

CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF THE IMPUTATION OF
CHRIST'S RIGHTEOUSNESS:
ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF "CALVIN AGAINST
THE CALVINISTS"?

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IN THE LONG and complicated history of the interpretation of the theology of John Calvin, one recurring question is that of the continuity and discontinuity between Calvin's views and those of later Calvinism. In a formal sense, this question necessarily belongs to the interpretation of any influential theologian that takes seriously the historical development of his particular theological tradition. Historical interpretation of a particular theological figure or tradition demands that careful attention be given to continuities and discontinuities in the course of its development. The theology of Calvin can hardly be understood without paying careful attention to his sixteenth-century context. Furthermore, the theology of later Calvinism can scarcely be understood without regard to the influence of Calvin, who is undoubtedly a leading theologian of the Reformed tradition.

However, the question of continuity and discontinuity between Calvin's views and later Calvinism takes on special significance, when viewed within the framework of the history of interpretation of Calvin's thought. Though it is not possible in an article such as this to review the history of the interpretation of Calvin's theology, it is instructive to note that the initial occasion for vigorous debate regarding Calvin and the Calvinists was the emergence of a neo-orthodox approach in the early twentieth century. Contrary to older, nineteenth-century approaches to Calvin's thought, which either identified the doctrine of predestination as the "central dogma" of Calvin's theology or found the key to interpretation in its peculiar dialectical form, the trajectory of neo-orthodox interpretation emphasized that Calvin's theology was characterized by a Christocentric doctrine of the revelation of God's grace in Christ.¹ In the

¹ For surveys and critical assessments of various approaches to the interpretation of Calvin's theology, some of which include a consideration of the "two traditions" thesis, which argues that the doctrine of the covenant was developed in the later Reformed tradition as a kind of theological counterweight to the doctrine of election, see Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), pp. 9-21; Benjamin Charles Milner, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Church* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970), p. 2; Eva-Maria Faber, *Symphonie von Gott und Mensch: Die Responsorische Struktur von Vermittlung in der Theologie Johannes Calvins* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1999), pp. 2-7; Richard Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp.

neo-orthodox reading of Calvin's theology, a sharp contrast was often drawn between Calvin's Christocentric doctrine of grace and certain theological tendencies of later Calvinism in the period of scholastic orthodoxy. Within the framework of this approach, a series of discontinuities were posited between the theology of Calvin and that of later Calvinists. For example, whereas Calvin developed his doctrine of predestination in the light of the revelation of God's grace in Christ, later Calvinism was said to have developed an abstract and austere doctrine of double predestination or decretalism. Perhaps the most well-known example of discontinuity is the thesis of R. T. Kendall, who contributed the language of "Calvin and the Calvinists" to the interpretive tradition.² According to Kendall, Calvin's doctrine of grace emphasized the universal provision of Christ's atoning work for all human beings, unlike the development in later Calvinism of a doctrine of "limited atonement." Another significant discontinuity that this trajectory of scholarship identified between Calvin and later Calvinists was the emergence of the two-covenant scheme of a pre-fall covenant of works and a post-fall covenant of grace. Whereas Calvin consistently viewed the relation between the Triune God and human beings as a relation based upon sheer grace, this two-covenant scheme is alleged to have introduced a kind of "legalism" into the tradition that belied Calvin's theology of grace.³

In the more recent history of the interpretation of Calvin's theology, the question of continuity and discontinuity between Calvin and later Calvinism has been raised in a way that seeks to evaluate Calvin's theology in its own context. Richard Muller, for example, in his *Unaccommodated Calvin* has argued for an approach to the interpretation of Calvin's

63-80; Cornelis P. Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ: The 'Twofold Grace of God' and the Interpretation of Calvin's Theology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), pp. 14-16; idem, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Doctrine of Predestination: Author of 'the Other Reformed Tradition'* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), esp. pp. 24-32; J. Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin's Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), pp. 22-60; Lyle D. Bierma, "Federal Theology in the Sixteenth Century: Two Traditions," *Westminster Theological Journal* 44/2 (Fall, 1983): 304-21; and J. Wayne Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant: The Other Reformed Tradition* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1980). For a summary of the more recent state of Calvin studies, see Muller, "Directions in Current Calvin Research," *Religious Studies Review* 27/2 (2002): 131-8; and Richard C. Gamble, "Current Trends in Calvin Research, 1982-90," in *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 91-112.

² *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, new ed. (Great Britain: Paternoster Press, 1997 [1979]). For a general discussion of the relation between Calvin and the later Calvinists, see Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin*, pp. 63-80; idem, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986); and Carl R. Trueman, "Calvin and Calvinism," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 225-44. Muller distinguishes five general approaches to the relation between "Calvin and the Calvinists," and argues that the "central dogma" approach inadequately interprets the continuities as well as discontinuities between Calvin's theology and that of subsequent Reformed theologians in the period of Reformed scholasticism.

³ See Beach, *Christ and the Covenant*, esp. pp. 47-60, for a survey of this neo-orthodox interpretation. Beach's thesis, which is based upon his study of Francis Turretin's federal theology, challenges the neo-orthodox charge of "legalism" by arguing that the bi-covenantal theology of Reformed orthodoxy was actually formulated in defense of the reformational doctrine of grace.

theology that is unencumbered by contemporary theological agendas that are superimposed upon the evaluation of Calvin's theology.⁴ According to Muller, the older approaches, especially the neo-orthodox reading of Calvin, tended to overlook not only the diversity of viewpoint within the Reformed theological tradition generally, but also often overstated the discontinuities between Calvin and the subsequent development of the Reformed tradition in the period of Reformed scholasticism.

The focus of this article, Calvin's doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness in the justification of believers, represents an interesting case study in the on-going discussion of continuities and discontinuities in the Reformed tradition. In the history of Reformed theology after Calvin, the topic of the imputation of Christ's righteousness was the focus of considerable debate.⁵ In this debate, differing views of the nature of the righteousness of Christ that is imputed to believers for their justification were advanced. The consensus of the Reformed tradition, which came to expression in the early seventeenth century, was that this righteousness consists both in Christ's "active" obedience to the requirements of God's law and his "passive" obedience in enduring the penal sanction of the law. However, a minority of Reformed theologians maintained that the imputation of Christ's righteousness was restricted to his obedience in making "satisfaction" for the sins of his people. In the course of this debate, the position of Calvin was appealed to in support of the respective positions of different theologians. There is evidence, therefore, that within the earliest tradition of Reformed theology the question of the continuity on this topic between Calvin's view and that of later Calvinism was explicitly broached.

Remarkably, in more recent treatments of Calvin's understanding of the imputation of Christ's righteousness for justification, the question of the continuity or discontinuity of his position and that of later Calvinism has once again surfaced. In spite of the consensus opinion of Reformed orthodoxy on the imputation of Christ's active obedience in the justification of believers, a number of modern interpreters of Calvin's theology have contributed a new chapter to the older debate by arguing that the later Calvinist doctrine differs from Calvin's view. These interpreters differ on the extent to which the later view was in harmony with Calvin's doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness. But they share the conviction that the appeal to Calvin on the part of later Calvinists for the specific idea of the imputation of Christ's active obedience was unwarranted. Thus, the question of Calvin's understanding of the imputation of Christ's righteousness in justification remains a subject of dispute in the literature, and is worthy of further assessment.

⁴ *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). As the title of his study intimates, Muller is critical of interpretations of Calvin's theology that are governed by contemporary theological agendas and as a consequence de-contextualize Calvin's theology.

⁵ For an extensive survey of this debate, see Heber Carlos de Campos, *Johannes Piscator (1546-1625) and the Consequent Development of the Imputation of Christ's Active Obedience* (Ph.D. diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, 2008), esp. pp. 32-118, 194-248. I will have occasion to summarize Campos' view of Calvin's doctrine of imputation in what follows.

1. The Debate Regarding Calvin's Doctrine of Imputation

Before we consider directly the evidence in Calvin's writings for his understanding of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ for justification, we need to define more precisely the question that we wish to address. In order to do so, I will begin with a brief description of the later Calvinist consensus on the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Then I will note the claim of some recent interpreters of Calvin who argue that this later Calvinist consensus does not correspond to Calvin's position. In the following and most important section of my article, I will review a number of themes in Calvin's theology that are especially relevant to a determination of his understanding of the righteousness of Christ that is imputed to believers for their justification.

1.1 The Distinction between Christ's "Active" and "Passive" Obedience

In the development of the Reformed tradition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there is a broad consensus on the doctrine of justification. Contrary to the medieval Roman Catholic view, which defined justification as a process whereby the faithful are "made righteous" (*facere iustum*) through the sacramental infusion of grace, the Reformed insisted that justification is a judicial or forensic declaration of the believer's status before God's tribunal. In the justification of sinners (*iustificatio impiū*), God pronounces believers to be righteous and acceptable to him on the basis of the righteousness of Christ, which is granted and imputed to them by grace alone and received by faith alone.

Despite this broad consensus on the basic meaning of the gospel grace of free justification, there was some disagreement in the history of the Reformed tradition regarding the nature of the "righteousness of Christ" that is imputed to believers for their justification. Though the exact origin and use of the language is uncertain, this disagreement came to be focused in terms of a distinction that was drawn between Christ's "active" and "passive" obedience to the law.⁶ This distinction, which was first articulated explicitly in the 1570's in the Lutheran and Reformed traditions, was to become a commonplace in the Reformed tradition by the middle of the seventeenth century.⁷

For the purpose of this article, the traditional definition of Christ's active and passive obedience in Reformed scholasticism is well stated by

⁶ Theodore Beza, in his *Tractationes theologiae* (Geneva, 1570-82), iii:248, 256, and in a letter to Olevianus ("Bèze a Olevianus," Feb. 13, 1570, in *Correspondance de Théodore de Bèze*, ed. Alain Dufour, Claire Chimelli and Beatrice Nicollier [Genève: Librairie Droz, 1983], tome XI, pp. 46-7) may have played a role in the eventual coining of this language and in the explicit consideration of the question whether Christ's active obedience belongs to the righteousness imputed for justification. He argues that justification means more than mere pardon, but requires the believer's positive righteousness before God, which is granted through the imputation of Christ's entire obedience. On Beza's view, see Campos, *Johannes Piscator*, pp. 88-97.

⁷ *The Formula of Concord* (1576), though it does not use the language of "active" and "passive" obedience, clearly affirms that the entire obedience of Christ constitutes the "righteousness" whereby the believer is justified. See Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House reprint, 1985 [1931], *The Formula of Concord*, Art. III, pp. 115-16.

Richard A. Muller in his *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*: “The *obedientia active* describes the life of Christ from his birth to his passion, and particularly his ministry, during which Christ acted sinlessly and in perfect obedience to the will of God. The *obedientia passive* refers to Christ's passion, during which he accepted passively, without any resistance, the suffering and cross to which he was subjected for the satisfaction of sin.”⁸

In the elaboration of this distinction among the Reformed scholastics, the obedience of Christ, though single and wholly soteriological in purpose, consists of these two aspects of his fulfillment of the law's obligations on behalf of the justified believer. Christ not only voluntarily suffered the penalty of the law, but he also fulfilled the requirements of perfect obedience to the law throughout the entire course of his incarnate life and ministry. When believers are justified, God grants and imputes Christ's entire obedience to them. Consequently, believers are no longer “under the law” in any respect so far as their justification before God is concerned. Upon the basis of the “double” imputation of Christ's active and passive obedience, believers are not only forgiven their sins but regarded as positively righteous and heirs of eternal life by virtue of their participation in the entire righteousness of Christ under the law of God.

