation of the righteousness of God found in them, by faith and without the works of the law. Nowhere does this ground for Paul's radical rejection of the law as the means of salvation and of what man supposes himself able to acquire of the righteousness and life in that way find clearer expression than in his personal statement in Philippians 3:4ff. ... It is clearly evident here that Paul's repudiation of the law and its works as means of salvation in the Jewish sense of the word is neither a theoretical dogma, nor rests on subjective experience, but is grounded on that which God has revealed and bestowed of righteousness and life in the death and resurrection of Christ.⁴²

We note here that Ridderbos holds Paul's own law-keeping as standing over and against not Jesus' law-keeping but rather his death and resurrection. This latter complex represents for Paul the attainment of *righteousness* and life that the law could not provide. What Ridderbos calls the ground of Paul's 'reconsideration' is itself the ground of his righteousness, justification, and eschatological salvation: the death and resurrection of Christ.

b) Galatians 2-3. These chapters have already been introduced above, where we argue that Paul holds the law over against the righteousness that comes from Jesus and gives salvation. With regard to 2:21, we note here that Paul does not contrast the righteousness of his own law-keeping with the righteousness of Jesus' law-keeping. Instead, Paul contrasts righteousness that comes through the law with the righteousness that comes through the death of Jesus. This, indeed, is the whole thrust of chapter 3, where Paul indicates that the covenant of Abraham has a different function in the history of salvation than the law of Moses. The continuity between the old and new covenant eras is to be found in the former, the discontinuity in the latter. Paul says that if righteousness comes through the law then the first covenant is abrogated (3:18). Within this discussion Paul highlights again that the law is the wrong kind of thing to give the righteousness that leads to life: 'But that by law no one will be justified by God is clear, because "the one who is righteous by faith will live". But the law is not of faith, but "the one who does these things will live by them"' (3:11-12). Law is of works, therefore it is inherently the wrong kind of thing to give the righteousness that leads to life before God. It is not simply a matter of someone's coming to earn law-righteousness so that humanity might be justified before God; salvation is rather a matter of God's providing another kind of righteousness altogether. Because Paul indicates that the law provides the

⁴² Ridderbos, *Paul*, 137-8.

wrong kind of righteousness to give fallen humanity justification and eschatological life before God, we must take seriously his bold claims about the sufficiency of the cross of Christ.

3) THE BLESSING AND CURSE OF THE LAW

One of the primary foundations of the active righteousness model of justification is the strict alternative posed by the law, an alternative of blessing for obedience or curse for disobedience. Meredith Kline, for example, strings together the work of Jesus, the blessings that come from obedience to law, and the righteousness associated with justification. Kline proceeds by adding up the following theologoumena: God as just and justifier (Rom. 3:26) comes through the work of Jesus; the inheritance comes through the 'law-inheritance principle', 'in Christ the principles of law and promise co-operate unto the salvation of God's people', and the obedience of Jesus shows forth the primacy of law in the covenant salvation of humanity.⁴³

Thus Kline applies to Jesus the principle of obedience to the law, with its promise of blessing and/or life that we find, for example, in Deuteronomy 11:26-28 (cf. Deut. 28-30, Lev. 18:5). Owen also leans on this facet of the promise of the law:

Then I say, this perfect *compleat* [*sic*] *obedience* of Christ to the Law is reckoned unto us. As there is a *truth* in that, *the day thou eatest thou shalt die*; Death is the reward of sin, and so we cannot be *freed* from death, but by the *death of Christ*, Heb. 2:13, 14. So also is that no less true, *do this and live*, that *life is not to be obtained unless all be done*, that the Law requires.⁴⁴

We do well to state again our agreement with Kline and Owen: Jesus was actively righteous, the only man ever to love God perfectly and love neighbour throughout the whole course of his life. This is the only man who has ever truly earned the blessings for obedience rather than the curse for disobedience. Why then would we ever want to say that Christ was not, in fact, blessed with the life that comes through the law as the blessing of obedience?

The end to humanity's hopes of being justified by law-observance came when the only man worthy of such justification, blessing, and life, was

⁴³ Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 30-1.

⁴⁴ Owen, *Communion with God*, 221 (italics original).

nailed to a tree. On the system of blessing and curse propounded on Deuteronomy, on which much of the active righteousness theology is based, there are two mutually exclusive options: righteousness, blessing, and life, on the one hand, and sin, curse, and death, on the other. Paul tells us, however, that when the only righteous, sinless man in history was nailed to the cross he became the curse of the law: 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, becoming a curse on our behalf (*genomenos huper emon katara*), for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs upon a tree"' (Gal. 3:13). Of the two mutually exclusive options, Paul claims that Christ received the curse of the law rather than its blessing. Indeed, as Paul states elsewhere, on the cross Christ became sin (2 Cor. 5:21), so that blessing by the law becomes, at the end, impossible. Therefore, those who look to Christ for righteousness and life must look elsewhere than the blessing of the law. This fact breaks the logical flow of the active righteousness position as it seeks to move from Christ's obedience to the law to his receiving its blessing.

