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## The Doctrine of Justification According to Gabriel Biel and Johann von Palz

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## The Doctrine of Justification According to Gabriel Biel and Johann v. Paltz

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"To understand Luther's spiritual development presupposes an understanding of what Luther was taught and what he later rejected," writes Dr. E. G. Schwiebert in his *Reformation Lectures* (a book which should be in every Lutheran pastor's library), and this understanding we have sought to give by these articles treating of the doctrine of justification as it was taught before the Reformation.\*

The University of Erfurt was exclusively "modern," i. e., only the nominalist philosophy of Occam was taught at that university. Luther called Occam "my master" and spoke of the Occamist school of philosophy as "my sect," and in the monastic seminary he studied the "modern" theology as expounded by Gabriel Biel, whom the "moderns" regarded as the "model theologian." When Luther entered the Augustinian monastery Johann v. Paltz and Johann Nathin were the two theological preceptors in the monastic seminary. Paltz, who had received his doctorate at Erfurt in 1483, left Erfurt in 1507, but Nathin, who had studied under Biel in Tuebingen from 1484 to 1486, remained in Erfurt for many years. In this connection we may add that Staupitz studied at Tuebingen a few years after Biel's death. When Luther began to prepare himself for the priesthood, he was given a copy of Biel's *Canon of the Mass*; and when he began his study for the lowest theological degree, that of Baccalaureus Biblicus, he studied not only the Bible and the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard but mainly the

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\* Cf. *C. T. M.*, Vol. VIII (1937), p. 748 ff.: "The Doctrine of Justification according to Bernard of Clairvaux"; Vol. IX (1938), p. 114 ff.: "The Doctrine of Justification according to Thomas Aquinas"; Vol. X (1939), p. 179 ff.: "The Doctrine of Justification according to Duns Scotus, Doctor Subtilis."



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works of Biel, D'Ailly, and Occam. "Biel and D'Ailly he knew almost by heart. Long and much he read the writings of Occam." (Melancthon.) Somewhat later he studied the works of Duns Scotus, Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Thomas Aquinas.

Duns Scotus had driven the dialectic art to the limit of human endurance. He had severely criticized the statements of his predecessors; and the later theologians, following in his footsteps, tore the older forms of theology into shreds by hair-splitting arguments. It has been said, that the Scholastic theologian would never see a stone without picking it up and throwing it away, or else, taking it to a pile, he would afterwards examine the pile, taking one stone away after the other. Pope Clement VI wrote in 1346: "They" (the theologians) "entangle themselves in philosophical questions and in disputes which merely pander to their cleverness in doubtful interpretations." These later theologians spoke much of the authority of the Scripture, and yet their final authority was the Church. They would bow to no individual, and yet they were always ready to bow down before the authority of the Church. At that time it was customary to lecture mainly on the First Book of the *Sentences*, and as a result theology was lost in the realms of metaphysics and in speculation about God and what was "probable" or "more probable." Well has Seeberg said: "A theology which created a thousand difficulties and suggested a thousand possibilities, only to return at last to the formulas so laboriously criticized, became, together with its advocates, ridiculous."

In the theology of the fourteenth and the fifteenth century we may distinguish three main schools of theology. Most of the theologians were either Scotists or Thomists. The foremost of the Scotists or "moderns" was William of Occam (d. ca. 1350), and the last was Gabriel Biel (d. 1495). Thomism or the "old theology" was represented by such men as Durandus de St. Portiano (d. 1334) and John Capreolus (d. 1444). The third school of theology was a reaction to the rising tide of Pelagianism and represented a return to Augustine. The chief theologians of this school were John of Bradwardina (d. 1349) and John Wyclif (d. 1384), but their Augustinianism was more or less a hyper-Augustinianism, *i. e.*, a predestinarianism combined with the Scotist conception of God as the absolutely free will.

