



# Covenant and Commandment: Works, Obedience, and Faithfulness in the Christian Life

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NSBT NEW STUDIES IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

# Covenant and Commandment

Works, obedience and faithfulness  
in the Christian life



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What is the actual issue?

If we are justified by faith alone apart from works, is there any meaningful way in which we can affirm the importance or even “necessity” of works in the Christian life?



G.C. Berkouwer:

‘One who has pondered the far-reaching significance of the “sola-fide” doctrine—justification by faith alone—is immediately faced with the question of whether this cardinal concept does not make all further discussion superfluous.’

*Faith and Sanctification*, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 17.



## Henri Blocher

What a paradox! The law, which focuses on holy obedience is unable to secure that obedience, it is powerless as regards sanctification just as it is for justification – but faith that justifies without works makes sanctification possible and actual!”

Henri Blocher, “Sanctification by Faith,” 12

# A Very Brief Summary of Justification

We are justified by faith alone in Christ Jesus and his work for us.

- The agent of justification: the *one* who justifies: God (Rom. 4:4-5)
- The grounds of justification: What Christ has done for us—climaxing in his death on the cross. (Rom. 5:9-19)
- The means of justification: Faith (Gal. 2:15-16; Phil. 3:8-9)
- The nature of justification: forensic, legal, declarative, once-for-all (Rom. 3:21-26)

# A Very Brief Summary of Justification

## Key Texts:

- Romans 3:21-26
- Romans 4:1-5
- Romans 5:9-10
- Galatians 2:15-16
- Philippians 3:8-9

# A Very Brief Summary of Justification

## Key Texts:

Proverbs 17:15

He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD.

Romans 4:4-5

<sup>4</sup> Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. <sup>5</sup> And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, . . .



# Ways in Which the New Testament Speaks of the Importance of Works, Obedience, and Faithfulness

(1) loving or knowing God is linked with obedience	Jn. 14:15, 21, 23; 15:10; 1 Jn. 2:3-6; 3:22, 24; 5:3; 2 Jn. 6; Rev. 12:17; 14:12
(2) the 'conditional' nature of our future salvation	Rom. 11:22; 1 Cor. 15:2; Heb. 3:6; 3:14; 4:14
(3) Christians must 'overcome' if they are to be saved ultimately	Heb. 10:38-39; Rev 2:7, 11; 3:5; 3:12, 3:21; 21:7
(4) the necessity of a great righteousness	Matt. 5:20
(5) the requirement of the law being met 'in us'	Rom. 8:3-4
(6) God will efficaciously work 'in' us, moving us to obey Him	Phil. 2:12-13
(7) the necessity of putting to death the old man, by the power of the Spirit	Rom. 8:13-14
(8) 'faith' and 'obedience/works' used as virtual synonyms	Rev. 12:17; 14:12; cf. Rev. 6:9; 2 Thess. 1:8; 1 Pt. 4:17
(9) we are truly judged, or justified, according to works	Rom. 2:6, 13; cf. Matt. 7:21, 25; Jam. 1:22-25
(10) the 'obedience of faith'	Rom. 1:5; 16:26; Acts 6:7
(11) we were created and redeemed for good works	Eph. 2:10; 2 Cor. 9:8; Tit. 2:14 (cf. 11-12)
(12) faith working through love	Gal. 5:6
(13) the law is affirmed; the law of Christ	Gal. 6:2; 1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 5:14; Rom. 13:9
(14) Persons do the works of their Father	Jn. 8:39

# Necessity of Works, Obedience, and Faithfulness in the New Testament?

(1) Loving or knowing God is linked with obedience

John 14:15, 21, 23; 15:10;  
1 John 2:3–6; 3:22, 24;  
5:3; 2 John 6; Rev. 12:17;  
14:12

# Necessity of Works, Obedience, and Faithfulness in the New Testament?

(2) The 'conditional' nature of our future salvation

Rom. 11:22; 1 Cor. 15:2;  
Heb. 3:6, 14; 4:14

# Necessity of Works, Obedience, and Faithfulness in the New Testament?

(3) Christians must 'overcome' if they are ultimately to be saved

Heb. 10:38–39; Rev. 2:7, 11; 3:5, 12, 21; 21:7

# Necessity of Works, Obedience, and Faithfulness in the New Testament?

(4) The necessity of a great righteousness

Matt. 5:20

# Necessity of Works, Obedience, and Faithfulness in the New Testament?

(5) The requirement of the law being met 'in us'