1.2 The Debate Regarding the Imputation of Christ's Active Obedience in the Period of Reformed Orthodoxy

The history of Reformed debates regarding this distinction and the nature of the imputed righteousness of Christ is a complicated one. Though most Reformed theologians affirmed that Christ's obedience included both his active conformity to the requirements of God's law and his passive endurance of the penalty for disobedience, not all taught that the entire obedience of Christ was imputed to believers as the basis for their justification. Among the early orthodox theologians, the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's “active” obedience seems to have been taught intermittently by Ursinus and Olevianus, the co-authors of the Heidelberg Catechism.⁹ However, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth-centuries, the Lutheran theologian, Karg, and several Reformed theologi-

⁸ *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), p. 205.

⁹ I use the language, “seems to have been taught,” since this is a matter of dispute in the literature. For passages that appear to affirm the imputation of Christ's active obedience for justification in the writings of Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus, see Ursinus, *Catechismus minor* 42, and *Summa theologiae* 16, 18, 23, 63, 131-39, 211 (in K. Sudhoff, *C. Olevianus and Z. Ursinus: Leben und ausgewählte Schriften* [Elberfeld: Friderichs, 1857], pp. 154-55, 160, 171-72, 206); Olevianus, *In epistolam d. pauli apostoli ad romanos notae, ex concionibus G. Oleviani excerptae* (ed. T. Beza; Geneva, 1579), 196-97, 205-6, 210; and idem, *In epistolam d. pauli apostolic ad galatas notae, ex concionibus G. Oleviani excerptae* (ed. T. Beza; Geneva, 1578), p. 57. For assessments of Ursinus' view that suggest some ambiguity in his position on the imputation of Christ's active obedience, see J. Wesley White, “The Denial of the Imputation of the Active Obedience of Christ: Pisactor on Justification,” *The Confessional Presbyterian* 3 (2007): 147-48; and Campos, *Johannes Piscator*, pp. 97-108. Both White and Campos cite the opinions of several prominent theologians and contemporaries of Ursinus who claimed that he did not teach the imputation of the active obedience of Christ, though Campos offers positive evidence for a rudimentary form of the doctrine in Ursinus' writings.

ans, including Pareus, Gattaker, Vines, and Twisse, rejected this teaching.¹⁰ Perhaps the most vigorous opponent of the doctrine was Piscator, a German Reformed theologian who taught at Heidelberg and appealed to Calvin in support of his denial of the imputation of active obedience.¹¹ Additional opposition to the doctrine was expressed by Arminius and his followers, who viewed faith as the evangelical act of obedience that constituted the righteousness of the justified believer.¹² Later in the seventeenth century, in the disputes over anti-nomianism and neo-nomism, Richard Baxter and other theologians also objected to the doctrine for similar reasons, fearing that it tended to undermine the obligation of obedience to the law by the justified believer.¹³ In order to respond to the continuing opposition to the doctrine after the Westminster Assembly, John Owen offered an extended response to Piscator and others, arguing that the imputation of Christ's active obedience was a source of encouragement and comfort to the believer.¹⁴ Toward the end of the seventeenth century, Francis Turretin also presented an extended defense of the imputation of Christ's active obedience in his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*.¹⁵ Turretin identified the Lutheran theologian, Karg, and the Reformed theologian, Piscator, as opponents of the doctrine, but adduced passages from Calvin's writings to illustrate that it represents the "received opinion" of the Reformed tradition from the beginning.¹⁶

¹⁰ Due to the presence of some of these theologians at the Westminster Assembly, there is some debate whether the Westminster Standards affirm the imputation of the "entire" obedience of Christ as the basis for the believer's justification. For treatments of this question, see Chad B. Van Dixhoorn, *Reforming the Reformation: Theological Debate at the Westminster Assembly, 1643-1652* (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 2004), vol. 1, pp. 270-344; *Justification: A Report from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education, 2007), pp. 141-5; Alan Strange, "The Affirmation of the Imputation of the Active Obedience of Christ at the Westminster Assembly of Divines," *The Confessional Presbyterian* 4 (2008): 194-209; J. I. Packer, "The Doctrine of Justification Among the Puritans," in *By Schisms Rent Asunder: Papers Read at the Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference, 1969* (London: N.P., 1970), p. 21; and Jeffrey K. Jue, "The Active Obedience of Christ and the Theology of the Westminster Standards: A Historical Investigation," in *Justified in Christ: God's Plan for us in Justification*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2007), pp. 99-130. If a consensus exists among these interpreters, it is that the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active obedience was the view held by the vast majority of the Westminster divines and belongs to the "system of doctrine" that the Westminster Standards espouse. Most of the churches that have historically adhered to the Westminster Standards have regarded them to teach the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active obedience.

¹¹ See Johannes Piscator, *Analysis Logica Epistolarum Pauli* (London: George Bishop, 1591), p. 10; idem, *Theses theologicae de iustificatione hominis coram deo* (Herborn, 1612); idem, *A Learned and Profitable Treatise of Man's Justification* (Eng. trans., 1599); idem, *Aphorismi doctrinae christianae* (3rd ed.; London, 1595); and the dissertation of Campos, *Johannes Piscator*, pp. 119-93.

¹² See Jacobus Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1:696-700, 738-50, 763-65, 2:6-9, 16-25, 42-63; and idem, *Opera theologica* (Leiden, 1629), pp. 127, 135-39, 145-46, 151-52, 156-61, 171-78, 180-83.

¹³ For a discussion of Baxter's position on the imputation of the active obedience of Christ, see Hans Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn: Richard Baxter's Doctrine in Its Seventeenth-Century Context of Controversy* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1993), pp. 220-31.

¹⁴ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. W.H. Goold (New York: Carter, 1851-53), 1:482; 2:133-35, 154-57, 162-63; 5:240-75.

¹⁵ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992-1997), 2.445-55.

¹⁶For a confirmation that this was the "consensus opinion" already early in the seventeenth century, see Johannes Wollebius, *Compendium Theologiae Christianae* (1626), Chapter

The debate regarding the imputation of Christ's active obedience can also be traced in the post-Reformation period in terms of the confessional symbols of the Reformed tradition. Though it may be disputed whether Ursinus himself taught the imputation of Christ's active obedience, it seems to be clearly affirmed in the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) in Question & Answer 59.¹⁷ At several synods of the French Reformed Church in the early seventeenth century, the imputation of Christ's active obedience was affirmed in response to the denials of Piscator.¹⁸ Moreover, at the international Synod of Dort, 1618-19, Article 22 of the Belgic Confession was slightly revised to clarify how "all the merits and works" of Christ are imputed to believers.¹⁹ In the period shortly before the calling of the Westminster Assembly, the Irish Articles of 1615, though without employing the express terminology of "active" and "passive" obedience, affirmed that the righteousness of Christ imputed to believers includes his entire obedience under the law.²⁰ Though there continues to be some

18, "The Humiliation of Christ the Mediator," section 8 (as translated in John W. Beardslee III, ed., *Reformed Dogmatics: Seventeenth-Century Reformed Theology Through the Writings of Wollebius, Voetius, and Turretin* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977 (1965), p. 99]): "It [imputed righteousness] consists, therefore, both of the bearing of punishment and of perfect righteousness. In the first, passive obedience is especially seen; in the second, active obedience. I add this qualification: We must not regard passive and active obedience as so differing, that undergoing punishment alone is passive obedience, and perfect righteousness alone is active. Nor is there a temporal difference, since both extend from the beginning of the incarnation to his death. Nor do they differ in subject, for active and passive are the same obedience, in different aspects, so that Christ's obedience is both active suffering and passive act; in so far as the pain of punishment is the receiving of anything, it is called passive, but in so far as it is a testimony to his supreme love, it can be called active. Nor is the division of obedience into active and passive a division into parts, but merely a distinction based on the end in view; namely, the twofold satisfaction, for punishment and for life eternal."

¹⁷ "Q. But what does it profit you now that you believe all this? A. Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ that is, though my conscience accuse me that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil, yet God, without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me; if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart." (As quoted in *Ecumenical and Reformed Creeds and Confessions* [Classroom Edition; Orange City, IA: Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 1991]). This was the interpretation of the Catechism by Johannes Wollebius (1586-1629) and Amandaus Polanus, both of whom taught the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active obedience. Cf. Wollebius, *Compendium christiane theologiae* (ed. E. Bizer; Minich: Moers, 1935), 1.18.8; 1.30.15-18; and Bernhardinus De Moor, *Commentarius perpetuus in Hoh. Marckii compendium theologiae christianae didactico-elencticum* (Ludgdunum Batavia, 1765), 3:969.

¹⁸ See John Quick, *Synodicon in Gallia Reformata: or, The Acts, Decisions, Decrees, and Canons of those Famous National Councils of the Reformed Churches in France* (London: Parkhurst and J. Robinson, 1692), p. 401; Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2.455; and Campos, *Johannes Piscator*, pp. 194-204.

¹⁹ For an account of this revision and its significance, see H. H. Kuyper, *De Post-Acta: Nahandelingen van de Nationale Synode van Dordrecht in 1618 en 1619 gehouden* (Amsterdam: Hoveker & Wormser, 1899), pp. 223, 338-341, 514-16; Nicolaas H. Gootjes, *Koinoonia 19/2* (Fall, 2002): 5-8; idem, *The Belgic Confession: Its History and Sources* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 151-2; and Campos, *Johannes Piscator*, pp. 16-17. The revision to this Article of the Confession was explicitly addressed to the controversy provoked by Piscator's views.

²⁰ Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3:532: "So that Christ is now the righteousness of all them that truly believe in him. He, for them, paid their ransom by his death. He, for them,

debate whether the Westminster Confession of Faith affirms the imputation of Christ's active obedience,²¹ it is explicitly affirmed in the Savoy Declaration of 1658, a congregational modification of the Confession.²² The codification of the doctrine in the confessions of the Reformed tradition corresponds to the development of the doctrine as a consensus opinion among the principal Reformed theologians of the period. An important factor in this history of increasing clarity on the doctrine was the explicit formulation of the relation between Christ's work as Mediator of the covenant of grace and the obligations of obedience that were stipulated in the pre-fall covenant of works.²³

1.3 The Thesis of Discontinuity in Recent Literature on Calvin

Despite the broad consensus that was achieved in the Reformed orthodox period on the imputation of Christ's righteousness, there were always dissenting voices within the tradition. In the course of the post-Reformation development of Reformed theology, some theologians, as we have observed, dissented from the consensus opinion on the imputation of Christ's active obedience. Due to the considerable reputation and importance of Calvin to the Reformed theological tradition, it is not surprising that opponents and proponents of the doctrine of the imputation of active obedience frequently adduced Calvin in support of their viewpoint. Accordingly, in the earliest history of debate about the nature of the righteousness that is imputed to believers for their justification, Calvin was sometimes appealed to as a key example of a Reformed theologian whose position was not in accord with the later, consensus opinion of Reformed orthodoxy. Remarkably, in the more recent history of Reformed theology, interpreters of Calvin have continued to raise questions regarding his understanding of the imputation of Christ's righteousness in the justification of believers. As in the earlier period of Reformed orthodoxy, opinions vary regarding the extent to which the later view was or was not anticipated in Calvin's thought. A number of recent interpreters of Calvin have insisted that the consensus opinion of Reformed orthodoxy does diverge to a greater or lesser extent from Calvin's position.

