

A Little Knowledge is a Dangerous Thing

Put a gun in the hands of a boy and teach him how to fire it without training him who or what to shoot at; you'll see readily enough that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

I was reminded of this when I read a report of a recent candidacy examination in the November 8 edition of *Christian Renewal*. The candidate was asked how Q&A 37 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* impinged on "current controversy." We are told that the candidate "affirmed the active obedience of Christ." "If you deny the active obedience of Christ... then it wouldn't have any redemptive purpose."

There is something of the proverb of "a little knowledge" regarding this exchange - and not only with regard to the candidate, but also his examiner.

First, Q&A 37 is referring to Christ's *suffering* - how He bore the wrath of God throughout His life, but especially at the end. *But that is not what is entailed in the active obedience of Christ; it is merely an extension of the passive obedience to the whole of Christ's life.* Thus the examiner errs in the way he leads the candidate in his line of questioning.

Second, nobody in the Reformed world, that I am aware of, denies "the active obedience of Christ." So there is a missing term here, which is presumably "the *imputation* of the active obedience of Christ." (See the RCUS resolution adopted at the same classis meeting: "That we affirm... the imputation of the active obedience of Christ as a necessary element in our righteousness before God.")

But then we must ask further: *What is meant* by affirming the imputation of the active obedience of Christ, and what would be meant by denying it (or some form of it)? If what we are talking about is the necessity of the sinless life of Jesus to qualify Him to be the spotless Lamb given as our sin offering, once again, nobody in the Reformed world, that I am aware of, denies this either. We are all agreed that Jesus never sinned, and that in no other way than His perfection could He have stood in our place and borne God's wrath as our substitute.

Thus, we must assume that unless both the questioner and the candidate are tilting at windmills - and the mention of "current controversy" indicates that they don't think so - something more is intended. Presumably, what is envisioned is something along these lines: "The imputation of Christ's acts of law-keeping in our place is a necessary component of the doctrine of justification."

There is indeed a little knowledge here - questioner and candidate are aware that some Reformed folk are denying that doctrine of the imputation of Christ's law-keeping. And they are aware that Christ lived an entire sinless life.

But this is a *little* knowledge, and it must be said that, of those under attack for denying the imputation of Christ's active obedience, most Reformed people I am aware of have a very robust view which gets at everything that doctrine is after, and more. I am referring to the view that when we are united to Christ, all that He is - His whole history and standing before God - become ours. In Scripture, the focus of this is Christ's death and resurrection (e.g. Romans 6), but we can also add that since we are clothed with Christ in baptism (Gal 3.27), the body of

Christ is collectively the one new Man (Gal 3.28), so that although Christ is the one Seed of Abraham (Gal 3.16), *we* become Abraham's seed, because we are Christ's (Gal 3.29).

And yet, despite the biblical character and apparently comprehensive extent of that view, some people are *still* not satisfied. Union with Christ, no matter how richly we view it, we are told, is no substitute for an apparently independent notion of Christ's (meritorious) law-keeping being imputed to us. And if we refuse to dot the "i" in that way, we can expect to be fired at like so many discarded tin cans.

In view of this, I wish to offer three theses here for the reader's consideration:

- 1) The text of Scripture never says that Christ's discrete acts of law-keeping are somehow directly imputed to us;
- 2) The biblical mechanism of justification is constructed from two integral components: Christ's death and resurrection; and
- 3) The biblical view of Christ's life is much richer and fuller than a notion of the imputation of His law-keeping.

Let's unpack these for a moment.

1. The text of Scripture never says that Christ's discrete acts of law-keeping are somehow directly imputed to us.

Neither the Gospels nor Paul's letters, nor any other biblical text, are concerned to focus upon the law-keeping of Jesus as the key to His sinlessness - still less to articulate a doctrine of imputation regarding that law-keeping.

This is not to say that no biblical texts get appealed to; by far the favourite go-to text is Romans 5.19, which tells us, "As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made [constituted] righteous."

However, this passage is not talking about law-keeping at all. In fact, it is not referring to the obedience of Jesus' entire life, whether construed as passive *or* active. We know this, because the previous verse defines this obedience as *the one Man's righteous act* (singular). And although some try the unlikely route of stretching that singular act to refer to Christ's whole life, the context does not leave this option open to us. We have already been told that we have been "justified by His blood" (5.9) and that we were "reconciled to God through the death of His Son" (5.10). And although 5.10 adds that we "shall be saved by His life," the parallel to 4.25, the chronology, and the future tense all indicate that this is a reference to Christ's *resurrection*, rather than to His pre-Passion obedience.

Equally telling, in this passage, *Christ's* one act of *obedience* is set over against *Adam's* one act of *disobedience*. Adam's disobedience was not a lifelong series of events, but a *singular rebellion* at the tree, and the only natural reading of Romans 5 is to understand it to be referring to Christ's one act of obedience in offering Himself for us upon the tree. Romans 5 does not teach the imputation of Christ's active obedience. (Nor, for that matter, does 2 Cor 5.21, which teaches that it was the fact of Christ's becoming sin - or a sin offering - for us that enabled us to become the righteousness of God in Him. Meaning: it was *Christ's death*, not His law-keeping,

that procured our new righteous identity, assuming the traditional reading here of “the righteousness of God.”)

