

3-1-1939

The Doctrine of Justification According to Duns Scotus, Doctor Subtilis

Theo. Dierks
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dierks, Theo. (1939) "The Doctrine of Justification According to Duns Scotus, Doctor Subtilis," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 10 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol10/iss1/19>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Der steht fest und unbeweglich. Wie die wütenden Wellen ihre Kraft verschwenden an einem Fels im Meer, so kann das ganze höllische Heer mit all seinem Anhang gegen Christum nichts ausrichten, weil er göttliche Kraft und Macht besitzt. Auf diesen Felsen hat sich Petrus durch sein Bekenntnis gestellt und ist daher ein Felsenmann, dem niemand etwas anhaben kann. Und auf mich, den Felsen, sagt Jesus, will ich bauen meine Gemeinde, alle Gläubigen aller Zeiten, und darum ist sie sicher trotz alles Wütens des Teufels. Stehen wir also auf Christo, dem Felsen, dann können wir der bösen Welt trocken und getrost unser Amt verrichten.

4. „Und will dir des Himmelreichs Schlüssel geben. Alles, was du auf Erden binden wirst, soll auch im Himmel gebunden sein, und alles, was du auf Erden lösen wirst, soll auch im Himmel los sein.“ Dies ist eine ganz majestätische Aussage. Hier bekennt der Herr, daß er der Herr des Himmels ist, daß er die Schlüssel des Himmels habe, den Himmel aufschließen kann, wenn er will, und ihn zuschließen, wenn er will. Ist er der Herr des Himmels, so ist er wahrer Gott und weit erhaben über alle Propheten, Apostel und Engel, Gottes ewiger, einziger Sohn.

Dies ist das Selbstzeugnis Jesu. Wir sprechen mit Petrus: „Du bist Christus, des lebendigen Gottes Sohn“, und preisen Gott, daß wir an ihn glauben und ihn verkünden dürfen.

§. 3 f.

The Doctrine of Justification According to Duns Scotus, Doctor Subtilis

In his book *Die Theologie des Johannes Duns Scotus*, Seeberg compares Duns Scotus with Luther and maintains that Luther's conflict with Rome was chiefly directed against Duns Scotus. This is true to some extent, especially in regard to the question of free will and grace. On September 15, 1516, when Bartholomew Bernhardi upheld his professor's distinctive views in a disputation for the degree of *Sententiarius*, Luther declared open war against every form of Scotism, or, more correctly stated, against every form of Pelagianism, Semi-Pelagianism, and Gregorianism; * and this

* Pelagianism taught that man can without grace keep the commandments of God. Semi-Pelagianism taught that in spite of the Fall, man can of himself decide whether or not he will accept or reject the assistance of grace; but because of the Fall, man needs the assistance of grace for actually keeping the commandments. Gregorianism (after Gregory the Great) taught that owing to the Fall, man cannot decide to accept or reject the assistance of grace. Prevenient grace must first put man in a position in which he can then decide either for or against grace.

180 The Doctrine of Justification According to Duns Scotus

war continued until Erasmus was induced to take up arms against Luther and Luther wrote his monumental work *De Servo Arbitrio*. In this part of the conflict with Rome, Luther championed *sola gratia*.

However, Luther also came in conflict with Rome in the question of justification by faith, and in the doctrine of justification there was no great difference between Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, for both held that man is justified by the infusion of grace. Now, when Luther finally broke through with the Scriptural doctrine of *sola fide*, he not only waged war against Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism to which Augustine had nearly given the death-blow but which had meanwhile revived and now, together with Gregorianism, reigned within the Church, but he also came in conflict with the Augustinian doctrine of justification, which, though originated and developed before Augustine, had through the labors of Augustine become the accepted doctrine of the Church. The conflict with Rome may therefore be described as follows: in the doctrine of free will and grace — against Scotism, *i. e.*, against every form of Pelagianism, Semi-Pelagianism, and Gregorianism; in the doctrine of justification — against Augustinianism, *i. e.*, as Augustine's doctrine had come down and was then being taught by both Scotists and Thomists.

