

NO HOPE WITHOUT IT?: RECONSIDERING THE ACTIVE OBEDIENCE OF CHRIST ROMANS 5:18–21

INTRODUCTION

On the day before his death on **1 January 1937**, **J. Gresham Machen**, the Presbyterian theologian and founder of Westminster Theological Seminary, sent a famous message to his fellow New Testament theologian **John Murray**—

*“I’m so thankful for the active obedience of Christ; no hope without it.”*¹

What exactly is “the active obedience of Christ,” and is it true that there is no hope without it?

We should most certainly be able to answer because—according to one scholar—this is precisely what is missing from the evangelical gospel today.²

But is that claim correct? Is the doctrine of active obedience an essential part of the gospel so that without it, the message is not only deficient but hopeless?

In other words, is that what makes the “good news” good?

¹ Andrew David Naselli, “The Righteous God Righteously Righteouses the Unrighteous: Justification according to Romans,” in *The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls: Justification in Biblical, Theological, Historical, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 236.

² Peter Sammons, *What’s Missing from the Evangelical Gospel? Introducing Imputationists* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2026).

At the heart of the matter is our understanding of how the Law relates to the gospel.

Specifically, it is about how we understand justification and the role of the Law in the imputation of righteousness to a believer.

Whether or not it is right to claim that the active obedience of Christ is essential to the gospel and foundational to our hope, one thing is certain—

Since the doctrine of justification is the heart of the gospel message, we must find clarity on the matter.

So, again, what is the active obedience of Christ?

In the words of **one proponent**—

*“It’s best understood as the meritorious righteousness of Christ, which is his obedience to the law of God, imputed to the elect, through faith, as the basis of their justification before God.”*³

That is a fair definition, but we can think of it in simpler terms as “all that Christ did to observe the law” as our representative head.⁴

Advocates of the doctrine believe that Christ had to come as the Second Adam to perfectly keep the law so that He could reverse the first Adam’s failure to do so.

³ Peter Sammons, *What’s Missing from the Evangelical Gospel? Introducing Imputationists* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2026), 230.

⁴ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans publishing co., 1938), 380.

In other words, the doctrine of active obedience presents Christ's life as one of “vicarious law keeping”—

Jesus perfectly obeyed the Law on our behalf in order to impute that righteousness of the Law to our account.

That is why **Geerhardus Vos**, a professor of biblical theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, once remarked that,

*“the blood Jesus shed in his circumcision is no less atoning than the blood he shed at Calvary.”*⁵

This is the sermon in which we wade into the waters of some of some of the most controversial doctrines that Paul addresses in **Romans 5**.

It is important for us to confront these controversial doctrines not only in our pursuit of biblical truth, but also because as all sides in the debate agree, we are dealing with matters that are essential to the gospel.

Therefore, as we tackle the doctrine of the active obedience of Christ, we are doing so in order to refine and clarify our understanding of the good news of our salvation.

⁵ Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., vol. 3 (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012–2016), 192.

PROPOSITION

As we ask whether there is really no hope without the active obedience of Christ, we will reconsider this doctrine with a simple outline of three questions:

1. **Where does this idea come from?**
2. **What does the Bible say?**
3. **Why does this matter?**

1. WHERE DOES THIS IDEA COME FROM?

As we begin with this question, we're asking a question of historical theology.

That is, we're asking how the doctrine developed over the course of church history.

As we look back over 2000 years of church history, we find that the idea of active obedience or vicarious Law keeping is absent from the writings of the church prior to the Reformation.⁶

During the early church and the medieval period, the doctrine of justification focused overwhelmingly on Christ's death and blood.

⁶ See Jesse Randolph, "The Lamb and the Law: A Historical, Biblical, and Theological Assessment of the Doctrine of the Imputation of the Active Obedience of Christ" (ThM thesis, Shepherds Theological Seminary, 2026).

There is no clear articulation of the doctrine of active obedience in the writings of the apostolic fathers, the apologists like Justin Martyr, or theologians like Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, Athanasius, or Augustine.

As we come to the Reformation, we see that the two leading figures of Luther and Calvin strongly affirmed the imputation of Christ's righteousness as a righteousness outside of us.