Rom. 8:3–4

# Necessity of Works, Obedience, and Faithfulness in the New Testament?

(6) God will efficaciously work  
'in' us, moving us to obey him

Phil. 2:12–13



# Necessity of Works, Obedience, and Faithfulness in the New Testament?

(7) The necessity of putting to death the old man, by the power of the Spirit

Rom. 8:13–14

# Old Testament Material

Jeremiah 31:31-34:

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a **new covenant** with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, <sup>32</sup> not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. <sup>33</sup> For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD:

# Old Testament Material

Jeremiah 31:31-34:

... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.  
And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. <sup>34</sup> And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

# Old Testament Material

Ezekiel 36:26-27:

**26** And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. **27** And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

# Old Testament Material

Ezekiel 11:19-20

<sup>19</sup>And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, <sup>20</sup>that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

# The New Covenant in the New Testament

- ▶ Hebrews 7-10 (8:8, 13; 9:15; cf 12:24)
- ▶ Lord's Supper/New Covenant passages:  
Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Lk. 22:20; 1  
Cor. 11:25
- ▶ 2 Corinthians 3:6

# Why the Atonement Matters

As Evangelicals, we know instinctively that the cross of Christ should/must be central to the issue of the place of works, obedience, and faithfulness in the Christian life . . .

. . . And it is. The pattern we see is that the atoning work of Christ is not only central to our *entrance* into a gracious covenant relationship with God, the atoning work of Christ is central to our *continuation* in a gracious covenant relationship with God.

# Why the Atonement Matters

Romans 8:3-4

<sup>3</sup> For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, <sup>4</sup> in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.



# Why the Atonement Matters

Ephesians 5:25-27

<sup>25</sup>Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, <sup>26</sup> that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, <sup>27</sup> so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

# Why the Atonement Matters

Hebrews 10:10, 14

**10** And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. . . .

. . . . **14** For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

# Why the Atonement Matters

Titus 2:14

**14** who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

# Union with Christ

John Murray

Nothing is more central or basic than union and communion with Christ. . . . [Union with Christ] underlies every step of the application of redemption. Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of redemption. Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation not only in its application . . .

# Union with Christ

John Murray

. . . but also in its once-for-all accomplishment in the finished work of Christ. Indeed the whole process of salvation has its origin in one phase of union with Christ and salvation has in view the realization of other phases of union with Christ.

John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 161

# Union with Christ

Romans 6:1-11

<sup>1</sup>What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? <sup>2</sup> By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? <sup>3</sup> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? . . .

# Union with Christ

Romans 6:1-11

... <sup>4</sup> We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. . . .

# Union with Christ

Romans 6:1-11

<sup>5</sup>For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. <sup>6</sup> We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. <sup>7</sup> For one who has died has been set free from sin . . .



# Union with Christ

Romans 6:1-11

. . .<sup>8</sup> Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. <sup>9</sup> We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. <sup>10</sup> For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. <sup>11</sup> So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.



# Union with Christ

John Owen (1616-1683) on Romans 6



# Union with Christ

## John Owen on Romans 6

“Dead to sin by profession; dead to sin by obligation to be so; dead to sin by participation of virtue and power for the killing of it; dead to sin by union and interest in Christ, in and by whom it is killed: how shall we live therein?”

# Union with Christ

## John Owen on Romans 6

Again: “Christ by his death destroying the works of the devil, procuring the Spirit for us, hath so killed sin, as to its reign in believers, that it shall not obtain its end and dominion.”

John Owen, *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, in *The Works of John Owen*, Vol. VI, pages 84 and 85.

# Union with Christ



John Owen on Hebrews 2:18:

“Mortification of sin is peculiarly from the death of Christ. It is one peculiar, yea, eminent end of the death of Christ, which shall assuredly be accomplished by it. He died to destroy the works of the devil. . . .

# Union with Christ



John Owen on Hebrews 2:18:

“ . . . . Whatever came upon our natures by his first temptation, whatever receives strength in our persons by his daily suggestions, Christ died to destroy it all.”

