

THE ACTIVE AND PASSIVE OBEDIENCE OF CHRIST

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We have said that the two great objectives to be accomplished by Christ in His mission to this world are, first, the removal of the curse under which His people labored as a result of the fall, and second, their restoration to the image and fellowship of God. It is perfectly evident that both of these elements were essential to salvation. In the preceding section we pointed out that because of the federal relationship which, through appointment of God, Adam bore to his posterity, all mankind since that time have been born into the state into which he fell, and that the purpose of Christ was to rescue His people from that condition and to bring them into a state of holiness and blessedness. In order that He might accomplish that purpose He entered into a vital relationship with them by taking their nature upon Himself through incarnation. Then, acting as their federal head and representative in precisely the same manner that Adam had acted when he plunged the race into sin, He assumed their place before the divine law fulfilling, on the one hand, its every precept, and on the other, receiving in His own person the penalty due for their transgressions. He thus lived the particular kind of life and suffered the particular kind of death that we read of in the Gospels. These two phases of His work are known as His 'Active' and His 'Passive' obedience.

Throughout the history of the Church most theological discussions have stressed Christ's passive obedience (although not often calling it by that name), but have had very little to say about His active obedience. The result is that many professing Christians who readily acknowledge that Christ suffered and died for them seem altogether unaware of the fact that the holy, sinless life which He lived was also a vicarious work in their behalf, wrought out by Him in His representative capacity and securing for them title to eternal life.

A moment's reflection should convince us that the suffering and death of Christ, although fully effective in paying the debt which His people owed to divine justice, was in a sense only a negative service. Being of the nature of a penalty it could relieve His people from the liability under which they

labored, but it could not provide them with a positive reward. Its effect was to bring them back up to the zero point, back to the position in which Adam stood before the fall. It provided for their rescue from sin and its consequences, but it did not provide for their establishment in heaven. Life in heaven is the reward for the perfect keeping of the moral law through a probationary period. Had the work of Christ stopped with the mere payment of the debt which was owed by His people, then they, like Adam, would still have been under obligation to have earned their own salvation through a covenant of works and, also like Adam, subject again to eternal death if they disobeyed. But the covenant of works had had its day and had failed. Very evidently if salvation is to be attempted a second time it will be on a different plan. For what would be the sense of rescuing a man from a torrent which had proved too strong for him merely to put him back into the same situation? Having rescued his people once God would not permit them to be lost a second time and in precisely the same way. This time not man but God will be the Actor; not works but grace (which is the free and undeserved love or favor of God exercised toward the undeserving, toward sinners) will be the basis; and not failure but complete success will crown the effort. Hence Christ, in His human nature and as a perfectly normal man among men, rendered perfect obedience to the moral law by living a sinless life during the thirty-three years of His earthly career, and thus fulfilled the second and vitally important part of His work of redemption.

THE SINLESS LIFE OF CHRIST

That Christ did live this life of perfect love and unselfish service to God and man is clearly set forth in Scripture. He 'did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth.' 1 Peter 2:22. He was 'holy guileless, undefiled, separated from sinners,' says the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews 7:26. 'I do always the things that are pleasing to Him,' said Jesus, John 8:29. 'Which of you convicteth me of sin?' was His challenge to His enemies, John 8:46. Even the demons bore witness that He was 'the Holy One of God,' Luke 4:34. As He was being crucified He prayed, 'Father, forgive them.' But never did He pray, Father, forgive me. It is not uncommon for the greatest of saints, when they come to the hour of death, to pour out their souls in fresh confessions; desiring to obtain renewed consciousness of sins forgiven. But there is no trace of sin-consciousness to be found anywhere in the life of Jesus. He made no confession of sin, nor did He at any time offer a sacrifice for Himself in

the temple. At the time of His death there was no shadow of a cloud between Him and the Father except as He assumed the consequences of sin on behalf of others.

By that life of spotless perfection, then, Jesus acquired for His people a positive righteousness which is imputed to them and which secures for them life in heaven. All that Christ has done and suffered is regarded as having been done and suffered by them. In Him they have fulfilled the law of perfect obedience, as also in Him they have borne the penalty for their sins. By His passive obedience they have been rescued from hell; and by His active obedience they are given entrance into heaven.