One significant example of this claim finds its home within the framework of a broadly neo-orthodox interpretation of Calvin's thought

fulfilled the law in his life; that now, in him, and by him, every true Christian man may be called a fulfiller of the law."

²¹ For a treatment of the Westminster Standards and the debate regarding their teaching on the imputation of Christ's active obedience, see the articles noted in fn8 *supra*.

²² The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order, 1658, Chap. 11.1: "Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth, not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing Christ's active obedience unto the whole law, and passive obedience in his death for their whole and sole righteousness, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God." Quoted from *Creeds & Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 3:115.

²³ See Campos, *Johannes Piscator*, pp. 250-65.

that argues for significant discontinuities between Calvin and the later Calvinists. In his *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth takes strong exception to the development of a two-covenant view in the later Calvinist tradition, which found confessional formulation in Chapter 7 of the Westminster Confession of Faith.²⁴ According to Barth, the doctrine of a pre-fall "covenant of works" introduces a strongly "legalistic" emphasis into Reformed theology. Since Adam's acceptance and favor with God depend upon his obedience to the stipulations of the law of nature and the pre-fall covenant, the gracious character of God's dealings with human beings in Christ is radically compromised. Within the framework of Reformed covenant theology, the obedience of Christ in the post-fall covenant of grace becomes the "meritorious" ground for God's acceptance of fallen sinners into favor with himself. The doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active obedience within this theological construction is developed in a manner that corrupts Calvin's original insight into the priority of God's grace in the divine-human relationship. Among students of Barth's theology, Holmes Rolston III and James B. Torrance have vigorously embraced and defended this Barthian claim.²⁵

However, the argument that Calvin differs from the later Calvinists on the imputation of Christ's active obedience is not restricted to the orbit of neo-orthodox theology. This argument has also been represented within the orbit of the confessional Reformed community in North America. Norman Shepherd, who succeeded John Murray as professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, has argued that the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active obedience is a post-Reformation development in Reformed theology.²⁶ In a manner reminiscent of the Barthian criticism of this construction, Shepherd claims that

²⁴ See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III/1: *The Doctrine of Creation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), pp. 94-9, 228-76; idem, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/1: *The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), pp. 22-66.

²⁵ See Holmes Rolston, III, "Responsible Man in Reformed Theology: Calvin Versus the Westminster Confession," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970): 129-56; and James B. Torrance, "Covenant or Contract? A Study of the Theological Background for Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970): 51-76. For another, similar example of the more recent argument that Calvin and the Calvinists are at odds on this question, see Alan C. Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1640-1790—An Evaluation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), esp. pp. 169-201. Clifford's study aims to support the Kendall thesis regarding Calvin and the later Calvinists, though it extends Kendall's thesis explicitly to include the doctrine of justification. For an analysis of the Barthian claim that the Reformed orthodox doctrine of a covenant of works betrays Calvin's theology of grace, see Cornelis Venema, "Recent Criticisms of the 'Covenant of Works' in the Westminster Confession of Faith," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 9/2 (1993): 165-98; and David B. McWilliams, "The Covenant Theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Recent Criticism," *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (1991): 109-124.

²⁶ Norman Shepherd, "The Imputation of Active Obedience," in *A Faith That is Never Alone: A Response to Westminster Seminary California*, ed. P. Andrew Sandlin (La Grange, CA: Kerygma Press, 2007), pp. 249-78. In this chapter, Shepherd is responding critically to the claim of R. Scott Clark that Calvin taught the imputation of the active obedience of Christ ("Do This and Live: Christ's Active Obedience as the Ground of Justification," in *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry: Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California*, ed. R. Scott Clark [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2007], pp. 229-65). See also Norman Shepherd, "Justification by Works in Reformed Theology," in *Backbone of the Bible: Covenant in Contemporary Perspective*, ed. P. Andrew Sandlin (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 2004), pp. 11-15.

the doctrine derives from the peculiar formulation of the covenant of works among the orthodox theologians of later Calvinism. Contrary to Calvin, who restricted the imputation of Christ's righteousness to his passive obedience and defined justification solely as the forgiveness of sins, this doctrine and its framework within the later covenant theology represents a declension from Calvin's view by introducing the themes of "merit" and "meritorious" works into the covenant relationship between God and his people. In Shepherd's analysis of the later doctrine of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ, the radical divergence between the Reformed understanding of God's grace in the covenant relationship between God and his people and the Roman Catholic doctrine of "merit" has been attenuated. In the position of Reformed orthodoxy, salvation becomes the fruit of Christ's "meritorious" work of obedience to the law, which then becomes the basis for the justification and salvation of believers. According to Shepherd, the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active obedience actually transmutes the Reformation doctrine of justification by grace into a doctrine of "justification by works," though the works in question are performed by Christ as Mediator.²⁷

In both the neo-orthodox and Shepherd claims that Calvin did not teach the imputation of Christ's active obedience, theological objections to the doctrine play a leading role. For neo-orthodoxy, the idea that Christ's entire obedience to the law was a necessary pre-condition to God's justification of believers, introduces an alien "legalism" that is at odds with the structure of Calvin's theology. In the covenant theology of Reformed orthodoxy, the requirement of obedience to the law forms a more basic component in the covenant between God and human beings than God's free and gracious decision to be for them in Christ. Though Shepherd's objections to the doctrine of the imputation of active obedience arise in a different theological framework, he also objects to the doctrine on theological grounds. In Shepherd's view, the covenant relationship between God and his people may not be construed in terms of the requirement of perfect obedience to the law in order for believers to enjoy the blessing of life-union with God. In contrast to Calvin's conception, Shepherd contends that orthodox Reformed theology treats the covenant relationship as a "contract," which requires the fulfillment of legal duties in order to "merit" the covenant inheritance of eternal life.

A different and more historically cautious approach to the interpretation of Calvin's view of the imputation of Christ's righteousness is evident in a recent comprehensive study by Heber Campos.²⁸ In his doctoral dissertation on Johannes Piscator and the development of the consensus opinion of Reformed orthodoxy on the imputation of Christ's active obedience, Campos argues that the orthodox view was formulated in the period subsequent to Calvin's reformatory labor. In Campos' opinion, much of the debate about whether the early Reformed theologians of the sixteenth century, particularly John Calvin, taught this doctrine betrays an

²⁷ Shepherd, "Justification by Works in Reformed Theology," pp. 114-18.

²⁸ "Johannes Piscator (1546-1625) and the Consequent Development of the Doctrine of the Imputation of Christ's Active Obedience," Ph.D. diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, 2008.

“anachronistic” reading of the sources.²⁹ The particulars of the debate regarding the imputation of Christ's active obedience arose in the context of the controversy provoked by Piscator, who explicitly rejected the doctrine as it was proposed by Calvin's theological successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza. In Piscator's theology, justification was defined to consist only in the forgiveness of sins, and was viewed as a simple divine act (*simplex actio Dei*). Piscator's defense of his understanding of justification as forgiveness was based upon a particular interpretation of the relevant biblical passages, and biblical-theological arguments that militate against the doctrine of the imputation of active obedience.

Campos identifies two arguments that were of special importance to Piscator. First, Piscator argued that, if Christ's obedience to the law “frees” the believer from the charge of disobedience, then his death upon the cross would be, legally, an instance of “double jeopardy.” Why, Piscator asked, would it be necessary for Christ not only to obey the law's demands on behalf of his people (thereby freeing them from the charge of having failed to keep the law) but also to suffer the penalty of disobedience to the law on their behalf as well? And second, Piscator believed that the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active obedience would undermine the legitimate sense in which believers are still obligated to obey the law of God in the way of sanctification.³⁰

According to Campos' reading of the development of the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active obedience in later Calvinism, there were three components of the later doctrine that were not yet developed by Calvin and the early theologians of the Reformed tradition. The first component was a developed doctrine of the law in relation to the distinct covenants before and the after the fall into sin. It was not until the Reformed tradition articulated a full bi-covenantal view of the covenants of “works” and of “grace” that it was able to offer a sophisticated account of the work of Christ under the law in the covenant of grace. Only within the framework of the doctrine of a covenant of works is it possible to draw a direct connection between the obedience to the law that was required of Adam before the fall and the obedience to the law that was required of Christ, the “last Adam,” in order that he might secure the inheritance of life and blessing for his people.³¹ The second component was a further development of the sense in which Christ's work of obedience genuinely fulfilled the requirements of a “twofold righteousness,” since it involved not only his satisfaction of the penalty of the law but also his active obedience to the precepts of the law. In the developed theology of Reformed orthodoxy, it became a commonplace to argue that believers require a “twofold righteousness” in order to be justified. It is not enough that believers are righteous in the limited sense that they are no longer liable to the penalty of the law. In order for believers to enjoy an “entitlement” to eternal life, they must also be positively righteous upon the basis of the granting and imputing to them of the perfect obedience of Christ in their place. Justification includes both the forgiveness of sins

²⁹ See Campos, *Johannes Piscator*, pp. 284-92, for a summary of the findings of his study.

³⁰ Campos, *Johannes Piscator*, pp. 179-91.

³¹ Campos, *Johannes Piscator*, pp. 250-65.

and the “right” to eternal life, which can only be based upon the fullness of Christ’s entire obedience under the law.³² The third and last component of the conception of Reformed orthodoxy was a development of the doctrine of Christ’s Person and work as Mediator and Surety of the covenant of grace. From the moment of his incarnation, Christ acted in the unity of his Person and natures in a thoroughly *vicarious* manner. The entire obedience of Christ under the law, accordingly, was a saving obedience on behalf and in the place of believers.³³

From this general survey of more recent interpretations of Calvin’s doctrine of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, it becomes apparent that the older Reformed consensus, especially in its appeal to Calvin in support of the imputation of Christ’s active obedience, remains a subject of dispute. Though Campos’ dissertation thoroughly addresses the subsequent development of the doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s active obedience in Reformed orthodoxy, it does not treat directly Calvin’s understanding of this subject. There remains a need to review more directly Calvin’s own writings and comments on the topic of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness in order to reach a more reliable conclusion regarding the continuity or discontinuity between his view and that of the later orthodox consensus.

2. Calvin’s Understanding of the Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness

Now that we have sketched the debate regarding whether Calvin taught the imputation of Christ’s active obedience in the older tradition of Reformed orthodoxy and more recent literature, we are in a position to address directly the question of continuity between Calvin’s teaching and that of the later Calvinists. Is there evidence in the writings of Calvin that he anticipated, at least in germinal form, the later doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s entire obedience in the justification of believers? Or is the later, scholastic development of the imputation of Christ’s active obedience an instance of discontinuity between Calvin and the Calvinists?

It is important to observe at the outset, before considering several themes and passages in Calvin’s *Institutes* and commentaries that are germane to this question, that Calvin nowhere draws an explicit distinction between what later theologians termed Christ’s “active” and “passive” obedience. Nor does he address the question of the imputation of Christ’s “active” obedience as a distinct question in the manner in which this was done in the later period of Reformed orthodoxy. Furthermore, though Calvin emphasizes themes that anticipate the later development of the doctrine of a pre-fall covenant of works and a post-fall covenant of grace, he does not explicitly teach the imputation of Christ’s active obedience within the framework of a developed theology of the covenant. It would be anachronistic, accordingly, to argue that Calvin taught the doc-

³² Campos, *Johannes Piscator*, pp. 265-74.