John Owen, *Mortification*, 83

# Union with Christ

Ephesians 2:4-10

<sup>4</sup> But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. . . . [2:8-10 to follow]



# Union with Christ

Ephesians 2:4-10

<sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus [note: we are created *in him*] for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

# Union with Christ

Galatians 4:18-19

**18** It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, **19** my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! **20**

# Insights from History



John Calvin (1509-1546)

## Insights from History

### John Calvin on Union with Christ/”Two-fold Grace”

"By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace (*duplex gratia*), namely, [1] that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, [2] that sanctified by Christ's Spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life" (*Institutes*, III.11.1).

# Insights from History

Faith

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graph LR; Faith --> Union[Union with Christ]; Union --> Justification; Union --> Sanctification;
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Union  
with  
Christ

Justification

Sanctification

## Insights from History

John Calvin:

“Christ, therefore, justifies no man without also sanctifying him. These blessings are conjoined by a perpetual and inseparable tie. Those whom he enlightens by his wisdom he redeems; whom he redeems he justifies; whom he justifies he sanctifies. . . .

## Insights from History

John Calvin:

. . . . But as the question relates only to justification and sanctification, to them let us confine ourselves. Though we distinguish between them, they are both inseparably comprehended in Christ. Would ye then obtain justification in Christ? You must previously possess Christ. . .

## Insights from History

. . . But you cannot possess him without being made a partaker of his sanctification: for Christ cannot be divided. Since the Lord, therefore, does not grant us the enjoyment of these blessings without bestowing himself, he bestows both at once but never the one without the other.



## Insights from History

Thus it appears how true it is that we are justified not without, and yet not by works, since in the participation of Christ, by which we are justified, is contained not less sanctification than justification.” (3.16.1)

John Calvin, *Institutes* 3.16.1

# Insights from History



Francis Turretin (1623-1687)



Insights from History  
Francis Turretin:

Turretin asks the question: ‘Are good works necessary for salvation?’ His answer — ‘we affirm.’

‘Are they required as the means and way for possessing salvation? This we hold’.

• • •



Insights from History  
Francis Turretin:

‘. . . . Although the proposition concerning the necessity of good works to salvation’ can certainly be misunderstood and misapplied, ‘it can be retained without danger if properly explained’.

Insights from History

Again: ‘although works may be said to contribute nothing to the acquisition of salvation, still they should be considered necessary to the obtainment of it, so that no one can be saved without them. . . .’

## Insights from History



Turretin is clear: ‘Although God by his special grace wishes these duties of man to be his blessings (which he carries out in them), still the believer does not cease to be bound to observe it, if he wishes to be a partaker of the blessings of the covenant’

## Insights from History

For Turretin, Christ frees us to obey him: ‘Christ, by freeing us from the curse and rigor of the law, still did not free us from the obligation to obedience, which is indispensable from the creature. Grace demands the same thing’ (2: 704). Works are necessary to the obtaining of glory ;’For since good works have the relation of the means to the end (Jn. 3:5, 16; Matt. 5:8); . . .

## Insights from History

... of the “way” to the goal (Eph. 2:10; Phil. 3:14); of the “sowing” to the harvest (Gal. 6:7, 8); of the “first fruits” to the mass (Rom. 8:23); of labor to the reward (Matt. 20:1); of the “contest” to the crown (2 Tim. 2:4; 4:8), everyone sees that there is the highest and an indispensable necessity of good works for obtaining glory. It is so great that it cannot be reached without them (Heb. 12:14; Rev. 21:27)’



# Insights from History



John Owen (1616-1683)

# Insights from History

John Owen

“... our sanctification is an effect or fruit of what he did and suffered for us” (pointing to Ephesians 5:25-26 and Titus 2:14).

# Insights from History

John Owen

“That God requires in and by the gospel a sincere obedience of all who believe, to be performed in and by their own persons, though through the aids of grace supplied to them by Jesus Christ. He requires indeed obedience, duties, works of righteousness in and of all persons whatever. . . . But that the works inquired after are necessary to all believers, is granted by all.”

John Owen, *Mortification*, 174

# Insights from History

John Owen

“The continuation of our justification depends on our own obedience and good works, or that our own obedience and good works are the condition of our justification, namely, that God indispensably requires good works and obedience in all that are justified, so that a justified state is inconsistent with the neglect of them.”