SALVATION BY GRACE

Paul's teaching that we are saved, not by a self-acquired, but by an imputed righteousness is very clear and definite. He strongly rebuked those of His own race who, 'being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God,' Rom. 10:3; and he declared that he willingly suffered the loss of all things in order that he might 'gain Christ, and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of mine own, even that which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ,' Phil. 3:9. 'Him who knew no sin He made to be sin on our behalf; that we might become the righteousness of God in Him,' II Cor. 5:21, — that is, our guilt and punishment was transferred to Christ, in order that His righteousness and purity might be transferred to us. To the Ephesians he wrote, 'We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God afore prepared that we should walk in them,' 2:10. Notice that he does not say that this change in character came about because we did good works, but that he ascribes the workmanship to God and says that its purpose was that we might bear fruit in good works and that these were not original on our part but that they were afore prepared or planned out that we should do them. In his declarations that, 'If there had been a law given which could make alive, verily righteousness would have been of the law,' Gal. 3:21, and 'If righteousness is through the law, then Christ died for nought,' Gal. 2:21, he disposes completely of the notion that man can earn his own salvation by good works. If we had been able to have worked out our own salvation there would have been no need for Christ to have become incarnate and to have submitted to such humiliation and suffering. And, of course, in that case He most certainly would not have done so. How

profoundly grateful we should be that not only our suffering for sin, but also our probation for heaven, has been assumed for us by Christ, that each of these is now a thing of the past, and that we are safe forever in God's care!

The salvation which the Scriptures offer to mankind is therefore a salvation provided entirely by God Himself. It is not adulterated in any way by human works. And because it is of this nature the Scripture writers never tire of asserting that it is by grace and not by works. Even the faith through which salvation is received is induced by the Holy Spirit and is a gift: 'By grace have ye been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, that no man should glory,' Eph. 2:8, 9. We are 'justified freely by His grace,' Rom. 3:24. Man's own righteousness, in the words of Isaiah, is as but 'a polluted garment' (or, as the King James Version expresses it, 'as filthy rags') in the sight of God, 64:6. 'Not by works done in righteousness, which we did ourselves, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit,' Titus 3:5. To Paul's assertion that Christ is 'all, and in all' in matters of salvation, Col. 3:11, we can add that man is nothing at all as to that work, and has not anything in himself which merits salvation. We are, in fact, nothing but receivers; we never bring any adequate reward to God, and we are always receiving from Him, and shall be unto all eternity. Good works are in no sense the meritorious ground, but rather the fruits and proof of salvation. They are performed not with the purpose of earning salvation, but as an expression of love and gratitude for the salvation which has already been conferred upon us. Good works, done with right motives toward God, are a result of our having been regenerated, not the means of our regeneration. Our part in this system is to praise God, to honor Him by keeping His commandments, and to reflect His glory in all possible ways. And just because salvation is by grace and does not have to be earned by works it is possible even for one who repents on his death bed, or for one like the thief on the cross, to turn to Jesus in the last hour and be saved.

In another connection the present writer has said:

'We hold that the law of perfect obedience which was originally given to Adam was permanent, that God has never done anything which would convey the impression that the law was too rigid in its requirements, or too severe in its penalty, or that it stood in need either

of abrogation or of derogation. We believe that the requirement for salvation now as originally is perfect obedience, perfect conformity to the will and character of God, that the merits of Christ's obedience are imputed to His people as the only basis of their salvation, and that they enter heaven clothed only with the cloak of His perfect righteousness and utterly destitute of any merit properly their own. Thus grace, pure grace, is extended not in lowering the requirements for salvation, but in the substitution of Christ for His people. He took their place before the law and did for them what they could not do for themselves. This Calvinistic principle is fitted in every way to impress upon us the absolute perfection and unchangeable obligation of the law which was originally given to Adam. It is not relaxed or set aside, but fittingly honored so that its excellence is shown. In behalf of those who are saved, for whom Christ died, and in behalf of those who are subjected to everlasting punishment, the law in its majesty is enforced and executed.' — *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, p. 154.

This doctrine of the sufficiency of Christ's work in regard both to His active and passive obedience is beautifully set forth in the Westminster Confession, which declares that

'The Lord Jesus, by His perfect obedience and sacrifice of Himself, which He through the eternal Spirit offered up unto God, hath fully satisfied the justice of His Father; hath purchased not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for all those whom the Father had given Him' (Ch. VIII, Sec. 5).