³³ Campos, *Johannes Piscator*, pp. 274-84.

trine of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ in the precise form in which it was taught at a later point in the Reformed tradition. However, it is appropriate to ask whether Calvin taught the imputation of Christ's righteousness as the basis for the justification of the believer, and whether his understanding of this righteousness anticipates important elements of the view of later Calvinists at least in seminal form. Or, to state the matter differently, it is a matter of some interest whether the later development of the doctrine of imputation in Reformed orthodoxy was consistent with Calvin's viewpoint or represented a significant departure from his view, as has been suggested by older and more recent interpreters.

2.1. Calvin's Definition of Justification

The first important piece of evidence regarding Calvin's view of the imputation of Christ's righteousness is provided by his formal definition of justification in the *Institutes*.

He is said to be justified in God's sight who is reckoned righteous in God's judgment (*qui iudicio Dei et censetur iustus*) and has been accepted on account of his righteousness.... On the contrary, justified by faith is he who, excluded from the righteousness of works, grasps the righteousness of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appears in God's sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man. Therefore, we explain justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness.³⁴

In this formal definition of justification, Calvin clearly distinguishes between justification on the basis of an inherent righteousness and justification on the basis of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, he explicitly distinguishes between two components of free justification: the forgiveness or non-imputation of the guilt of sin and the "imputation of Christ's righteousness." Though Calvin does not spell out in this definition wherein this imputed righteousness consists, it is significant that he distinguishes this component of justification from forgiveness or the non-imputation of the guilt of sin.³⁵ In the justification of believers, God imputes the righteousness of Christ to them so that they appear before his

³⁴ III.xi.2 (OS 4.182–3). Cf. III.xvii.8 (OS 4.261); III.xi.4 (OS 4.184–5). When referring to the *Institutes*, I will cite the reference by book, chapter, and section. For example, "I.i.1" refers to the *Institutes*, Book I, Chapter i, Section 1. When referring in what follows to Calvin's works in the *Opera Selecta* (ed. P. Barth and G. Niesel, 5 vol., [München: Kaiser, 1926–52]), I will use the abbreviation, OS. When referring to the *Calvini Opera* (*Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed G. Baum, E. Cunitz, E. Reuss et al., 59 vol. [vol. 29–87, *Corpus Reformatorum*. Brunsvigae, Schwetschke, 1863–1900]), I will use the abbreviation, CO.

³⁵ For an older study of Calvin's theology that argues an incompatibility of these two components of justification in Calvin's theology, see Willy L Lüttge, *Die Rechtfertigungslehre Calvins und ihre Bedeutung für seine Frömmigkeit*. (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1909). Lüttge argues that Calvin identifies justification with the forgiveness of sins and therefore his use of the language of "imputation" is superfluous and unnecessary. For a critical assessment of this claim, see Cornelis P. Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ: The "Twofold Grace of God" and the Interpretation of Calvin's Theology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), pp. 150–54.

sight, not as sinners but as righteous persons. Furthermore, in his articulation of the nature of this gracious judgment of God, Calvin ordinarily in his writings conceives it to comprise two interrelated elements: the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.³⁶ Although Calvin sometimes refers only to the first of these aspects, the forgiveness of sins, as synonymous with justification,³⁷ generally and more properly he understands it as comprising both a negative element and a positive element: the non-imputation of unrighteousness (or forgiveness) and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.³⁸

Though it is possible to treat the second of these two elements in Calvin's formal definition of justification as exegetical of the first, it seems more likely that Calvin views the imputation of Christ's righteousness as a distinct and further element in the divine verdict of free justification. Of course, this does not in itself provide any express evidence for the conclusion that this imputed righteousness includes what the later writers termed Christ's "active" obedience. But it does indicate that Calvin views the justifying verdict as a *complex* act, which comprises the elements of non-imputation or forgiveness and the imputation of Christ's righteousness. This raises the important question, accordingly, as to how Calvin understands the nature of the righteousness that is imputed for justification.

2.2. The Obedience and Righteousness of Christ in the Institutes, Book II

In order to appreciate what Calvin means by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ in his definition of justification, it is important to observe that his discussion of justification in Book III of the Institutes occurs against the background of his treatment of Christ's work as Mediator in Book II. At the outset of his consideration of what he terms the "double grace" or benefit of the believer's union with Christ through faith and by the "bond of the Holy Spirit," Calvin observes:

We must now examine this question. How do we receive those benefits which the Father bestowed on his only-begotten Son—not for Christ's own private use, but that he might enrich poor and needy men? First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him all he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useful and of no value for us. Therefore, to

³⁶ See, e.g., III.xi.2 (OS 4.182–3); III.xvii.8 (OS 4.261); III.xi.4 (OS 4.184–5); *Serm. sur la Justification* (CO 23.692); *Serm. sur la Justification* (CO 23.706).

³⁷ E.g., III.xi.21 (OS 4.204): "... iustitiam fidei esse reconciliationem cum Deo, quae sola peccatorum remissione constat"; III.xi.3 (OS 4.184). Despite this kind of statement, it seems clear that Calvin does not identify justification simply with the forgiveness of sins. The importance of the aspect of the imputation of Christ's righteousness is evident from Calvin's occasional identification of justification with this aspect alone. See, e.g., Comm. Rom 4:3 (CO 49.70).

³⁸ See, e.g., III.xi.11 (OS 4.192–5); Comm. Rom 4:6 (CO 49.71); Comm. Rom 4:25 (CO 49.87); *Serm. sur la Justification* (CO 23.706); *Acta Synodi Tridentinae Cum Antidoto*, 1547 (CO 7.442–3); *Responsio ad Sadoleti epistolam* (OS 1.469–70); *Instruction Et Confession De Foy*, 1537 (OS 1.393).

share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us.³⁹

The significance of this construction of the believer's relation through faith to the Person and work of Christ in Calvin's theology can hardly be overstated. The two benefits of union with Christ, justification and regeneration or repentance, are granted to believers by the working of the Spirit through the Word of the gospel. By faith-union with Christ, "all that he [Christ] has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race" becomes beneficial to believers. The implication of Calvin's language in this critical transitional paragraph at the opening of Book III of the *Institutes* is that the work of Christ as Mediator, which was described at length in Book II, was performed vicariously. In order for believers to participate in and benefit from the mediatorial work of Christ, they must become members of Christ and partakers of all his benefits through faith.

In Book II of the *Institutes*, Calvin offers a comprehensive statement of the Person of Christ, the Son of God who became man through his gracious condescension and incarnation in order that he might fulfill his office as Mediator and Redeemer. In the setting of this broad conception of the Person and office of Christ, Calvin addresses directly the nature and saving benefit of Christ's obedience.

Now someone asks, How has Christ abolished sin, banished the separation between us and God, and acquired righteousness to render God favorable and kindly toward us? To this we can in general reply that he has achieved this for us by the whole course of his obedience. This is proved by Paul's testimony: "As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience we are made righteous" [Rom. 5:19 p.]. In another passage, to be sure, Paul extends the basis of the pardon that frees us from the curse of the law to the whole life of Christ: "But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, subject to the law, to redeem those who were under the law" [Gal. 4:4-5]. Thus in his very baptism, also, he asserted that he fulfilled a part of righteousness in obediently carrying out his Father's commandments [Matt. 3:15]. In short, from the time when he took on the form of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation in order to redeem us. Yet to define the way of salvation more exactly, Scripture ascribes this as peculiar and proper to Christ's death. ... For this reason the so-called "Apostles' Creed" passes at once in the best order from the birth of Christ to his death and resurrection, wherein the whole of perfect salvation consists. Yet the remainder of the obedience that he manifested in his life is not excluded. Paul embraces it all from the beginning to end: "He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, ... and was obedient to the father unto death, even death on a cross" [Phil. 2:7-8 p.]. And truly, even in death itself his willing obedience is the important thing because a sacrifice not offered voluntarily would not have furthered righteousness.⁴⁰

³⁹ III.i.1 (OS 4.1).

⁴⁰ II.xvi.5 (OS 3.485-6). It is interesting to compare this comment in the 1559 edition of the *Institutes* to Calvin's earlier observation about the sequence of the articles of the Apostles' Creed in his *Catechism of 1545*, where Calvin seems to ascribe all of the redemptive benefit of Christ's obedience to his work on the cross. See *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (Library of Christian Classics, vol. 22; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, n.d.) p. 98 (CO 2.82).

The importance of this passage for determining Calvin's view of the righteousness of Christ that is imputed for justification is transparent. The whole of Christ's obedience was indispensable to his acquisition of God's favor and kindness toward believers. Though it is possible to view the death of Christ upon the cross as the apex of this obedience, it is not possible to limit the obedience of Christ to his vicarious death upon the cross. For Calvin, the death of Christ, which was "voluntarily" suffered as an act of obedience to the Father, belongs to the entire curriculum of Christ's obedience from his incarnation until his crucifixion. It is hardly possible to interpret Calvin's language in this passage in a way that would view his life of obedience as merely one that qualified him to suffer the penalty of sin vicariously for believers, but not as one that vicariously fulfills the righteousness in which believers participate through faith in a way that is savingly beneficial. Calvin views the entirety of Christ's life of obedience, which includes but is not limited to his death, as constitutive of the righteousness that obtains acceptance with God for those who are united to him by faith.

Another section of Book II that is particularly instructive is Calvin's concluding treatment of the question whether we may properly speak of Christ's work as having "merited" grace and salvation for his people. In his answer to this question, Calvin begins by observing how absurd it would be to set God's grace against the merit of Christ's work as Mediator, since the entirety of Christ's work is a free gift of God's love and grace. However, in order that God's righteousness might be upheld, it was proper for Christ to render obedience to the Father throughout his entire life, and especially in his death upon the cross, as a substitute for and on behalf of his people.⁴¹ This righteousness of Christ, which consists in the fullness of his obedient life and death, is imputed to believers and is therefore reckoned to be their own. "For if righteousness consists in the observance of the law, who will deny that Christ merited favor for us when, by taking that burden upon himself, he reconciled us to God as if we had kept the law? ... What was the purpose of this subjection of Christ to the law [Gal. 4:4-5] but to acquire righteousness for us, undertaking to pay what we could not pay? Hence, that imputation of righteousness without works which Paul discusses [Rom., ch. 4]. For the righteousness found in Christ alone is reckoned as ours."⁴² The righteousness that is imputed to believers for their justification, according to this passage, consists in the "fullness of his [Christ's] obedient life and death," all of which was performed on behalf of those whom Christ redeems. By virtue of the participation of believers in Christ's meritorious obedience and death, they may now be regarded "as if [they] had kept the law." Without using the language of "active" and "passive" obedience, Calvin clearly anticipates in this passage what this language means in

⁴¹ For a general study of Calvin's view of Christ's work as substitutionary, see Paul Van Buren, *Christ in Our Place: The Substitutionary Character of Calvin's Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957). Van Buren (pp. 29-34) cites a number of passages from Calvin's commentaries that speak of Christ's obedience to the whole law, with all of its requirements, on behalf of his people.

⁴² Inst. II.xvii.5 (OS 3.513).

the writings of later Calvinists. The righteousness that is imputed to believers for their justification is comprehensive in scope, and includes both of the elements that were distinguished by later writers but not yet explicitly distinguished in Calvin's formulation.