And even so, this fact does not stand alone, divorced from a context. Paul says in Galatians 3 that the reason for Jesus' becoming the curse of the law was in order to redeem those who were cursed, so that the blessing of Abraham might go forth to all nations in Christ. In other words, it is by bearing the curse of the law, not by obtaining its blessing, that Jesus secures the covenant promise of a seed, righteousness, and life made to Abraham. If the law-righteousness model of salvation is correct, however, then the cross invalidates the work of Christ.

4) ALTERNATIVE CONSTRUAL OF THE SOLUTION: UNION WITH CHRIST BIBLICALLY DEFINED

A simpler construal of the righteousness of life that comes to believers, and one that does not create such biblical tensions, is found in the simplicity of an Adam-Christ parallel that does not import the category of law.⁴⁵ The Adam-Christ parallel indicates that their obedience devolves, in each case, to a single command. Adam was given one command regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and, as indicated in part one of this study, Romans 5 correlates this with the one command to go to the cross. Adam received one command concerning a tree, the breaking of which command led to death. The Second Adam received one command concerning a tree, the keeping of which command led to life. When we examine the Adamic work of Christ, we are drawn to his death (Rom.

⁴⁵ Pace Kline, *By Oath Consigned*, 26-38.

5:12-21) and resurrection (1 Cor. 15:20-49). He represents humanity in the work the Father gave him to do. God has determined that in this one Adamic act humanity would be saved. In other words, God determined that the cross of Christ would be sufficient for bringing God's people justification and life.

This leads us to one final way in which the NT speaks of the work of Christ for the believer. The idea of 'union with Christ', of being 'in Christ', lies at the heart of the NT picture of the application of redemption. What is true of the believer is true of him or her insofar as it is true first of Christ. It is on this basis that contemporary application of active righteousness often appeals to passages such as Philippians 3:9-10 or Isaiah 61:10 ('he has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness'). All this, however, begs the question of the *nature* of that righteousness. We must allow the NT to set the parameters of what it is, exactly, to which we are united when we are united to Christ. Indeed, Owen himself appeals to union with Christ in his attempt to establish his active righteousness position, saying,

there is almost nothing that Christ hath *done*, which is a spring of that Grace whereof we speak, but we are said to do it with him. We are *crucified* with him, Gal. 2:20. we are *dead* with him, Rom. 6:4. Col. 2:12. we are *quicken'd together with him*, Col. 2:13. *risen with him*, Col. 3:1. *He hath quicken'd us together with Christ, and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places*, Eph. 2:5,6.⁴⁶

Although there is a sense in which Owen can say that there is 'almost nothing' which Christ has done in which we are not said to participate, the list he puts forward illustrates the force of the 'almost'. His list is an accurate summary of the biblical witness that spotlights the believer's union with Christ in the salvific work of his death and resurrection. Nowhere is the believer said to be united with Jesus in his whole life of law-keeping, and now we know why: because his life of obedience, while essential for Jesus' spotless sacrifice, does not provide the kind of righteousness robed with which a person can stand as righteous before God.

The righteousness that God must provide for a sinful, fallen humanity is precisely designed to meet its need: the tree of Christ's command, the one righteous act which provides the necessary salvation for entry into eschatological life, is designed to give righteousness and life to fallen humanity precisely as fallen. Union with Christ in his death assures

⁴⁶ Owen, *Communion with God*, 210-11 (italics original).

humanity of union with Christ in his resurrection. Union with Christ in his death and resurrection seals to humanity its participation in the eschatological blessing of everlasting life. Even in our union with the same Christ who lived perfectly and loved perfectly throughout the course of his life, Scripture calls us to humbly acknowledge the sufficiency of his cross. Christ's death and resurrection are sufficient categories to encompass our salvation, especially the righteousness that comes to us in justification.

5) THE OT WITNESS TO JESUS

a) Luke 24. Twice in the final chapter of Luke's Gospel Jesus himself epitomizes the OT message about himself. Both times the fulfilment of the OT, including the law, points not to his obedience of precepts but to his death and resurrection. Luke 24:25-27 tells of Jesus' revelation of his work to the men on the road to Emmaus. Summary statements sit on either end (vv. 25 and 27). These verses indicate that the law and the prophets have Jesus as their subject matter. Jesus chastises the two men for not believing the message of the prophets (v. 25). In between these two summary statements Jesus tells the men the content of the OT message, the message they should have believed: 'Was it not necessary that the Christ suffer these things and enter into his glory?' (v. 26). The death and resurrection form the OT message of Jesus' work as Messiah.⁴⁷

The summary of Jesus' teaching to his disciples later in that same chapter makes it even clearer that Jesus sees his death and resurrection, with the subsequent proclamation of the gospel to all nations, as the sum of the OT teaching concerning himself (Luke 24:44-47).⁴⁸ When Jesus looks back to the OT to give shape to his ministry, he does not look back to it as laying out the precepts that he needed to obey in order to be Messiah; he looks back at even the law of Moses as testimony to his Messianic ministry of suffering and death. As Richard Gaffin explains:

⁴⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (trans. William Pringle; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 359-61, illustrates the ways in which the law and prophets testify to Jesus' death as mediator on behalf of God's people.