John Owen, *Justification*, 169

# Insights from History



Richard Gaffin

# Insights from History

Richard Gaffin on union with Christ and true faith:

‘The faith by which sinners are justified, as it unites them to Christ and so secures for them all the benefits of salvation that there are in him, that faith perseveres to the end and in persevering is never alone.’

‘a faith that rests in God the Savior is a faith that is restless to do His will.’

# Insights from History

Richard Gaffin on God's "stake" in our sanctification

“The personally involved, intimately engaged stake he has in our sanctification, as well as our justification, is nothing less than his own ever-accruing glory in the midst of that brotherhood comprising those, as freely justified, who are also being conformed to his image. . . .

# Insights from History

## Richard Gaffin on God's "stake" in our sanctification

... That, his all-surprising glory being realized as he is the 'firstborn among many brothers', in union with them, that glory, as much as anything, ought to be our constant and controlling preoccupation in all matters that concern the *ordo salutis*."

Richard Gaffin, "Union with Christ," 288.



## Insights from History

Gaffin is suggesting that God has something “at stake” in our sanctification. By sanctification, God is conforming us to the image of His Son. As beings who are being sanctified, and who are being prepared to enter into the presence of God, God has something “at stake” in our transformation. Might we also say, then, that God is “bound”—by his own glory, and by his own covenant promises—to so work that we are transformed and changed over time? And that this transformation and change would include—but not be limited to—the works, obedience, and faithfulness that develop in us?

# Insights from History

Gaffin is very much in the tradition of Geerhardus Vos



Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949)

# Insights from History

Geerhardus Vos

‘Precisely because human righteousness subserves the revelation of God’s glory, its [i.e., “human righteousness”] external embodiment is essential to its [i.e., God’s glory’s] complete realization.’

Geerhardus Vos, “The Alleged Legalism in Paul’s Doctrine of Justification,” 397.

# Geerhardus Vos

It is plain, then, that law-keeping did not figure at that juncture [i.e., the Mosaic covenant] as the meritorious ground of life-inheritance. The latter [i.e., life-inheritance] is based on grace alone, no less emphatically than Paul himself places salvation on that ground. . . .

# Geerhardus Vos

. . . . But, while this is so, it might still be objected that law-observance, if not the ground for receiving, is yet made the ground for retention of the privileges inherited. Here it cannot, of course, be denied that a real connection exists. . . .



Geerhardus Vos

. . . . But the Judaizers went wrong in inferring that the connection must be *meritorious*, that, if Israel keeps the cherished gifts of Jehovah through obedience of His law, this must be so, because in strict justice they had earned them. . . .