2.3. The Obedience and Righteousness of Christ in the *Institutes*, Book III

In addition to these important passages in Book II of the *Institutes*, Calvin also offers clues in Book III as to his understanding of the righteousness of Christ that is imputed to believers for their justification. In the context of his definition of the grace of free justification, Calvin describes the nature of the righteousness of Christ with which believers are clothed through imputation.

I reply that 'accepting grace,' as they call it [i.e., the Schoolmen], is nothing else than his free goodness, with which the Father embraces us in Christ when he clothes us with the innocence of Christ and accepts it as ours that by the benefit of it he may hold us as holy, pure, and innocent. For Christ's righteousness, which as it alone is perfect alone can bear the sight of God, must appear in court on our behalf, and stand surety in judgment. Furnished with this righteousness, we obtain continual forgiveness of sins in faith. Covered with this purity, the sordidness and uncleanness of our imperfections are not ascribed to us but are hidden as if buried that they may not come into God's judgment....⁴³

Though Calvin could be interpreted to equate justification only with the forgiveness of sins in this statement, it is instructive that he regards the act of justification to involve more than a declaration of the believer's innocence in the sense of being no-longer-regarded-as-guilty. In free justification, believers who are embraced in Christ are now regarded as being positively "holy, pure, and innocent." The righteousness that becomes the possession of the believer includes the "innocence of Christ" who appears in God's court on behalf of his people. Christ's innocence is accepted by God as though it were the property of those on whose behalf he acts as surety and representative. Free justification involves not only the righteousness of forgiveness from the penalty of the law but also the righteousness of perfect holiness and purity in God's presence.

An especially significant testimony to Calvin's view of the imputation of Christ's righteousness in Book III is his extended polemic with the Lutheran theologian, Osiander. Calvin's refutation of the doctrine of Osiander, which is largely found in his *Institutes* III.xi.5-12, begins with an account of Osiander's conception of justification. As Calvin understands him, Osiander teaches that we possess an "essential righteousness" that is imparted to us through the transfusion of the divine essence.⁴⁴ Though

⁴³ III.xiv.12 (OS 4.231).

⁴⁴ III.xi.5 (OS IV.185-6): "... essentiam Dei in homines transfundere apperteret." For general treatments of Osiander's position on justification and Calvin's polemic against it, see E. Hirsch, *Die Theologie des Andreas Osiander und ihre geschichtlichen Vorsetzung* (Tübingen, 1919); W. Niesel, "Calvin wider Osianders Rechtfertigungslehre," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, XLVI (1927), 410-30; Garcia, "Life in Christ," 175-223; Mark A. Garcia, "Imputation and the Christology of Union with Christ: Calvin, Osiander, and the Contempo-

Calvin admits the correctness of Osiander's emphasis upon union with Christ, he maintains that Osiander misconceives the nature of this union when he mixes Christ's essence with ours, and when he teaches that Christ is "our righteousness because he is eternal God, the source of righteousness, and the very righteousness of God."⁴⁵ Rather than teaching that we are united with Christ, the Mediator, through the operation and indwelling of his Spirit, Osiander falsely teaches an *immediate* union of our essence with that of Christ and concludes that "we are substantially righteous in God by the infusion both of his essence and his quality."⁴⁶ In so doing, Osiander shows himself unsatisfied "with the righteousness which has been acquired for us by Christ's obedience and sacrificial death."⁴⁷

In his polemic with Osiander, Calvin makes clear why he objects to his doctrine of an essential righteousness that is imparted to us through a "crass mixture" of Christ's essence with ours. With this doctrine, Osiander makes our justification depend upon an intrinsic righteousness that inheres in us. But this is manifestly impossible, Calvin argues, because our righteousness, imparted to us through the Spirit, cannot suffice for righteousness before God's tribunal. Only the perfect righteousness of Christ, which remains to some degree "outside of us" (*extra nos*) so long as we live in this world, can enable us to stand *coram Deo*. So long as our union with Christ is rightly interpreted as a personal and reciprocal relation between ourselves and Christ through his Spirit, we may not confuse his righteousness with our own. And we may continue to insist upon a juridical and imputative conception of justification as wholly consistent with it. Though Christ lives and dwells in us through the Spirit, renewing us after the image of God, he continues to possess a unique and unparalleled righteousness that alone makes us acceptable to God when it is imputed to us. As Calvin puts it, in a characteristic comment toward the conclusion of his polemic with Osiander: "This is a wonderful plan of justification that, covered by the righteousness of Christ, they should not tremble at the judgment they deserve, and that while they rightly condemn themselves, they should be accounted right-

rary Quest for a Reformed Model," *Westminster Theological Journal* 68 (2006): 219-51; and Julie Canlis, "Calvin, Osiander and Participation in God," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6/2 (2004): 169-84. Garcia's article (228-30) provides a helpful identification of the most important sources for an understanding of Osiander's theology, including several that appeal to Osiander's view as a bridge from Lutheranism to Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic views of justification.

⁴⁵ III.xi.5 (OS IV.186): "Dicit nos unum esse cum Christo. Fatemur: interea negamus misceri Christi essentiam cum nostra. Deinde perperam hoc principium trahi dicimus ad illas eius praestigias: Christum nobis esse iustitiam, quia Deus est aeternus, fons iustitiae, ipsaque Dei iustitia."

⁴⁶ III.xi.5 (OS IV.186): "...nos substantialiter in Deo iustos esse tam essentia quam qualitate infusa."

⁴⁷ III.xi.5 (OS IV.186). Cf. III.xi.8 (OS IV.189), where Calvin refutes Osiander's claim that, "since Christ is God and man, he is made righteousness for us with respect to his divine nature, not his human nature." According to Calvin, this strips Christ the Mediator of his justifying office, which is located in the "dispensation enjoined upon him" and "the power of his death and resurrection."

eous outside themselves (*iusti extra se censeantur*).⁴⁸ Since free justification consists in the verdict or declaration of righteousness before God, it is only possible on the basis of the believer's possession through imputation ("accounted righteous") of the perfect righteousness and holiness of Christ. Even though Calvin does not employ the language of the later Calvinists by explicitly distinguishing between the two facets of Christ's obedience or righteousness, he regards Christ's righteousness to constitute a seamless garment of perfect obedience in every respect to the requirements of God's holiness.

2.4. Evidence from Calvin's Commentaries and Sermons

In addition to this evidence from his principal theological work, the *Institutes*, there are a number of important references in Calvin's commentaries and sermons that are of particular significance for our question. These references, which in some cases treat biblical passages that Calvin cites in his treatment of the imputation of Christ's righteousness in the *Institutes*, suggest that the righteousness of Christ that is imputed to believers includes Christ's entire obedience under the law. Though Calvin does not explicitly draw the later distinction between "active" and "passive" obedience in his commentaries and sermons, he does define Christ's obedience under the law in a manner that includes both of these aspects. Most importantly, he includes in his definition of the righteousness of Christ, which is imputed to believers for their justification, all the obedience that Christ performed in his office as Mediator.

The first reference is taken from Calvin's commentary on Romans 5:19. In the context of the apostle Paul's extended analogy between Adam and Christ, a contrast is drawn between the condemnation and death that result from Adam's transgression and the justification and life that result from the obedience of Christ. After noting that all who are ingrafted into Christ by faith come to share in "Christ Himself with all His blessings, given to us by the Father's bounty," Calvin offers an explanation of the nature and extent of the "righteousness of Christ" that is imputed to believers.

When he [the apostle Paul] afterwards states that we are made righteous by the obedience of Christ, we deduce from this that Christ, in satisfying the Father, has procured righteousness for us. It follows from this that righteousness exists in Christ as property, but that that which belongs properly to Christ is imputed to us. At the same time he explains the character of the righteousness of Christ by referring to it as *obedience*. Let us note here what we are required to bring into the presence of God, if we wish to be justified by works, viz. obedience to the law, and not a partial obedience, but absolute obedience in every respect. If a righteous man has fallen, none of his former righteousness is remembered. We are also to learn from the falsity of the self-conceived schemes which men thrust upon God for the purpose of satisfying His justice. Only when we

⁴⁸ III.xi.11 (OS IV.195): "Sed haec est mirabilis iustificandi ratio, ut Christi iustitia tecti non exhorreant iudicium quo digni sunt, et dum seipsos merito damnant, iusti extra se censeantur."

follow what God has commanded us do we truly worship Him, and render obedience to His Word. Let us, therefore, have nothing to do with those who confidently lay claim to the righteousness of works, *which can exist only when there is full and complete observance of the law.*⁴⁹

In this passage, Calvin interprets the “obedience of the one [Christ]” to refer to the entire curriculum of Christ’s obedience as Mediator. When God grants and imputes Christ’s righteousness to believers for their justification, he grants and imputes to them the whole Christ with all of his works of obedience under the law. Furthermore, in the last sentence of this extended passage, Calvin defines the “righteousness of works” under the law that would satisfy God’s justice to be a “full and complete observance of the law.” The implication of this definition is that believers, when they are granted a part in Christ’s righteousness, are regarded as positively righteous by this standard. Upon the basis of the believer’s participation in Christ’s righteousness by faith, God repute the believer to have rendered to him an “absolute obedience in every respect.”

A second important passage in Calvin’s commentaries occurs in his treatment of 2 Corinthians 5:21. This passage describes the work of Christ in terms of a twofold imputation. On the one hand, Christ “was made to be sin” in the sense that all the offenses of his people were charged to him and he bore their penalty upon the cross. On the other hand, those who are found “in Christ” by faith are granted his righteousness as though it were their own.

Here righteousness means not a quality or habit but something imputed to us, since we are said to have received the righteousness of Christ. ... How can we become righteous before God? In the same way as Christ became a sinner. For He took, as it were, our person, that He might be the offender in our name and thus might be reckoned a sinner, not because of His own offences but because of those of others, since He Himself was pure and free from every fault and bore the penalty that was our due and not His own. Now in the same way we are righteous in Him, not because we have satisfied God’s judgment by our own works, but because we are judged in relation to Christ’s righteousness which we have put on by faith, that it may become our own.⁵⁰

Calvin’s explanation of this passage interprets the believer’s participation in Christ through imputation to involve a complete participation in the righteousness of Christ’s person. Parallel to the manner in which Christ’s person was identified with ours so that our offences were attributed to him, our person is identified with Christ’s so that all of his righteousness is attributed to us. Though Calvin does not explicitly define the righteousness of Christ that is imputed to believers in this passage, he places no limit or restriction upon the extent of the believer’s share in Christ’s righteousness. The implication of Calvin’s comments is that all that be-

⁴⁹ *Comm.* Rom. 5:19 (NTC 8:118; CO 49.101, emphasis mine).

⁵⁰ *Comm.* 2 Cor. 5:21 (NTC 10:81-2; CO 50.74). It is interesting to observe that Calvin’s comments on this passage are not cited by Turretin as evidence that Calvin taught the imputation of Christ’s active obedience.

longs to Christ's righteousness in his office and person as Mediator is imputed to believers for their justification.

A third passage in Calvin's commentaries, and the last one we will consider, is his commentary on Galatians 4:4. In this passage, the apostle Paul describes the way Christ, the Son of God, assumed our human nature and was born "under the law" in order that he might set us free from the law.