Since the days of Anselm all English theologians spoke much of the freedom of the will, and this is especially true of Duns Scotus (taught in Oxford, Paris, and Cologne, d. 1308); but in the hands of Duns, since he practically denied original sin, this emphasis on free will became Semi-Pelagianism, or rather Pelagianism.

According to Duns the will of man is always free (*Sent.*, II, d. 25, No. 6). This cannot be proved theoretically but only through experience, and therefore "those who deny that something happens contingently ought to be exposed to the tortures until they concede that it is possible that they be not tortured" (*Sent.*, I, d. 39, No. 13). That the will wills as it wills is due to the will itself; for "nothing else than the will is the cause of the entire volition of the will" (*Sent.*, II, d. 25, No. 22). Since the will of man is always free, and since the will itself is the only determining cause of the will, therefore man bears guilt or merits a reward.

Adam, being endowed with free will, was capable of falling

If man decides to cooperate with grace, he can with the help of grace carry out the commandments. According to Pelagianism natural man is spiritually well; according to Semi-Pelagianism natural man is spiritually sick; according to Gregorianism natural man is in a state of spiritual coma; according to Scripture natural man is spiritually dead.

into sin, and in his nature, as in every nature, there existed concupiscence; *i. e.*, the sensuous nature was liable to rebel against the spiritual nature. Therefore, if Adam was to remain without sin, he had to have the "superadded gift," the "supernatural gift" (II, d. 23, Nos. 6, 7), the "restraining rein" (II, d. 32, No. 7), which kept the lower powers subject to the higher powers, *i. e.*, kept the appetite subject to reason. Adam was capable of receiving and of keeping this imparted grace, and therefore he was obligated to righteousness. It was a debt which he owed to God. But when man does not receive this imparted grace or does not keep it, he does not possess righteousness, and this non-possession of, this absence or want of, righteousness is guilt. Original Sin is therefore defined by Duns as "the privation" of original righteousness. Duns expressly denies that it consists in concupiscence; for that is something "natural" to man (II, d. 30, q. 2, No. 3).

Original righteousness was given to Adam for himself and "for all [his] children," and "by virtue of such gifts the will of every child of his becomes a debtor" and owes "the original righteousness." But Adam lost the original righteousness, and therefore every child of Adam "is lacking it" (II, d. 32, No. 8). It is self-evident that the Scriptural doctrine of an inherited guilt and an inherited corruption is here completely denied. We have inherited only a debt.

The teaching of Duns in regard to actual sin is in harmony with his theory of original sin. Sin is the "privation of that harmony" (II, d. 37, No. 3), owing to the absence of original justice, and is sin "because it is [done] voluntarily" (IV, d. 15, q. 3, No. 3). Now, when a man transgresses the Law of God, "he lacks actual righteousness, which he owes. . . . This absence, as far as it comes from the deficient will, . . . is formally actual sin" (IV, d. 37, No. 6). Sin, however, does not corrupt nature but merely wounds it; for the "continuous absence of righteous" makes nature "incapable of right use" (IV, d. 37, No. 10). In other words, the repetition of evil deeds breeds an evil habit, whereby man is hindered in the exercise of his free will towards the good. Man's life is therefore not sinful but is filled with isolated sins; and herein Duns fully agrees with Pelagius. But Duns differed from Pelagius in this, that he taught that through habitual sin free will is hindered and weakened, while Pelagius taught that free will remains always the same.