However, neither clearly articulates the doctrine of active obedience or grounds justification in Christ's active Law-keeping in the way later Reformed theology does.

Calvin does, admittedly, come close when he wrote in his Institutes—

“How has Christ abolished sin, banished the separation between us and God, and acquired righteousness to render God favourable 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.... 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.”⁷

However, while Luther and Calvin's writings contained traces of what would later be described and defined as the imputation of the active obedience of Christ,

it was not until the post-reformation development of covenant theology that we find the doctrine expressly articulated.

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1 & 2, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 507.

This already should give us pause as we ask whether there is truly no hope without this doctrine.

Firstly, it should give us pause as we note that the idea—in any form—was absent from any theological writings within the church prior to the Reformation.

Second, it should give us pause as we consider the doctrine's dependence upon a theological system instead of the text of Scripture.

In this case, the active obedience of Christ is Reformed covenant theology.

If the idea comes from a theological system that we impose on the text rather than from our exegesis of Scripture itself then we can hardly refer to it as a biblical doctrine,
let alone an essential component of the gospel.

So what is “covenant theology” and how did it lead to the idea of the active obedience of Christ?

Fundamentally, covenant theology teaches that we should read the Bible in the light of two great theological covenants—the “covenant of works” and the “covenant of grace.”

The covenant of works was made with Adam before the fall.

Under this covenant, a person acquires righteousness by doing good works—more specifically, by perfect obedience to God.

Adam sinned, and so failed to uphold the covenant of works.⁸

The covenant of grace is the overarching covenant that promises salvation to people by faith and obedience.

It encompasses the Noahic, Abrahamic, old (or Mosaic), Davidic, and new covenants.⁹

The trouble is, you will search your Bible in vain to find any mention of either a covenant of works or a covenant of grace.

That is because they are “theological covenants.”

Theological covenants are distinct from biblical covenants in that they represent a systematic framework rather than specific, historical agreements recorded in Scripture.

In other words, theological covenants function as organising principles that structure the way we understand Scripture.

Indeed, as even Reformed theologians **Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley** concede, covenant theology is, fundamentally, a system of Bible interpretation.

⁸ Duane A. Garrett, *The Problem of the Old Testament: Hermeneutical, Schematic & Theological Approaches* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2020), 114.

⁹ Gregg R. Allison, “Covenant Theology,” in *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 54.

As they write, *“Covenant theology, when done rightly, provides a sensitive hermeneutic for discovering how all Scripture is profitable for teaching and training God’s people today.”*¹⁰

It is from this system of covenant theology that arose after the Reformation and it’s theological construct of a “covenant of works” that the doctrine of the active obedience of Christ arose.¹¹

Active obedience emerged as a natural outworking of covenant theology since it teaches that the only way for a human being to gain eternal life is to perfectly keep the covenant of works as formulated into law.¹²

As **Charles Hodge** declares, *“The law demands, and from the nature of God, must demand perfect obedience.... No man since the fall is able to fulfil these demands, yet He must fulfil them or perish.”*¹³

This is why covenant theology emphasises the idea of vicarious law keeping.

That is, it teaches that salvation comes through Christ keeping the Law perfectly on our behalf.

¹⁰ Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, Revelation and God (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 111.

¹¹ Randolph, “The Lamb and the Law,” 31.

¹² Larry Pettegrew, *Forsaking Israel: How It Happened and Why It Matters* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress, 2020), 182.

¹³ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 517.

Covenant theology teaches that Christ earned extra righteousness by keeping the covenant of works and the Law which could then be imputed, or transferred, to our account.

As **Larry Pettegrew** helpfully explains—

*“For covenantalism, there is a sort of Protestant ‘treasury of merit,’ so to speak, containing the infinite righteousness that Christ earned by keeping the covenant of works, not for Himself, but for others. God withdraws from this infinite ‘treasury of righteousness,’ when He justifies the repentant sinner.”*¹⁴

But is that what the Bible teaches?

2. WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

As much as what theologians may declare that there is “no hope without” the active obedience of Christ, the most important question is whether or not this doctrine is found in Scripture.

So what does the Bible say?

In order to answer this, we’ll consider the theology of three of authors of Scripture—Moses, Matthew, and Paul.