Christ, the Son of God, who was by right exempt from all subjection, became subject to the law. Why? In our name, that He might obtain freedom for us. A free-man redeemed a slave by constituting himself a surety; by putting the chains on himself, he takes them off the other. In the same way Christ chose to become liable to keep the law that He might obtain exemption for us. Otherwise He would have submitted to the yoke of the law in vain, for it was certainly not on His own account that He did so.⁵¹

These comments are particularly relevant to the question of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers. According to Calvin's understanding of what it meant for Christ to be born "under the law," Christ assumed all of the obligations of the law and kept them for us. These obligations were not limited to his endurance of the law's penalty in the case of disobedience. The "yoke of the law" in this passage is the law's requirement of perfect obedience, which is only way to obtain life "under the law" and escape the "curse" that falls upon anyone who does not continue in all things that are written in the law (cf. Gal. 3:10-14). Christ's perfect obedience to the law as the "surety" of his people secures their freedom from the law's obligations as a means to secure life and blessing. This freedom is a not freedom from a grateful life of obedience to the law as a "rule of gratitude." But it is a freedom from the rigors of the law, whose demands we cannot fulfill and whose penalty we cannot escape.

In addition to these references in Calvin's commentaries, there are also instances in his sermons where he offers a definition of Christ's righteousness that comprehends the entirety of Christ's obedience as Mediator. Though Calvin does not use the later language of "active" and "passive" obedience in these sermons, it is difficult to avoid the implication that Calvin views the whole of Christ's obedience under the law to be the righteousness that is granted and imputed to believers. The incidental manner in which Calvin speaks of the entire obedience of Christ as the believer's righteousness before God underscores that he is not addressing the question in the form it arose in later Calvinism. Since the later form of the dispute, which was occasioned by the denial of the imputation of the "active" obedience of Christ, was unknown to Calvin, it is not surprising that Calvin articulates his position in a less explicit and polemical form than among later Calvinist theologians.

There are three passages from Calvin's sermons that are especially clear in their testimony to the extent of Christ's obedience under the law, and the scope of his righteousness that is imputed to believers. The first

⁵¹ *Comm.* Gal. 4:4 (NTC 8:74; CO 50.227).

and most striking of these passages occurs in Calvin's sermon on Deuteronomy 21:22, 23.

St. Paul ... says that because we cannot attain to righteousness but by fulfilling the law in all points, and by being discharged by God, it behooved our Lord Jesus Christ to be subject to the law to the intent that his obedience might now be imputed unto us, and God accept thereof as though we brought the like obedience of our own. When we speak of being justified before God, how is that to be understood? Verily that we should obey the things that Cod commands us in his law....

But [in spite of our own righteousness] yet are we righteous in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. And why? For he being the sovereign king in whom there was no bondage nor subjection, did willingly submit himself to the law, and bear the yoke thereof for us; for we know that he performed the will of God his Father in all points to the full. And so by that means we are taken for righteous in Jesus Christ. Why so? Because he was obedient. Yea and that obedience of his was not for himself; there was no subjection in him, neither was he bound to any thing for he is altogether above the law: therefore it follows that he was obedient for us. And therefore when we flee to him for succor, our heavenly Father admits us as if we brought perfect obedience with us. For look what is wanting and missing in ourselves, we go to seek it like poor beggars in our Lord Jesus Christ, and all is applied unto us by the virtue of faith.⁵²

Careful reflection upon these comments in this sermon of Calvin can only lead to the conclusion that Calvin viewed Christ's obedience in its entirety as the obedience of the Mediator on behalf and in the place of his people. Not only Christ's substitutionary endurance of the law's penalty or curse, but also his perfect conformity to all of the law's demands, are included in the obedience of Christ that is imputed to believers and received by faith alone.

A second comment on the nature of the righteousness of Christ that is attributed to believers for their justification is made by Calvin in the same series of sermons on Deuteronomy. In his sermon on Deuteronomy 26:16-19, Calvin offers an unqualified account of the believer's participation in the fullness of Christ's obedience.

For God, having adopted us for his children, certifies us that the inheritance of heaven is made ready for us, and behold he gives his own Son unto us for a pledge of his love, and whatsoever our Lord Jesus Christ has is all ours, with all the fullness of riches which we read was given unto him. And why? Even unto the end that we should be enriched by them. The obedience which he yielded unto his Father is our righteousness. To be short, he has nothing whereof he makes not us partakers. Seeing that he is ours, and that his given unto us, how shall not all the rest which he has be given unto us also with him, as S. Paul says in the eighth to the Romans.⁵³

The point that Calvin makes in these comments is one that we have seen frequently in our survey of Calvin's explanation of the righteousness of

⁵² *Serm. Deut. 21:22, 23 (Sermon on Deuteronomy: John Calvin [Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, facsimile ed., n.d.], p. 763; CO 27.693).*

⁵³ *Serm. Deut. 26:16-19 (Sermons on Deuteronomy, p. 913; CO 28.288).*

Christ that is imputed to believers. Since Christ's obedience in its entirety was offered in his person and office as Mediator, it was an entire curriculum, a life of obedience under the law, that was performed, not for his own benefit or advantage, but solely for the benefit and advantage of those who share in his obedience through faith. Nothing that Christ did under the law was accomplished for himself, but was accomplished in his substitution and representation on behalf of his people.

The last passage in Calvin's sermons that we wish to note is taken from his sermon on Galatians 4:4. In our identification of several key passages from Calvin's commentaries, we have already seen how Calvin makes pertinent comments on the imputation of Christ's righteousness, when treating the same passage. In his sermon on this passage, Calvin draws a contrast between the "righteousness of the law," which is unattainable by sinful human beings who never keep the law perfectly, and the free grace of God in Christ whereby the "obedience of the Lord Jesus Christ" is imputed to us for justification. "Thus, since the righteousness of the law is unattainable, and is something from which we are utterly barred, we need to find another righteousness. Put another way, we need God to accept us through his free grace. Instead of God receiving anything from us, we need the obedience of the Lord Jesus Christ to be imputed to us, though we do not deserve it."⁵⁴ As is true of the kinds of passages that we have previously cited, Calvin does not explain the extent or scope of Christ's obedience in this passage. This confirms that Calvin's understanding of the imputation of Christ's obedience for justification was not framed by the later controversy among the Calvinists regarding the imputation of Christ's "active" obedience. But it can scarcely be argued that Calvin limited Christ's obedience in this and other statements to what the later writers would term expressly Christ's "passive obedience." In this statement, as with the others, Calvin anticipates the substantive point of the later Calvinists, who drew a more explicit distinction between the two aspects of Christ's obedience, "active" and "passive." But he treats the obedience of Christ as a single obedience that includes the entire course of his subjection to the law of God from the moment of his incarnation until its culmination in his death upon the cross. The cumulative weight of this evidence from Calvin's commentaries and sermons suggests rather incontrovertibly that Calvin viewed the believer's participation in Christ's righteousness by faith to include the entirety or the "whole" of Christ's obedience to the law.

2.5. Antecedents of a "Covenant of Works" in Calvin

In our survey of the interpretation of Calvin's teaching on the imputation of Christ's righteousness, we have observed that the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active obedience was closely linked to the later bi-covenantalism of Reformed orthodoxy. Within the framework of the kind of covenant theology that is codified in the Westminster Standards, for example, an emphasis upon the imputation of Christ's active obedi-

⁵⁴ *Serm. Gal. 2:16* (CO 51.415-28).

ence has a proper home. However, where the doctrine of a pre-lapsarian covenant of works is not present, the later formulations of the imputation of Christ's righteousness do not appear to have a clear theological framework within which to function. If Adam in the pre-lapsarian covenant was not obliged to obey the law of God perfectly in order to secure the blessing of eternal life, then there is no need to maintain that Christ, the last Adam, was obliged to obey the law perfectly in order that he might obtain this inheritance for believers who receive his law-keeping as if it were their own in the way of faith. One specific way to formulate the question of this article, therefore, is to ask whether any of the key elements of the later "covenant of works" doctrine of Reformed orthodoxy are anticipated in Calvin's theology. If the indispensable components of the later doctrine find a place in Calvin's theology, then this may provide further evidence for the anticipation in his thought of the later teaching of the imputation of Christ's active obedience.⁵⁵

While it is clear that Calvin does not explicitly formulate a doctrine of a pre-lapsarian covenant of works in relation to his understanding of the work of Christ in the covenant of grace, there are important themes in his theology that constitute the essential components of the later doctrine. These themes include: an understanding of Adam's role as the head and representative of the human race; an emphasis upon Adam's obligations of obedience, which were the necessary pre-condition for his entrance into immutable blessedness in life-communion with God; an insistence that the law of God perpetually requires perfect obedience on the part of human beings who are created in God's image, if they are to enjoy eternal life; and a clear emphasis upon the entire obedience of Christ as Mediator in the procurement of the right to eternal life for his people.

2.5.1. Adam's Role by God's Appointment

On the first of these points, the role of Adam as the first head of the human race, Calvin has often been interpreted to teach a "realist" view of Adam's relationship to his posterity that is incompatible with the later "federalist" view of his place as representative of his posterity.⁵⁶ Though it is evident from Calvin's treatment of a critical passage like Romans 5:12 that he generally tends to follow the Augustinian tradition of "realism," it is not accurate to say that no elements of the later "federalist" view are present in Calvin's understanding of Adam's role and place.⁵⁷ In his summary of Adam's relationship to his posterity in the *Institutes*, for example, Calvin not only views Adam as the organic head and source of

⁵⁵ See Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), Chapter 15, "Is There a Covenant of Works in Calvin's Theology?," pp. 276-304. Lillback offers a strong case that all of the essential components of the later doctrine are present in rudimentary form in Calvin's writings.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., J. H. Thornwell, *Collected Writings* (Richmond, VA, 1871-73), 1.619; and John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1959), pp. 17-18.

⁵⁷ Comm. Rom. 5:12 (CO 49.95). However, Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1.627, argues that Calvin held the federalist view.

the human race but also as a “public” person, to use the language of the later Calvinists, who was “ordained” to act in the place of his posterity. “[T]he beginning of corruption in Adam was such that it was conveyed in a perpetual stream from the ancestors into their descendants. For the contagion does not take its origin from the substance of the flesh or soul, but because *it had been so ordained by God that the first man should at one and the same time have and lose, both for himself and for his descendants, the gifts that God had bestowed upon him.*”⁵⁸ Careful reflection on this passage suggests that Calvin does not simply view Adam as the “head” of the human race in the “realistic” sense that all human beings were organically included within his person. Adam also acted, by virtue of God’s ordination and appointment, as the “representative” head of all his posterity, so that his sin immediately implicated the entire human race and forfeited whatever gifts had originally been granted to the race in him.⁵⁹ Therefore, even though Calvin does not use the language of “covenant head” or “representative,” the truth conveyed by such language is not absent from his theological assessment of the significance of Adam’s original sin for the whole human race.