Christ merited for us "the first grace by which we should be joined to Him" (III, d. 19, No. 5), and this grace is that *habitus* of love through which the Holy Spirit inclines the will of man to do a meritorious work. "By the same *habitus* by which the Holy Spirit dwells in the soul the will is inclined to its meritorious work" (II, d. 27, No. 3). Grace and love are materially the same, but

182 The Doctrine of Justification According to Duns Scotus

formally they are to be distinguished. The *habitus* is called love inasmuch as by it we love God; it is called grace inasmuch as by it we are loved of God (II, d. 27, No. 4). As grace this *habitus* equips man with a certain "worthiness," for which sake "God accepts him that has it as worthy of the honor of salvation" (II, d. 27, No. 4). "Man can by his own natural endowments in a state of nature love God above all things" (III, d. 27, No. 15), but he needs the *habitus* imparted by God in order that he may meritoriously love God and thus earn salvation. That such an act is accepted by God as meritorious is due to the will of God and not to the act itself. "I consider it to be of a meritorious nature because it is thus accepted by divine will in the order for remuneration or to be acceptable or to be accepted as worthy" (I, d. 17, q. 2, No. 24). Nor is any act in itself worthy of salvation. That is due to the liberality of God. "God remunerates more than has been merited by a worthy merit, indeed, generally beyond the worthiness of an act which is a merit, because such act is regarded as a worthy (condign) merit, i. e., above nature and the inner goodness of the act, merely because of the divine gracious acceptance; and perhaps, even more than that, which according to common law would be acceptable because God remunerates merely because of liberality" (I, d. 17, q. 2, No. 26).

Grace is infused in man through the Sacraments of the Church. "Our Sacraments, which are effective in the power of Christ's Passion, convey more grace than the Sacraments of the old Law. Besides this we have more helps of grace because we have more Sacraments" (III, d. 40, No. 7). Duns defines a Sacrament as "a sensible sign, which efficaciously signifies by divine appointment the grace of God or the gracious effect of God and is ordained for the salvation of man the pilgrim" (IV, d. 2, No. 9). In opposition to Aquinas, who held that in the Sacrament there is present "a virtue for producing the sacramental effect," Duns held that "the receiving of the Sacrament signifies, not indeed through some intrinsic form, . . . but only through the aid of God, who causes that effect, not of absolute necessity but by a necessity that has regard to the power ordained. For God has made the appointment universal and has certified to the Church that on him who receives such a Sacrament He will confer the signified effect" (IV, d. 1, q. 5, No. 13). The Sacraments are therefore mere symbols, signifying the effect of God's grace. However, if the sinner is to receive grace, he must receive the Sacrament; for "this is the excellency of the Sacraments of the New Law that the receiving of them is a disposition sufficient for [the receiving of] grace" (IV, d. 19, No. 24). In other words, even though the Sacraments are mere symbols of the grace effected, they must nevertheless be received

The Doctrine of Justification According to Duns Scotus 183

by the sinner if he is to receive grace. Note how Duns continually attacks the doctrine of the Church and then in a roundabout way returns to some extent to the doctrine of the Church. We noted before how Duns maintained that man could by nature love God above all things. This thought, if consistently carried out, would have destroyed the whole sacramentarianism of the Church. But Duns returned to the doctrine of the Church when he maintained that man could not without grace meritoriously love God and thus earn salvation. Duns severely criticized not only the contemporary theologians but also all the theologians before him, and yet he was always willing to submit to the doctrine of the Church.

We turn to the doctrine of justification itself. Duns treats this doctrine in conjunction with the sacrament of penance. When man has committed a mortal sin, he is able by attrition, the "contrition of the gallows" as Luther called it, to prepare himself for the reception of grace; for thereby he establishes a merit of fitness (*meritum de congruo*). "Adults are justified by attrition, as it were, by a merit of fitness" (IV, d. 19, No. 32). "God disposes to give as a merit of fitness in some moment grace, and because of such attrition, as for a merit, He justifies, because it is a merit of [deserving] justification" (IV, d. 14, q. 2, No. 15). When this attrition has lasted long enough, as God has determined, grace is infused, and through the infusion of grace the attrition is changed to contrition, since love is thus imparted to man. "That emotion is called attrition and is a disposition or a merit of fitness for the extinction of mortal sin, which follows in the last moment of a definite time, as long as the attrition has lasted. . . . No disposition can be more sufficient for that justification than that attrition which is completely indicated in the manner of ethics, so that then, in the last moment or in any moment as long as God has determined that [such] attrition shall endure in order that it be a merit of fitness for justification, grace is infused, and then sin is completely wiped out. . . . The same emotion which at first was attrition becomes in that moment contrition, because in that moment it is accompanied by grace, and thus [it becomes] a complete act, for it has with it love, which is the [complete] form of the act" (IV, d. 14, q. 2, No. 14).