¹⁴ Pettegrew, *Forsaking Israel*, 184–185.

a. Moses

What does Moses say about the function of the Law, and how does that help us evaluate the doctrine of Christ's vicarious Law keeping?

Let's consider the giving of the Ten Commandments as a summary of the entire Mosaic Law.

Exodus 19:3-6—

³ Now Moses went up to God, and Yahweh called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel:

⁴ 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I lifted you up on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself.

⁵ So now then, if you will indeed listen to My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine;

⁶ and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel."

Exodus 20:1-3—

¹ Then God spoke all these words, saying,

² "I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

³ "You shall have no other gods before Me.

As we see clearly in these texts, the Mosaic Law functioned fundamentally as a gracious response to redemption rather than as a means of earning salvation.

Moses consistently taught Israel that “obedience to the law was not a means for gaining salvation but a willing and grateful response to salvation already received.”¹⁵

As **Daniel Block** put it well—

“The laws provided a way of saying ‘thank you’ to God for the deliverance he gave them in the Exodus, for the delight of being his covenant people, for the privilege of receiving the Promised Land as his gift.

The revelation of the Law was a supreme act of grace preceded and superseded only by the experience of the Exodus itself.”¹⁶

Therefore, Moses denied that the Law ever functioned as a means of earning salvation.

We should not think, then, that the Law was God’s appointed way of becoming right with Him if only someone could obey it perfectly.

b. Matthew

There is a strong continuity between Moses and Matthew since he was specifically concerned with explaining the gospel of Jesus Christ to his Jewish readers.

There are two key texts that are often used by proponents of active obedience—Matthew 3:15 and Matthew 5:17.

¹⁵ Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 26.

¹⁶ Daniel I. Block, *How I Love Your Torah, O Lord!: Studies in the Book of Deuteronomy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 13.

First, **Matthew 3:15**—

¹⁵ **But Jesus answered and said to him, “Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.”**

This text comes in the context of Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist.

Those who hold to the doctrine of active obedience often suggest that Christ underwent this baptism of repentance not as a matter of necessity (since He had no sin), but Rather as a matter of His commitment to perfectly keeping the Law.

To “**fulfil all righteousness**,” in other words, meant to keep the Law, so that the merits of doing so could be imputed to believers in their justification.

As **R. C. Sproul** wrote—

“The bottom line is that Jesus’ life of perfect obedience was just as necessary for our salvation as His perfect atonement on the cross.... To fulfil all the law, Jesus had to submit to baptism.”¹⁷

As compelling as what that idea may sound, it suffers from a fatal flaw—the Law did not require baptism so Jesus was not obeying the Law by getting baptised.

¹⁷ R. C. Sproul, *The Work of Christ: What the Events of Jesus’ Life Mean for You* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2012).

In the words of **one author**—

“Some commentators hold that the baptism of Christ fulfilled all righteousness in that it indicated His submission to the law of Moses... This has the serious difficulty of uniting John’s baptism with the law.

Since John’s baptism was new, it would be chronologically impossible for his baptism to be a fulfilment of the requirements of the law. There is not direct connection between John’s baptism and the law.”¹⁸

But what then did Matthew mean that Jesus was baptised in order to “fulfil all righteousness”?

While there are a number of interpretations that are suggested, the simplest and most compelling is that “because God had led John to baptise, it was proper for Christ to receive the ordinance” of baptism from John.¹⁹

In other words, as one commentator put it, “It was proper for all devout Jews to be baptised; therefore it was proper for Jesus.”²⁰

That is, Jesus “fulfilled all righteousness” by demonstrating His overall willingness to do the will of God.

¹⁸ Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1980), 72.

¹⁹ Ibid., 72-73.

²⁰ John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, American Commentary on the New Testament (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886), 56.

So Matthew's record of Jesus' baptism simply does not support that idea of Jesus keeping the Law on our behalf so that it can be imputed to our account.

Second, Matthew 5:17—

¹⁷ **“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfil.”**

This is a critical statement from Jesus in His sermon on the mount.

However, this important concept of Jesus fulfilling the Law and the Prophets is frequently misunderstood, especially by those who advocate for active obedience.