2.5.2. The Promise of Eternal Life upon the Condition of Obedience

Another feature of the later federal theology of orthodox Calvinism is the Augustinian teaching that the pre-lapsarian state of Adam was not yet a perfected state of glory. Adam would secure the inheritance of eternal life only upon the condition of obedience to the requirements of God’s law, which were written upon his conscience and known to him by nature, and the particular prohibition set forth in Genesis 2:13. For Calvin, God’s prohibition against eating from the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” in paradise was a “test” of Adam’s obedience.⁶⁰ By means of this particular stipulation of obedience, Adam was obliged to “prove that he was willingly under God’s command.”⁶¹ Furthermore, the obligation of obedience to God’s law in the original pre-fall state was accompanied by a “promise by which he [Adam] was bidden to hope for eternal life.”⁶² Calvin understands the original relationship between God and the human race in Adam, therefore, to involve the stipulation of “personal and perfect obedience,” to use the language of the Westminster Confession of Faith, and to include a promise of life in unbreakable communion with God. Adam’s state of innocence before the fall was a mutable and defectable state: “The state of man was not perfected in the person of Adam” inasmuch as “man’s life was only earthly, seeing he had no firm and settled constancy.”⁶³ Calvin also explicitly speaks of Adam’s obligations of obedience before the fall as a “test of obedience” that were a precondition

⁵⁸ II.i.7 (OS 3.236, emphasis mine). On the basis of these kinds of passages, Francis Turretin argued in his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (1.627) that Calvin actually held a federalist view of Adam’s relation to his posterity.

⁵⁹ Cf. Comm. John 3:6 (CO 47.56-8).

⁶⁰ Institutes II.i.4 (OS 3.231).

⁶¹ Institutes II.i.4 (OS 3.231).

⁶² Institutes II.i.4 (OS 3.231).

⁶³ Comm. Gen. 2:9 (CO 23.37-39).

for his entrance into a state of perfection and glory: “Truly the first man would have passed to a better life, had he remained upright; but there would have been no separation of the soul from the body, no corruption, no kind of destruction, and, in short, no violent change.”⁶⁴ Only upon condition of perfect obedience would Adam “arrive at perfection.”⁶⁵ There are a remarkable series of parallels in Calvin’s comments on Adam’s original state in relationship to God, and the later, more fully developed formulation of the pre-lapsarian covenant of works in Reformed orthodoxy.⁶⁶

2.5.3. The Perpetual Requirement of God’s Law

In addition to the presence of these elements in Calvin’s writings that anticipate the later “covenant of works” doctrine, there is also compelling evidence that Calvin shared another feature of the orthodox understanding of this doctrine, namely, the perpetual requirement of perfect obedience to the law of God as a necessary precondition to righteousness and acceptance with God. Before and after the fall into sin, human beings who bear God’s image remain obliged by the law to perfect obedience, and are reminded that favor with God can only be present where such obedience is present. The dictates of God’s righteousness require that his holy law be obeyed, and only in the way of such obedience can human beings who bear God’s image find acceptance with him.

Calvin’s understanding of the perpetual requirement of God’s law is apparent from his treatment of what he terms the “repugnance” (*repugnatio*) of law and the gospel in respect to the grace of free justification.⁶⁷ For Calvin, there is an insuperable contradiction between law and gospel when it comes to the question of the cause or ground of our justification. Since the law stipulates an “impossible condition for salvation,” it compels us to seek a righteousness apart from the law that alone can make us acceptable to God.⁶⁸ In order to emphasize this antithesis between the law and the gospel, Calvin speaks variously of the law as a “minister of death,”⁶⁹ as a “yoke” and a “burden,”⁷⁰ and as that which “kills” and “curses.”⁷¹ Due to the corruption of our nature through sin, the law serves only to heighten and intensify our awareness of condemnation

⁶⁴ Comm. Gen. 3:9 (CO 23.74-77).

⁶⁵ Comm. Gen. 1:26 (CO 23.25-27).

⁶⁶ One element that I have not considered is Calvin’s treatment of the “tree of life” as a kind of “sacrament” in the pre-lapsarian circumstance, a treatment that anticipates the position of the later federal theologians. See, e.g., Comm. Gen. 2:9 (CO 23.37-39); Comm. Gen. 3:22 (CO 23.949-50); and Lillback, *The Binding of God*, pp. 290-91. Lillback notes that Calvin even refers to the pre-lapsarian circumstance as a kind of “covenant” in the *Institutes* (IV.xiv.18 [OS 5.276]).

⁶⁷ Comm. Gal. 3:12 (CO 50.209). Cf. Comm. Acts 15:11 (CO 48.351); Comm. Gal. 3:11 (CO 50.208).

⁶⁸ II.vii.5 (OS 3.330); Com. Gal. 2:16 (CO 50.196); Com. 1 Thess. 5:19 (CO 52.175-6); II.v.9 (OS 3.307); II.v.12 (OS 3.312). This righteousness which is impossible for us to attain, has been manifested in Christ’s obedience and atoning sacrifice accomplished in our place.

⁶⁹ Com. Gen. 11:16 (CO 23.45); Com. *Harm. Moses, Finis et Usus Legis* (CO 24.26); Com. Jer. 31:31 (CO 38.690); Com. Ezek. 20.11 (CO 40.482-3).

⁷⁰ Com. Gal. 2:12 (CO 50.192).

⁷¹ Com. 2 Cor. 3:7 (CO 50.41-2) Gal. 3:10 (CO 50.208)

and death. Though the law was originally given as a pattern of righteousness that leads to life, the reality of sin and disobedience means that it has become a "perpetual and inevitable accident (*accidens*) of the law" to kill and to curse.⁷² Though this is not the principal purpose of the law, and though our own corruption causes the law to obtain this function, this "accidental" ministry of the law has now been perpetually and inseparably joined to it.⁷³ In his commentary on Romans 7:10, Calvin notes the significance this function of the law has in relation to the gospel.

Paul states two things here: (1) The commandment shows us the way of life in the righteousness of God, and was given in order that we might obtain eternal life by observing the law of the Lord, unless prevented by the corruption which is in all of us. (2) None of us, however, obeys the law; rather, we plunge head over heels into the course of life from which the law recalls us. The law, therefore, can bring us nothing but death. We need to make this distinction between the nature of the law and our own wickedness. It follows from this that it is an accident that the law inflicts a mortal wound on us, just as if an incurable disease were rendered more acute by a healing remedy. The accident, I admit, is inseparable from the law, and for this reason the law, as compared with the gospel, is elsewhere referred to as "the ministration of death." The point, however, holds good, that the law is not injurious to us by its own nature, but because our corruption provokes and draws upon us its curse.⁷⁴

However true it may be that the law is not evil or even principally a minister of death, it always compels us to search elsewhere for life and mercy than in the fulfillment of its requirements.

In his treatment of the law's requirement, it is of special importance that Calvin views the law, as was the case in the writings of the later "federal" theologians, to include a kind of covenant or promise to grant life to those who fulfill its requirements. In this feature of Calvin's understanding of the law, there are obvious similarities to the later covenant theology of Reformed orthodoxy, which emphasized the "stability" of God's law in the pre-lapsarian and post-lapsarian circumstances.⁷⁵ Calvin even employs language in his description of the law's requirement that suggest one of the principal features of the later federalism of the Reformed tradition. Because the law requires perfect obedience and promises life to those who fulfill its requirements, it reminds believers that in the post-lapsarian situation the only way to life and blessedness is through faith in Christ whose righteousness alone is the believer's righteousness before God. In his commentary on Romans 3:20, for ex-

⁷² Com. 2 Cor. 3:7 (CO 50.42): "Since the law abandons a man to himself it consigns him to inevitable death, while the gospel leads him to Christ and thus opens the gates of life. To kill is thus a perpetual and inevitable accident of the law...."

⁷³ See, e.g., Com. Acts 7:38 (CO 48.151); Com. 1 Cor. 15:57 (CO 49.565).

⁷⁴ Com. Rom. 7:10 (CO 49.126). Cf. Com. Gal. 3:10 (CO 50.208): "Hence we conclude that it is accidental that the law should curse, though at the same time perpetual and inseparable (Hinc colligimus, quod lex maledicit, esse accidentis, sed perpetua et inseparabilis)."

⁷⁵ On the significance of this emphasis upon the "stability" of the divine law for the development of federal theology in the Reformed tradition, see Richard Muller, "The Covenant of Works and the Stability of Divine Law in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy: A Study in the Theology of Herman Witsius and Wilhelmus À Brakel," *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (April 2004): 75-100.

ample, Calvin observes that “[t]he law is indeed by itself, as it teaches us what righteousness is, the way to salvation: but our depravity and corruption prevent it from being in this respect of any advantage to us.”⁷⁶ Similarly, in his comments on Romans 2:13, Calvin regards the requirement of obedience to the law for justification to stipulate a hypothetical, but unfulfilled, means to obtain righteousness and life: “The sense of this verse, therefore, is that if righteousness is sought by the law, the law must be fulfilled, for the righteousness of the law consists in the perfection of works.”⁷⁷ According to Calvin, the law’s requirement of perfect obedience is linked to a promise of life to all who meet this requirement. Calvin’s interpretation of two passages that played an important role in the development of the later doctrine of a covenant of works, Leviticus 18:5 and Habakkuk 2:4, are also instructive. Commenting on Leviticus 18:5, for example, Calvin observes, “Foolishly, then, do some reject as an absurdity the statement that if a man fulfills the Law he attains to righteousness; for the defect does not arise from the doctrine of the Law, but from the infirmity of men.... We must observe, however, that salvation is not to be expected from the Law unless its precepts be in every respect complied with; for life is not promised to one who shall have done this thing, or that thing, but by the plural word, full obedience is required of us.”⁷⁸ If Calvin’s comments in these passages on the connection between the law’s obligation and the promise of life are compared with those of the later Calvinists, there is no significant difference that would suggest any substantial discontinuity in viewpoint.

As we observed in our review of the neo-orthodox and Shepherd objections to the claim that Calvin anticipated the later doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s active obedience, a frequent theological objection is raised regarding this feature of the covenant of works. Since Calvin explicitly rejects any idea of “merit” in the relationship that obtains between human beings and God, whether in the pre- or the post-lapsarian circumstance, it is argued that his position is substantially at odds with the later federal theologians and their formulation of the covenant of works.⁷⁹ However, this objection rests upon the false assumption that the federal theology of Reformed orthodoxy taught an unqualified doctrine of human “merit” in the pre-lapsarian covenant relationship. Admittedly, the orthodox doctrine of a “covenant of works” emphasized that Adam’s obedience was the stipulated condition for his enjoyment of God’s favor and eternal life, and that his disobedience justly forfeited (demer-

⁷⁶ Comm. Rom. 3:20 (CO 49.57).

⁷⁷ Comm. Rom. 2:13 (CO 49.37).

⁷⁸ Comm. Lev. 18:5 (CO 25.7). Cf. Comm. Hab. 2:4 (CO 43.531): “[A]s to justification, the law accords not with the gospel any more than light with darkness: for the law promises life to those who serve God; and the promise is conditional, dependent on the merits of works. The gospel also does indeed promise righteousness under condition; but it has not respect to the merits of works. What then? It is only this, that they who are condemned and lost are to embrace the favor offered them in Christ.”