2) *The biblical mechanism of justification is constructed from two integral components: Christ’s death and resurrection.*

Paul has provided this twofold view in the prior context of the passage we have just looked at. Faith is accounted for righteousness to those who believe in the God who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, “who was handed over on account of our transgressions, and was raised on account of our justification” (Rom 4.25).

The integral character of Christ’s resurrection in justification is clearly implied in 1 Corinthians 15.17, as well: “if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!”

What then is the relationship between these poles of Christ’s death, His resurrection, and our justification? What we learn throughout Paul’s letters, in particular, is that we are justified *in Christ*. Righteousness and sanctification and redemption are all in Him, as the apostle writes in 1 Cor 1.30. (Paul himself is picking up on the earlier biblical theme of Isaiah 45.25, where Yahweh says that justification is in Himself.) Christ dies under judgment as our sin offering; His resurrection is His own justification or vindication (cf. 1 Tim 3.16). That justification becomes ours because we are united to the Just One, our Lord Jesus. *There is no justification apart from resurrection, for resurrection is the enacted verdict of God the Judge.*

It is surely instructive that so many of our defenders of the faith (with the notable exception of Richard Gaffin and those schooled by his careful work on the redemptive significance of Christ’s resurrection) are virtually silent on what Scripture explicitly identifies as a component in our justification, while shooting at people for not affirming a matter on which it is Scripture itself that is silent. This is theology trumping the Bible.

3) *The biblical view of Christ’s life is much richer and fuller than a notion of the imputation of His law-keeping.*

What then of the assertion of our candidate, who apparently believes that Christ’s life would have no redemptive purpose if there is no imputation of His active obedience? Such a position entails a fundamental misreading of the actual evidence we have of Christ’s life; it also entails a truncation of how Christ viewed His own life.

Were the imputation of Christ’s active obedience (read here as “law-keeping”) such an important strand in the gospel of grace, we should expect to find that there would be a proliferation of stories in the Gospels, showing how He kept the law in its sundry aspects. But in truth, the Gospels take on a very different character altogether. They lead us through symbolic reenactments of history, such as the baptism in the Jordan, which echoes the water crossings of the Old Testament. And they tell us a great deal about Jesus’ activity in healing and even exorcism - but these are not law-keeping concerns (indeed, many of these too are reenactments of history - such as parallels between Jesus’ food miracles and that of Elisha).

Quite to the contrary, we find Jesus coming into direct conflict with the Sabbath law by allowing His disciples to pluck heads of grain on the Sabbath (Mk 2.23-28). This is not, as is so often claimed, a “work of necessity;” the law required that planning for the Sabbath be made ahead of time, so that even gathering manna on the seventh day was unlawful. And tellingly, Jesus’

self-defense is not that the activity of His disciples was legally allowable, but that *He was greater than the Sabbath*.

It is true that Jesus said He came “to fulfill the law” (Mt 5.17). But *law* in this instance refers not narrowly to commandments; in this verse, it is placed in parallel to “the prophets,” and the two together refer to the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures. Moreover, “fulfill” never means “keep” or “obey,” or even “confirm;” at its most basic, it means “fill.” The law and the prophets - that is, the whole Old Testament - is fulfilled *in* Christ, who takes up the whole history of God’s dealings with man into Himself. Christ’s fulfilling of the law isn’t a mere substitutionary obedience that we couldn’t accomplish; rather, it entails the reality that He is that which the law could never be; He is the goal toward which the law points (see e.g. Rom 10.4). He is in fact the embodiment of the whole Word of Scripture; the dual uses of “Word” to refer to the Scriptures and to Jesus is no mere verbal accident but a fundamental indicator of the dynamic relationship between Jesus as the eternal Voice of God, the Word He has spoken to Israel, and His history as the One who becomes flesh. As with each of us, He is the embodiment of His own speech.

This is why we find so much typology in the Gospels; repeatedly we discover that Jesus is the new and full Adam, the new and full Abraham, the new and full David, the new and full Moses, and the new and full Israel. Indeed, He is the representative and Head of creation itself.

In view of this, of course, we do indeed have a very strong biblical theology of the redemptive purpose of Christ’s life, and it is much larger than a notion of the imputation of Christ’s law-keeping to our individual account books. The redemptive significance of Christ’s life means that He has wholly fulfilled what it means to be human; indeed, He has fulfilled history itself within His own life, as He has gone from new creation through final judgment and on into resurrection. It is hard to imagine a greater redemptive theme than this, which culminates in the very redemption of the body for which we also long (Rom 8.23).

The point of this little exercise is to remind us that it is easy indeed to go around shooting people. It is far more work to understand both them and the biblical text that we are charged to preach faithfully. There is far too much of the former in these days; the air is filled with ill-informed accusations of the brethren. Let this little piece be seen as a plea for 1) more considered judgment; 2) an improved pursuit of knowledge that doesn’t settle for simplistic exegesis, easy targets and catch-phrases; and 3) a great deal more charity.