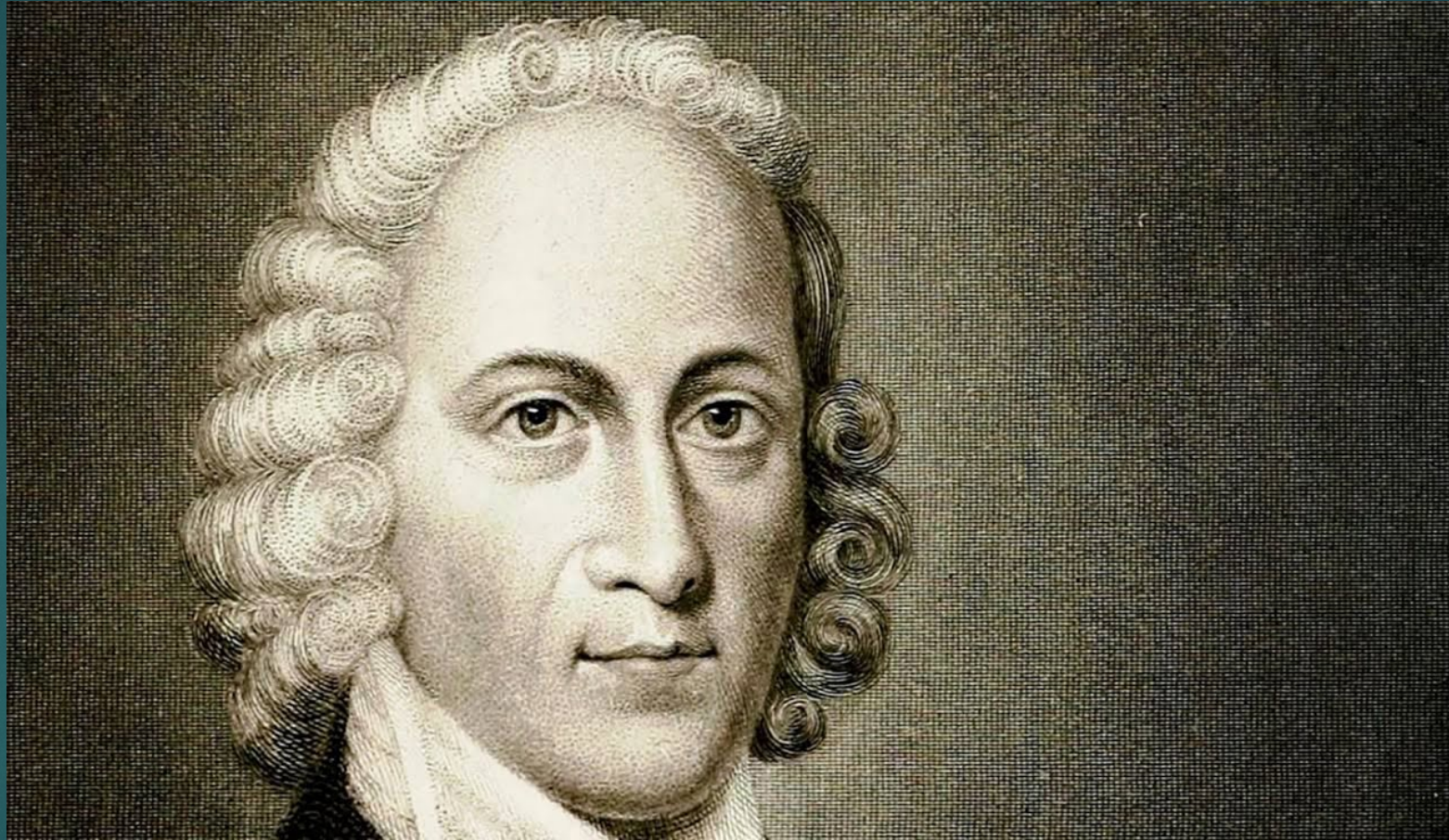


Geerhardus Vos

The connection is of a totally different kind. It belongs not to the legal sphere of merit, but to the symbolico-typical sphere of *appropriateness of expression*.

Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 127

# Insights from History



Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)



# Insights from History

“The Work of Redemption with respect to the grand design in general as it relates to the universal subject and end of it, is carried on from the fall of man to the end of the world in a different manner, not merely by the repeating and renewing the same effect on the different subjects of it, but by many successive works and dispensations of God, all tending to one great end and effect, all united as the several parts of a scheme, and altogether making up one great work. . . .

# Insights from History

. . . Like a house or temple that is building, first the workmen are sent forth, then the materials are gathered, then the ground fitted, then the foundation is laid, then the superstructure erected one part after another, till at length the topstone is laid. And all is finished. Now the Work of Redemption in that large sense that has been explained may be compared to such a building that is carrying on from the fall of man to the end of the world.”

*A History of the Work of Redemption* , 121.

[kindle://book/?action=open&asin=B0055HLV88&location=272](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0055HLV88?pf_rd_p=272)

# Summative Statement

*Christ has accomplished everything needed for my redemption. The central events of the gospel—Christ's death, burial, resurrection, appearances, ascension, and exaltation, accomplished outside of us and for us, remain at the heart of a truly biblical and faithful theology. Then we should go on to say: What Christ has accomplished outside of us and for us is the font and source of real change in the believer. In short, Christ obeyed the Father—both in his life and in his death. Christ's obedience outside of me and for me is what was needed for my salvation. Now that I have been united to Christ by faith alone apart from works, Christ is being formed in me (Gal. 4:19). Christ was the perfect Son, who obeyed his Father perfectly. I, in union with Christ, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, walk by faith, and am being conformed to the image of the Son—the one who obeyed outside of me and for me. Since Christ the one who obeyed is being formed in me, we should expect to see real if imperfect, necessary but not meritorious works flowing from the life of the believer. We obey from the heart—imperfectly, as we are being conformed to the image of the Son—the one who obeyed perfectly.*