⁷⁹ For clear examples of Calvin’s repudiation of human “merit” before God in any circumstance, see, e.g., Comm. Gal. 3:17 (CO 49.213-14; Comm. Rom. 4:13 (CO 49.76-77). Cf. Lillback, *The Binding of God*, pp. 292-97. Interestingly, Calvin can speak broadly of “meritorious” works in connection with what he terms the “covenant of law” (Comm. Gen. 15:6 [CO 23.211-12]).

ited) God's favor. But the federal theologians of the orthodox period, even when they employed the language of "merit" in the pre-fall covenant context, typically recognized that this language is being used "improperly," and merely expressed the "connection" between God's covenant promise and the reward of eternal life. They acknowledged a kind of "covenantal merit" (*meritum ex pacto*) that accords with divine truth and justice, but ultimately originates with God's unmerited favor in conferring upon Adam a "right" to eternal life that surpasses anything he "deserved" as a creature in the presence of his Creator. Since God promises to bless human obedience to his will, God's bestowal or granting a blessing to Adam for obedience to his will is a matter of being true to his promise and therefore a matter of covenanted justice. In this understanding of the connection between Adam's obedience and the promised reward of eternal life, the Roman Catholic doctrine of "condign" and "congruent" merit is rejected.⁸⁰ Calvin's clear repudiation of the idea of "merit" in the relationship between human beings and God in the pre- and post-lapsarian circumstances does not require the conclusion, therefore, that his theology is substantially at odds with the more fulsome federal theology of later Calvinism.⁸¹

2.5.4. Christ's Entire Obedience as the Last Adam

Within the framework of his understanding of the obligation of perfect obedience to the law, which was the original requirement for human beings in Adam to obtain eternal life in fellowship with God, Calvin also emphasizes that Christ's work as Mediator includes the entirety of his obedience to the law. Christ's obedience as the Mediator does not simply qualify him as an innocent person who could suffer the penalty and curse of the law on behalf of his people. As a number of the references we have previously considered indicate, Christ's positive obedience to the law is also a necessary component of his saving righteousness. The following passage from the *Institutes* well illustrates this element of Calvin's understanding.

⁸⁰ In traditional Roman Catholic teaching, "condign" merit (*meritum de condigno*) is the intrinsic merit or worth of human obedience as it is prompted by God's grace and Spirit; "congruent" merit (*meritum de congruo*) is the "half-merit" of human works that receive a reward that exceeds their intrinsic worth. On this distinction, see Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 191-2; and s.v. "Merit," in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Karl Rahner (London: Search Press Limited, 1969), 4:11-14.

⁸¹ For classic Reformed treatments of this question, see Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1994), 2.710-23; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 2.569-71; and J. Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenant*, pp. 112-119, 140-142, 196-202, 326-328. The following observation of Turretin is of particular significance to an understanding of the later view of Reformed orthodoxy: "Hence also it appears that there is no merit properly so called of man before God, in whatever state he is placed. Thus Adam himself, if he had persevered, would not have merited life in strict justice, although (through a certain condescension [*synchatabasin*]) God promised him by a covenant life under the condition of perfect obedience (which is called meritorious from that covenant in a broader sense)" (2.712).

The second requirement of our reconciliation [in addition to the incarnation] with God was this: that man, who by his disobedience had become lost, should by way of remedy counter it with obedience, satisfy God's judgment, and pay the penalties for sin. Accordingly, our Lord came forth as true man and *took the person and the name of Adam in order to take Adam's place in obeying the Father*, to present our flesh as the price of satisfaction to God's righteous judgment, and in the same flesh, to pay the penalty that we had deserved.⁸²

In this passage, Calvin offers a clear statement of the parallel between Adam and Christ, which includes the idea that Christ was obliged in his office as Mediator to fulfill all of the requirements of obedience to God's law in order to restore believers to fellowship with God. These obligations include not only the satisfaction of the penalty of the law ("passive" obedience), but also the satisfaction of the positive demands of the law ("active" obedience). Furthermore, Christ's obedience in its entirety is viewed as the obedience of a substitute and representative, and therefore is savingly beneficial to those on whose behalf he offers such obedience to the Father.

Our survey of these components of Calvin's teaching suggest that the essential elements of the later Calvinist doctrine of a pre-lapsarian "covenant of works" are present in his theology. Though these elements are not theologically formulated in the form of an explicit two-covenant theology, it is evident that Calvin views Christ's obedience in its entirety to be performed vicariously on behalf of his people and to be a fulfillment in their place of all the requirements of the law of God. These requirements include not only the positive obligations of the law but also the penalty due to those who transgress the law's stipulations. Through faith believers participate fully in the righteousness of Christ, which consists in his entire obedience under the law as Mediator and Surety.

3. Concluding Observations

In my introduction to this article, I observed that the question of continuity and discontinuity between Calvin's theology and that of later Calvinists has played a prominent role in the interpretation of Calvin's theology. Though this question is unavoidable in any study of the history of doctrine, it has especially marked the study of the history of the Reformed theological tradition after Calvin. The focus of my interest in this article has been one example of the debate regarding the continuity between the views of later Calvinists and Calvin himself, namely, whether Calvin anticipated or taught the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's "active" and "passive" obedience for the free justification of believers. This particular example of the debate regarding continuity and discontinuity between Calvin and the Calvinists has played an important role in the earlier and in more recent literature on Calvin's theology, but it has thus far remained a subject of continued dispute. Upon the basis of the evi-

⁸² Institutes, II.xii.3 (OS 3.439-40, emphasis mine).

dence that I have adduced from Calvin's writings, several concluding observations regarding this dispute are warranted.

First, it has to be acknowledged that there is a considerable danger of "anachronism" in the way our question has often been posed. There is no evidence in Calvin's writings, at least none that I have been able to discover, that indicates a clearly articulated distinction between what the later Calvinists termed Christ's "active" and "passive" obedience. Undoubtedly, Calvin affirms the doctrine of Christ's perfect obedience to his Father's will and all the requirements of his holy law. That obedience includes both the aspects of active, voluntary submission to the law's requirements and of substitutionary endurance of the law's curse against all who transgress its requirements. But Calvin does not address explicitly the question of the imputation of Christ's "active" obedience as it was to be formulated in the later debates within the developing Calvinist tradition, especially under the pressure of Johannes Piscator's sustained opposition to the doctrine. When Calvin speaks of the "obedience" or the "righteousness" of Christ, he does not employ the careful distinctions of later Reformed scholasticism. For this reason, it is probably not permissible to assert without qualification that Calvin taught the imputation of Christ's "active" obedience for justification. But neither is it permissible to assert that Calvin did not teach the idea of the imputation of Christ's "active" obedience. Since the precise question and the theological vocabulary that accompanied it in the debates within later Calvinism were unknown to Calvin, it would be a case of "over-interpretation" to conclude categorically that Calvin affirmed or denied the doctrine, *as it was articulated in later Calvinism*. Consequently, the recent thesis of Heber Campos that it is "anachronistic" to draw Calvin into what is essentially a debate in later Calvinism on this particular doctrinal point, exhibits a modesty appropriate to historical study.

Second, though it may be anachronistic to say that Calvin expressly taught or denied the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active obedience, interpreters such as Campos tend to overlook or diminish elements of continuity between Calvin and the later Calvinists on this topic. It is certainly legitimate to ask whether the theological trajectory of his teaching is continuous or discontinuous with the later, more fully developed doctrine of the orthodox Reformed. In the early history of the debate within the Calvinist tradition on the imputation of Christ's active obedience, Calvin was often appealed to by figures on both sides of the debate. The same pattern can be discerned in more recent studies of Calvin. The history of interpretation shows that this is a key issue in the ongoing discussion of Calvin's relationship to theologians in the developing Reformed tradition of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Upon the basis of my analysis of Calvin's teaching on the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers, I believe there is significant evidence that he anticipates features of the later, more explicit formulations of orthodox Reformed theologians. The preponderance of the evidence argues for *continuity* rather than *discontinuity* between Calvin and the consensus of later Calvinists on the imputation of Christ's active obedience. Without falling prey to the charge of "anachronism," there is a substan-

tial body of evidence that would support the conclusion that Calvin *anticipates* the essential elements of the later, more explicit formulations of Calvinist orthodoxy on this issue. Or, to express the matter differently, Calvin does teach a doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness that includes what later writers distinguished into Christ's active and passive obedience.

And third, in my consideration of the evidence in Calvin's writings, I appealed to a diversity of sources and kinds of evidence that cumulatively support the conclusion that Calvin anticipates the main features of the later doctrine of the imputation of Christ's entire obedience. In Calvin's principal theological work, the *Institutes*, it is important to note that he distinguishes the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness as two indispensable components of the verdict of free justification. Furthermore, in Books II and III of the *Institutes*, Calvin formulates his understanding of the vicarious obedience and suffering of Christ in a way that includes both the dimensions of "active" and "passive" obedience, as this language was understood by later writers in the Reformed tradition. The context for Calvin's definition of justification in Chapter 11 of Book III compels the conclusion that he includes within the "imputation of Christ's righteousness" the entire curriculum of Christ's obedience under the law from his incarnation until his death upon the cross. Furthermore, in a number of passages in his commentaries and sermons, Calvin gives expression to a view of the imputed righteousness of Christ that wholly comports with the idea of the imputation of Christ's active obedience. Without utilizing the kind of language that was coined at a later stage in the development of the Reformed tradition, Calvin clearly affirms that, by virtue of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers, God regards them as if the entire obedience of Christ under the law had been performed by them.

Perhaps the most controversial piece of evidence in my survey of Calvin's writings is the claim that he sets forth the key components of the later "federal" theology's doctrine of a prelapsarian "covenant of works," and that this provides a framework for understanding the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active obedience for justification. The reason this piece of evidence is often regarded as controversial stems from the mistaken view that the later federal theology compromised Calvin's theology of grace by introducing an element of "legalism" into Reformed theology. Once this mistaken assumption is set aside, it becomes evident that the principal features of the later formulations of a prelapsarian covenant of works are present in Calvin's writings, even if in undeveloped and unsystematic form. These features include at least the following emphases: Adam's role as a "public" person by divine appointment, whose obedience or disobedience would implicate and involve him and all his posterity in consequences either for good or ill; the Augustinian view of the prelapsarian state as a state of mutable holiness and blessedness, which would only lead to immutable holiness and blessedness for Adam upon condition of personal and perfect obedience; the inviolable requirement of God's holy law for perfect obedience and its accompanying promise of eternal life to all who fulfill this requirement; and the office of Christ as

Mediator and last Adam who fulfilled all righteousness under the law in the entire course of his life and ministry, from incarnation until his death of the cross. Within the framework of these kinds of theological themes, Calvin articulates his doctrine of the perfect obedience and righteousness of Christ, which is imputed to believers for their justification and entitlement to eternal life in unbroken communion with God.

Without utilizing the language of later Calvinists, Calvin understood the righteousness of Christ, which is the sole basis for the believer's justification before God, to be a comprehensive righteousness. The entire obedience of Christ under the law is granted and imputed to believers, and upon this basis the verdict of justification amounts not only to the declaration of the forgiveness of sins but also of the believer's positive righteousness and holiness before God.⁸³

⁸³ One question that I have not addressed in this article is, Why didn't Calvin explicitly distinguish between Christ's "active" and "passive" obedience in his formulation of the imputation of Christ's righteousness for justification. Why does this distinction only appear later in the sixteenth century among Reformed theologians? Perhaps the absence of the distinction can be explained by the difference of historical context. Calvin formulated his doctrine of justification in opposition to the Roman Catholic Church, which viewed justification to include both the forgiveness of sins and the renewal of the faithful in the way of obedience. The polemics of later Calvinists regarding the imputation of "active" and "passive" obedience were addressed to a concern regarding the antinomian implications of the Reformed view. Piscator, for example, feared that the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active obedience would undercut the continued obligations of obedience to the law in the Christian life. Calvin, however, answered this alleged problem by means of his own doctrine of the "twofold grace" of God in justification and sanctification, which are inseparable benefits of the believer's union with Christ by faith.