And in the Shorter Catechism in answer to the question, 'What is justification?' we are told that 'Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein He pardoneth all our sins and accepteth us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.'

But while it enables us to understand more clearly and fully the work which Christ has accomplished for us, if we view it as having an active and a passive side, we must not imagine that these two phases can be separated in His life. We cannot even say that His active obedience was accomplished by His life and His passive obedience by His death. For in varying degrees these two works were accomplished simultaneously and concurrently. Throughout

all of His life He was perfectly obedient to the moral law in all that He thought and said and did. And in varying degrees every moment of His life on earth involved humiliation or suffering or both, — it involved humiliation beyond our power to comprehend for the King of Glory, the Creator of the universe, the One who is altogether holy and blessed and powerful and rich to be born a helpless babe, and that in the most humble condition, to subject Himself to the limitations of incarnate man for a period of thirty-three years, to endure the temptations presented by the Devil, to bring His holy and sensitive nature into close association with sinful men so that He would hear their failings and curses and be confronted with their ingratitude and opposition and hatred, to experience fatigue and hunger, and to look forward through all of His public ministry to the most shameful and painful death by crucifixion. And nowhere else was His active obedience so prominently displayed as on the cross, for there in particular as He suffered He also resisted all temptation to doubt God, or hate His enemies, or commit the slightest offense against those who treated Him so shamefully. Throughout His entire life as He actively obeyed He passively endured, and as He passively endured He actively obeyed. These two aspects of His work, while distinct in nature, were inextricably intertwined in time. Together they secure the wonderful, full salvation which was wrought out vicariously for us.

THE CRUCIFIXION ON CALVARY

Death by crucifixion is, of course, horrible in the extreme. The usual procedure was that the crosspieces would be laid flat on the ground, the person then stretched upon it, and a soldier would drive iron spikes through the hands and feet into the rough wood. Then the cross with its attached victim would be lifted and set in the hole prepared for it. The person was left to writhe in his agony, with the swelling wounds, the parched thirst, the burning fever, until death brought the welcome release. Human ingenuity has never devised greater agony than crucifixion. Yet that is what Christ endured for us.

But not for a minute would we be understood as inferring that we can really fathom the depths of Christ's suffering. We are only given partial information concerning it. His physical suffering was that of a perfectly normal man in crucifixion. Yet that was not all, nor even the most important part, of His suffering. His cry, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me' indicates a spiritual suffering more intense and more baffling than the physical. We have

already seen that the penalty originally inflicted for sin was not merely the separation of the soul from the body, which is physical death, but the separation of the soul from God, which is spiritual death. That Jesus suffered this latter form of the penalty as well as the former is attested by His despairing cry. During those hours that Jesus hung on the cross as the sin-offering for His people that unique spiritual relationship which had existed between His human soul and the Father, and which had so enriched Him during the entire period of His earthly life, was completely withdrawn. No glimpse of Divinity any longer broke in upon Him. God had literally hid His face from Him. His human soul, which in Gethsemane 'began to be greatly amazed and sore troubled,' was now entirely cut off from all divine enlightenment. Being limited in knowledge and comprehension as all human souls are, utterly distressed by the ordeal through which He was passing, and engaged in this last desperate combat with the Devil and the forces of the evil world which through His entire earthly career had sought untiringly to cause His downfall and to defeat His purpose. His human soul was unable to understand fully this complete abandonment of the righteous soul by God the Father.

Not only was all special grace withdrawn from Him, but also all common grace. No sedative was allowed to dull His pain. Ordinarily those who were sentenced to be crucified were given a stupefying drug, in order that their suffering might be somewhat alleviated. Doubtless the two thieves who were crucified at the same time received that treatment. But Jesus, realizing that such a drug would incapacitate Him for carrying the very burden of suffering for which He had come to that hour and that it would therefore defeat His purpose of redemption, rejected the wine and myrrh and determined to suffer with His senses fully alert. All of His friends forsook Him. Only His enemies remained to taunt. His clothes (also a gift of common grace, clothes being designed since the time of the fall to cover the body and to serve as a restraint on human sin) were removed, leaving Him shamefully exposed to the vulgar rabble. The light, which is one of the greatest gifts of common grace, was denied Him, and for three hours He was left to suffer in the terrifying darkness. Calvary presents a spectacle such as had never been seen before and can never be seen again. For Jesus did not suffer and die passively, as one helplessly submitting to the inevitable, but actively, as one keeping a schedule or as one fulfilling a purpose. Had we been able to have looked