According to these theologians, Jesus is referring to His intention to fulfil all the obligations of the Law so that this righteousness will be imputed to us in justification.

Indeed, there is no denying that Christ did obey the Law, and that His obedience to the Law was necessary to qualify Him as a perfect and spotless Lamb.

However, Jesus' words had nothing to do with Him meeting the demands of the Law, nor with Him perfectly obeying the Law as part of the “covenant of works.”

In short, Jesus is not referring to the basis of the believer's justification.

Rather, as **one author** explained, “*Jesus is claiming that He brings the law and the prophets to their intended consummation.*”²¹

We can state this with confidence for **two reasons**.

First, as we notice, Jesus does not single out the Law by itself.

Instead, He refers to His fulfilment of both the Law and the Prophets, which was a common way for a Hebrew to refer to the entire Old Testament.

Second, Jesus explains what He means in the very next verse.

Matthew 5:18—

¹⁸ **For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.**

Quite simply, Jesus parallels the idea of fulfilling the Old Testament with accomplishing the Old Testament.

As **Michael Vlach** explains—

“Jesus declares that His ministry is perfectly harmonious with the entire Hebrew Scriptures. Not only does Jesus not discard any of the Old Testament, but He makes sure everything in them happens. This includes messianic prophecies about Himself....

[PTO]

²¹ Ken Casillas, *The Law and the Christian: God's Light within God's Limits* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2007), 58.

Understanding what Jesus means by “fulfil” is important. Jesus does not make the details of the Old Testament vanish into His person. Nor does He transform the Old Testament. Instead, Jesus is the means for the literal fulfilment of the Old Testament. This includes the Old Testament’s teaching that the Messiah will bring a New Covenant that supersedes the older Mosaic Covenant.”²²

To put it simply, Jesus is not referring to the obligations of the Law but to the prophecies of the Old Testament.

Considering both **Matthew 3:15 and 5:17**—

two texts that active obedience theologians insist clearly and explicitly teach Jesus’ vicarious law keeping—
we find that neither text supports the idea that Jesus’ obedience under the Law was imputed to us in justification.

c. Paul

Paul is the most important theologian for those arguing for the active obedience of Christ, and yet, as we’ll see,

Paul’s theology directly contradicts the doctrine.

First, let’s consider **2 Corinthians 5:21**—

²¹ **He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.**

²² Michael J. Vlach, *The New Covenant Lawgiver: Jesus and Law in Matthew 5:17–48* (Theological Studies Press, 2022), 61.

This verse is often emphasised in the debate as, for instance, **one theologian** writes that this passage is “*a perpetual centrepiece in the discussion of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness,*” and “*among the cardinal texts in this debate.*”²³

As the verse begins, Paul asserts that Jesus “**knew no sin.**”

This is Paul’s highly condensed way of referring to Christ’s sinless perfection.

Indeed, we do not deny that in any way, since it is the basis for the claim in **1 Peter 1:19** that we are redeemed—

¹⁹ **with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.**

Next, Paul says that Jesus was made “**to be sin on our behalf.**”

To be clear, that does not mean that the Father made the Son sinful, since Paul has already clarified Jesus’ sinless perfection.

Rather, as **one commentator** explains, what “**sin**” means here is “*guilt, penalty, and shame. By imputing this to Christ, God could avoid imputing it to sinners. This cleared the way for God to impute His righteousness to us, a righteousness that is perfect and ensures our approval with God.*”²⁴

²³ Brian Vickers, *Jesus’ Blood and Righteousness: Paul’s Theology of Imputation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 159.

²⁴ Homer A. Kent, *A Heart Opened Wide: Studies in 2 Corinthians* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1982), 88-89.

Finally, Paul writes that the Father did this so that “**we might become the righteousness of God in Him [Christ].**”

Here Paul is plainly teaching the doctrine of justification whereby a righteousness that is not our own is imputed to us through faith alone.

What is essential for us to take note of, and what is detrimental to the idea of active obedience, is that Paul does refer to Christ's perfect obedience under the convent of works, nor His Law-keeping merit.

In fact, Paul does not even refer to the righteousness that is imputed to believers as “**the righteousness of Christ.**”

Instead, he writes of “**the righteousness of God in [Christ].**”

In terms of trinitarian theology, we understand that the righteousness of God is one that belongs to Christ too in His divine nature as a member of the Trinity.