⁴⁸ Richard B. Gaffin, in his class lecture for Acts and the Pauline Epistles at Westminster Theological Seminary (PA), highlights both the summary nature of Jesus' words to his disciples in Luke 24:44-47 and the manner in which Jesus focuses the OT around his own work (section 3.C.2). Gaffin argues: 'The Old Testament in its essentially prophetic mode is essentially forward-looking and finds its fulfillment in His work.'

[The forty days] is largely a period of instruction and teaching. It is the period when Christ interprets to his disciples the significance of the sufferings he has just experienced, and consequent glory. It is a forty-days-crash-course in Old Testament hermeneutics.⁴⁹ The substance of the 'course', and thus the hermeneutical key for reading the OT as a witness to the work of Jesus, is his death and resurrection. Calvin comments on the propriety of this focus:

Whoever then desires to make great proficiency *in the Scriptures* ought always to keep this end in view. Now Christ here places first in order his death and resurrection, and afterwards the fruit which we derive from both. For whence come repentance and forgiveness of sins, but because *our old man is crucified with Christ*, (Rom. vi. 6,) and by his grace we may rise to *newness of life*; and because our sins have been expiated by the sacrifice of his death, our pollution has been washed away by his blood, and we have obtained righteousness through his resurrection? He teaches, therefore, that in his death and resurrection we ought to seek the cause and grounds of our salvation; because hence arise reconciliation to God, and regeneration to a new and spiritual life.⁵⁰

Calvin rightly sees that the subject matter of OT prophecy concerning death is indissoluble from the means of salvation itself, namely, the death and resurrection of Jesus.

b) 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. In this chapter Paul describes his gospel proclamation, in relation to the OT Scriptures, in precisely the same way that Jesus configures the relationship between himself and the OT witness in Luke 24. In addition, Paul can describe this summary statement of his gospel proclamation, that is, the death and resurrection of Jesus, as the 'first things', the things necessary and sufficient to be held onto for salvation. And, as always in the NT, Jesus' law-keeping on behalf of his people is absent: 'For I gave over to you as of first importance that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised the third day according to the Scriptures' (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Paul asserts that he is in keeping with the tradition of the entire early church when he proclaims the gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus.⁵¹ Paul conceives of the gospel, the bedrock of the Christian gospel, what one must believe to be saved, without

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Harmony*, 3:377 (italics original, underscore added).

⁵¹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1186-7.

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recourse to a confession of Jesus' life of law-keeping. The OT witnesses to the gospel, as Jesus says in Luke 24, precisely by witnessing to Jesus' death and resurrection.

CONCLUSION

The question that this study has taken up is an intramural debate among theologians within the Westminster Calvinist tradition. The question at issue is not whether the righteousness of justification is imputed or infused; it is not whether the righteousness is Christ's or the believer's; it is not whether Jesus himself was actively righteous or not. All are agreed that the righteousness of the sinless Jesus alone, as it remains his and is reckoned ours through our union with him, avails for justification and eschatological life. The pointed question of debate is this: what is the quality of Jesus' righteousness that avails to sinners in justification?

The active righteousness position laudably attempts to hold together the uniquely perfect life of Jesus on earth with the unique salvation that he works on behalf of his people. However, proponents of the position must often bring their theological construct with them to various NT passages in order to hold up the argument being constructed. The active righteous position becomes unnecessary when once we realize that the NT writers give a different answer to the question the active righteousness position seeks to answer. This point should not be minimized. It is one thing to build a theological construct, using language and concepts not immediately available in Scripture, to answer questions that the biblical writers do not take up themselves. And so, for example, the work of the councils to define the Trinity and the dual nature of the person of Jesus is well pursued. In the present case, however, the NT writers, most notably Paul, take up the very question of the relationship between righteousness, Jesus' work, justification, and eschatological salvation and life. They give answers that both make the active righteousness position unnecessary and call its validity into question. Humanity cannot be justified by the law, not simply because we as fallen people cannot fulfil its precepts, but also, and even more importantly, because we see that even the One who lived perfectly (a) saved us through his death rather than through the law and (b) was himself cursed rather than blessed by the law. The cross of Christ evacuates the *entire system* of salvation by works of the law of all its purported merit.

Thus we see the wisdom of the Westminster Assembly: aware of division on this and other issues the commissioners adroitly crafted the language of their Confession to leave room at the table for divergent

trajectories within the one system of doctrine. In this case, the room they created enables those who hold to their system to consider anew, as a matter of intramural debate, the quality of Jesus' righteousness and the theological accretions that have grown up around commonly held positions. The commissioners have left room for their theological progeny to step back and consider afresh whether the Scriptures themselves can support the connections that many now make between the merit of the law and the righteousness of Christ.

In this case, the plea of the minority finds compelling grounds in the NT Scriptures. Those who wish to know of the salvation won for humanity by Christ, and the righteousness it entails, can do no better than to carefully reflect on the words of John Calvin in his comment on Romans 4:25: 'But the meaning is, that when we possess the benefit of Christ's death and resurrection, there is nothing wanting to the completion of perfect righteousness.'⁵²

⁵² Calvin, *Romans*, 185.