within the soul of Christ we would have witnessed the most colossal struggle that the universe has ever known. Far from being the passive sufferer that He appeared to those who witnessed the crucifixion, He was upholding the pillars of the moral universe by rendering full satisfaction to divine justice. For as the sinner's substitute and in his stead Jesus stood before the awful tribunal of God, — before the Judge who abhors sin and burns against it with inexpressible indignation. Justice severe and inexorable was meted out. As He endured the break in the spiritual relationship with the Father He literally descended into hell; for hell is primarily separation from God, a condition the exact opposite of the blessed environment of the divine presence. This does not mean that His soul suffered remorse or any sense of guilt, which is one of the torments of lost souls; for He had no personal sin. Nor does it mean that this condition continued after His death. All was completed on the cross. When the allotted suffering was finished the divine light again broke in upon His soul, and we hear His triumphant cry, 'It is finished' (that is, the atonement, God's objective provision for man's salvation, was completed); and that was followed almost immediately by the affectionate words, 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.' Every detail of the account is so presented that we are compelled to recognize the full price of our redemption was paid for by Christ alone, without human assistance of any kind. And thus through the infinite mercy of God and in a manner that shall forever bring glory to His name there was made available a way, the only possible way, through which sinners might be saved.

And after all, does not this Christian doctrine of the atonement stand forth as the only reasonable and logical explanation of the suffering and death of Christ? God has so ordered this world that sin and suffering are inseparably connected. Where there is no sin God cannot under any conditions inflict suffering, — for the simple reason that it would be unjust for Him to punish an innocent person. Christ's suffering can have no other explanation than that it was vicarious, rendered not for Himself but for others. For there One who was sinless and undefiled suffered the extreme of pain and agony and disgrace as though He were the worst of sinners. Unless Christ was acting on behalf of others and as their substitute, God Himself is put under eternal indictment for inflicting such suffering without a cause.

Moreover, if it be denied that Christ's suffering was vicarious and substitutionary, His voluntary acceptance of crucifixion is utterly unreasonable, —

in fact it is scandalous, because suicidal. The plain teaching of Scripture is that He accepted this ordeal voluntarily. 'I lay down my life for the sheep . . . No one taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself,' John 10:15, 18. Rebuking Peter for His well-intended but misguided use of the sword He said, 'Put up the sword into the sheath: the cup which the Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?' John 18.11. Now it is perfectly evident, of course, that no creature, not even a sinless angel, has the right to dispose of his own life. That prerogative belongs only to the Creator to whom he belongs. But Christ did have that right, because He was the King of the universe. Since He had within Himself divine as well as human life He could dispose of Himself without fatal or permanent injury either to Himself or to any other person. When seen in the light of the doctrines of substitution, satisfaction, sacrifice, the death of Christ appears as a great divine achievement, a glorious and unapproachable priestly action through which the suffering Messiah offered Himself in order that divine justice might be safeguarded and that sinful man might be reconciled to God. Logic drives us to the conclusion that the death of Christ on the cross was no ordinary death, but a mighty transaction through which God provided redemption for His people.

Unless Christ was what He claimed to be, Deity incarnate giving His life a ransom for many, the Unitarians and modernists are right in saying that the doctrine of the Atonement is a colossal hoax and that it is ridiculous for anyone to believe that he can obtain salvation through faith in a mere man, a Jew, who was crucified in Palestine nineteen hundred years ago. Either the Christian system is true and we are saved through the supernatural work of Christ as the Bible teaches and as devout people in all ages have believed, or we are left to save ourselves through some humanistic or naturalistic system as skeptics and unbelievers have held.

On the basis of any teaching rightfully calling itself Christian the active and passive obedience of Christ emerges as the only basis of our spiritual and eternal life. Since the demand that sin must be punished was met by Him in His representative capacity, justice was not injured; and since His life of perfect obedience to the moral law was also rendered in His representative capacity, the gift of spiritual cleansing and of eternal life is now conferred upon His people as their right and privilege. He saves them from hell, and establishes them in heaven. There is no blessing in this world or in the next for which they should not give Christ thanks.

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