But if Paul wanted to speak of the righteous merit that Christ earned under the Law as a perfect man, then he would have to specify that it is the “**righteousness of Christ.**”

As **Jesse Randolph** argues—

“Contextually and grammatically, the import of 2 Corinthians 5:21 is that it is through Christ's death—not His life of perfect Law-keeping—that the believer is made to be the righteousness of God.”²⁵

²⁵ Randolph, “The Lamb and the Law,” 72.

In other words, Paul does not affirm the doctrine of vicarious law keeping, or active obedience, in **2 Corinthians 5:21**.

In fact, Paul's argument stands opposed to the doctrine as it affirms the centrality of Jesus' death on the cross, not His obedience to the Law.

Second, this brings us back to the text that we have recently studied—**Romans 5:18-21**—

18 So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men.

19 For as through the one man's disobedience the many were appointed sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be appointed righteous.

20 Now the Law came in so that the transgression would increase, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,

21 so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

What was this “**one act of righteousness**”?

It is critical to note that Paul does not refer to Christ's perfect life of righteousness,

though He certainly did live a life of sinless perfection.

Rather, as we learnt two Sundays ago,

Paul refers to a singular “**act of righteousness**” by which he is clearly thinking of a **single manifestation of Christ's obedience to His Father**.

Simply, Paul is referring to **Christ's obedience to the Father's will to die on a Roman cross**.²⁶

As Paul wrote in **Philippians 2:8**—

⁸ Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

It was this single act of obedience that was the basis of our justification.

Furthermore, as we learnt this past Sunday, the Law is powerless to provide you with righteousness.

The Law is effective at revealing God's requirement of righteousness, but it is utterly ineffective at giving His people a right standing before Him.

The reason why the Law is unable to save you from sin and make you right with God is that God never intended it to.

The Law is not God's solution to our problem of Adam's headship.

God's purpose in giving Israel the Law was to point to grace as His solution to sin and death.

Therefore, God never gave the Law the power to justify anyone, as Paul wrote plainly to both the Roman and Galatian churches—**no one is justified by the Law before God.**

²⁶ Moo, *Romans*, 184. See also, Schreiner, *Romans*, 292.

Here's the critical point—that includes Jesus Christ.

So as we consider Moses, Matthew, and Paul together, we find that the theology of these three men as they articulate it in their writings **does not support the doctrine of active obedience.**

It is, therefore, false to claim as **Geerhardus Vos** did, that—
*“the blood Jesus shed in his circumcision is no less atoning than the blood he shed at Calvary.”*²⁷

Moreover, as much as what Machen may have believed that there is no hope without the active obedience of Christ, that is a conviction that was not shared by Moses, Matthew, or Paul.

To put it simply and plainly, the Bible does not teach that Christ's obedience to the Law is the basis of our justification.

As **Jesse Randolph** contends—

“Though the believer in Christ ought to recognise and be grateful for Christ's perfect life (through which He qualified Himself as the perfect and spotless Lamb, 1 Peter 1:18-19), the reality is that it is through His death on the cross that His innate righteousness is imputed to those who place their faith in Him.”

That may be, but what does this matter?

²⁷ Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., vol. 3 (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012–2016), 192.

3. WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

First, this matters because it affects the way we interpret the Scriptures and do the work of theology.

Second, this matters because it affects how we understand that purpose and function of the Law.

Third, this matters because it affects how we understand the gospel.

CONCLUSION

Machen may have been “so thankful for the active obedience of Christ,” believing that there is “no hope without it,”
but we find a better hope in the death of Christ on the cross.

As we sing in the hymn, ***Nothing but the Blood***—

1. What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Oh! precious is the flow
That makes me white as snow;
No other fount I know,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

2. For my pardon, this I see,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
For my cleansing, this my plea,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

3. Nothing can for sin atone,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
Naught of good that I have done,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

4. This is all my hope and peace,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
This is all my righteousness,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

BENEDICTION

Hebrews 13:20-21

²⁰ Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, our Lord Jesus,
²¹ equip you in every good thing to do His will, by doing in us what is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.