Thomas held that the forgiveness of sin followed the infusion of grace, whereby sin is destroyed. But Duns distinguished between the infusion of grace and the forgiveness of sin. He held that the former is the "actual change," while the latter is an "ideal change." The infusion of grace actually transforms man, but forgiveness of sin makes man no longer liable to punishment. Which, then, occurs first? Since the infusion of grace is more intimately related to the glorification and gracious acceptance of man, it has

184 The Doctrine of Justification According to Duns Scotus

priority in the divine will over the forgiveness of sin; but in the execution of the divine will the order is reversed: first the forgiveness of sin, then the infusion of grace. "In executing, He wills the reverse way; for as He first wants him to have merit before glory, so He first wills, in the order of execution, that no guilt be in him before grace be in him" (IV, d. 16, No. 19). "God naturally remits an offense before He gives grace to him," i. e., to the offender (I, d. 17, q. 3, No. 19). This question caused much debate in later years. Occam held with Duns, while Biel followed Aquinas. But it would be absolutely incorrect to infer from this that either Duns or the later theologians held the Scriptural doctrine of justification.

But if attrition is sufficient for the reception of grace, why, then, is the sacrament of penance necessary? Why must the sinner confess to the priest and receive absolution? This problem was never solved by the theologians, but it was solved in a practical manner by the Church. This was done by emphasizing the effect of the sacrament of penance and making less demands on the sinner. This tendency we find already in Duns. "It is sufficient that some displeasure, although imperfect, precedes, and then he is capable of sacramental absolution" (IV, d. 16, No. 7). Man must do what is in him and place no obstacle in the way, and then he will receive the forgiveness of sin. "No other way is so easy and so certain; for here is nothing necessary except not to put an obstacle to grace, which is much less than to have some attrition, which by manner of a merit of fitness may suffice for justification" (IV, d. 1, No. 13). The demands became less and less, so that John v. Paltz, a teacher at the Erfurt Seminary when Luther became a monk, says of his day that nearly all are not contrite and not even attrite in the full sense of the word but only in a secondary sense. "They do in some manner what they can and are yet assisted by the priests in the sacramental absolution." (Quoted in Seeberg, *Duns Scotus*, p. 410.) Note the connection. The less there is of repentance, the greater is the need of the sacrament; but the more there is of repentance, the less need there is of the sacrament, for the contrite and even attrite sinner can merit for himself the forgiveness of sin even without the sacrament. Well has Seeberg said: "It is not easy to say which of the two conceptions was the more dangerous: the exercise of penitential grief, to which was affixed the reward of forgiveness of sin, or the sorrow for sin, which was to be transformed into complete penitence by the solemnities of divine worship."

In the sacrament of penance much emphasis was placed on the absolution of the priest. Duns says that the absolution "is performed by certain words which are with due intention spoken by the priest, who has jurisdiction by divine institution, which [words]

effectively signify the absolution of the soul from sin" (IV, d. 14, No. 2). Here again Duns distinguishes between the sacramental sign and the immediate effect of grace which accompanies the sign. By absolution man is absolved from eternal punishment, but by it he is obligated to temporal punishment. "For such judgment of the priest so absolves that it nevertheless binds. Indeed, it absolves from the guilt of eternal punishment, but it obliges to the enduring of temporal punishment, except it be already sufficiently endured" (IV, d. 16, No. 7). The sinner must therefore endure temporal punishment, which is the satisfaction for sin. Such satisfaction is "an outward laborious performance or punishment willingly accepted for the punishing of sin committed by himself, and this is to assuage the offended God, or it is a suffering or a punishment willingly suffered in a prescribed order" (IV, d. 15, No. 12). Duns did not have a very high opinion of indulgences; for to him the penitential exercises have greater merit. "Wherefore it is good and safe that men perform the penitential exercises laid upon them, because by them they merit more" (*Miscell.*, q. 7). The main effect of the sacrament of penance "is to free from guilt, and that [effect] cannot be obtained by something else, namely, indulgences" (*Miscell.*, q. 15).

The whole theology of Duns Scotus, especially his doctrine of salvation, is akin to Pelagianism. Man can and must merit the forgiveness of sin and eternal life; but where he fails, the sacraments of the Church will cooperate and provide. At that time everything centered on the sacrament of penance, and when Luther attacked the Catholic doctrine of penance in the Ninety-five Theses, he struck the most vulnerable point in the Catholic Church, and then the whole sacramentarianism of the Catholic Church crashed to the ground.

But in the theology of Duns there is emphasis not only on the will of man but also on the will of God, and if we would do justice to the influence of Duns on later theology, we must make note of this fact. God, as "the first Cause," is "intelligent and volitional" (I, d. 2, q. 20). That God wills this or that is because He wills it. "There is no reason why His will willed this except that His will is will" (I, d. 8, q. 5, No. 24). To the will of God all things are possible except the logical impossibility (IV, d. 10, q. 2, Nos. 5, 11). According to His "absolute power" God could even save the already lost Judas; but, as a rule, God works according to the "ordained power" whereby He has bound Himself to certain laws and ordinances which He has arbitrarily fixed. But because of His absolute power He could, if He so willed, save a person even without grace (I, d. 44, Nos. 1-4).

God has according to His free will predestinated certain ones

186 The Doctrine of Justification According to Duns Scotus

to grace and glory (I, d. 40, No. 1). Can a predestinated person be lost? Duns maintains that, if God had so willed it, these persons would have been lost. "In that first [act] it does not contradict itself to have an opposite object; yea, it could likely be the opposite, although not both at the same time" (I, d. 40, No. 2). However, once God has willed, the opposite cannot take place "because ordination of one cannot stand with the opposite of that which He ordained" (I, d. 40, No. 3). In those whom God predestinated He foresaw no merit, but He did foresee the final sin of those whom He reprobated. "He wills salvation to him not because of those things which He has seen before. . . . It seems cruel to punish any one if no guilt in him exists; therefore, to infer by similitude, He will not punish any one ere He sees that he is a sinner" (I, d. 41, No. 11). That one is saved is therefore due to the will of God; that another is not saved is because God foresaw his final sin and therefore did not predestinate him. But finally everything depends on the will of God, and His will must be fulfilled. "The will of God as far as it concerns all things must always be fulfilled, because as He, the Almighty, can make everything possible, so, when the divine will by unchangeable determination decrees to put something into being, that will be [fulfilled]. But that willing by the will of good pleasure is the last determination which can be stated on the side of the will of Him who in His omnipotence will bring the effect into being. Therefore, regarding any effect, if God so wills, it will be" (I, d. 46, No. 2).

This doctrine of predestination according to Duns is not so different from that of Aquinas, but the whole conception of God as the Supreme Will as found in Duns's theology, — God wills as He wills, and if He so wills, He can will otherwise; because God wills it, therefore some are predestinated and others are reprobated; because God wills it, therefore a certain thing is good, not because it is good in itself; because God wills it, therefore the merit of Christ is accepted by God for the predestinated, — this whole conception of God can only strike fear in the heart of the sinner. It is true that Duns taught that God loves Himself and that He has called this world into existence in order that certain ones whom He loves may love Him as He loves Himself; but the concept of God as the absolutely Free Will fills the sinner's heart not only with rebellion but with hatred towards God. The Absolute Being without the love of God in Christ Jesus is to the conscience-stricken sinner not a loving God but a wanton devil.

Morrison, III.

THEO. DIERKS