According to Biel the Sacraments effect grace in a twofold manner, *ex opere operato* or *ex opere operantis*. "Any sign may be understood to confer grace in a twofold way. This occurs in one way by the sign itself or the sacrament or, as some say, by the deed performed, *ex opere operato*. Thus by the very fact that the work, *i. e.*, sign or sacrament, is celebrated, grace is conferred



unless an obstacle of mortal sin hinder; because, besides the celebration of the sign externally celebrated, a good inner motive is not required in the recipient by which he may merit grace by worthiness or fitness, but it suffices that the recipient interpose no obstacle. . . . In another way, signs or sacraments are understood to confer grace by the one performing the work (*ex opere operante*) and by the way of merit, i. e., that the sacrament externally celebrated does not suffice for the conferring of grace, but beyond this is required a good motive, or inner devotion, of the one receiving the sacrament, according to whose intention grace is conferred corresponding to the merit of worthiness or fitness, precisely, and not more, according to the celebration of the sacrament." (*Sent. IV. d. 1. q. 3. a. 1. nota 2.*)

Salvation is obtained primarily through the merits of Christ; nevertheless man must do his part by cooperating with the grace of Christ. "Granting that the passion of Christ is the principal merit on account of which grace, the opening of the kingdom and glory, are conferred, yet it is never the sole and entire meritorious cause. This is evident because some work, such as the merit of fitness or of worthiness of the one receiving the grace or glory, always concurs with the merit of Christ." (*Sent. III. d. 19. a. 2. concl. 5.*) By performing some good work, even though it be without love, man can and must merit the grace of justification. "Good works morally performed without love merit by fitness many spiritual good things, which is evident because they merit the grace of justification." (*Sent. IV. d. 16. q. 2. a. 3. dub. 4.*) In other words, by doing what is in him, man merits grace by a merit of fitness, and through the reception of grace he merits salvation by worthiness. That a person can merit is due primarily "to the free acceptance of God" (*Sent. II. d. 27. q. 1. a. 3. dub. 2. M.*)

In the later Scholastics the doctrine of justification is always treated in connection with the sacrament of penance, and here Biel, even as the other Scholastics, distinguishes between the *materia* and the *forma* of the sacrament. The *materia* consists in the acts of the penitent, the *forma* consists in the words of absolution spoken by the priest.

The first element of the sacrament is the contrition, or at least the attrition, of the sinner. God could infuse grace and thus forgive sin even without us, but He has ordained that man should do "what is in him" (*Sent. IV. d. 14. q. 1. a. 2. concl. 3.*) To begin with, man must have a "detestation of his crime" and a "displeasure of sin" (*Sent. IV. d. 14. q. 1. a. 2. concl. 5.*), and as a rule this begins with servile fear; i. e., the sinner "fears hell" (*Sent. IV. d. 16. q. 2. a. 3. dub. 4.*) Through confession and absolution, grace is infused, and thus attrition is transformed into contrition; for God "has appointed



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that He will not be lacking to him who does what is in him, nor will He withhold grace from him who is sufficiently inclined to its reception" (*Sent. IV. d. 14. q. 2. a. 1. opin. 3*). God has determined "immutably to give grace to him who does what is in him" (*Coll. in Sent. II. d. 27. q. 1. dub. 4. P*). This is the common expression of that day: man must do what is in him, and then God will infallibly give grace. The same thoughts are also found in Johann v. Paltz.

From Ezek. 18:21-23; 33:11 Paltz concluded that before the advent of Christ only the contrite received the forgiveness of sin. However, since such contrition was seldom found, God ordained that in the New Law the sinner should be assisted by "the help of the sacraments." If the sinner is attrite, then sacramental grace will transform his attrition to contrition because of the Passion of Christ; hence "under the New Law the mode of repenting and of salvation is easier" (*Coelifodina, Q. 5. v*). At times it does happen that the sinner is really contrite, and in that case he is absolved by God; but as a rule repentance begins with attrition. Paltz defined attrition as "gallow-penitence" "because the attrite mourns that he has sinned on account of the infernal gallows" (*ibid., Q. 6. v*). When the sinner is attrite, God through the infusion of grace changes his attrition into contrition, "sometimes of His own motion before the reception of the sacraments, sometimes in the reception of the sacraments, which is more certain" (*ibid., Suppl. R. 2. r*). Through the sacrament the sinner receives that peculiar grace which makes him acceptable. This grace destroys mortal sin, causes man to do good works, and remits guilt; and this is the justification of the sinner. Paltz was under the impression that with this doctrine he was actually teaching the Scriptural doctrine of justification by faith. He writes: "Therefore for the reception of justification in the adult there is required a motion of the free will according to which it consents to grace. And because the first motion through which he consents to grace is a motion of faith, therefore that motion itself is a motion of faith. Thus Rom. 5 justifies through faith," *i. e.*, teaches justification through faith. (*Ibid., R. 2. r.*) Paltz understood "justification" in a twofold sense: as the gradual movement towards righteousness, or as a change without a movement. In the former sense it takes place gradually; in the latter it is effected in an instant. When the sinner thus becomes righteous, he at the same time receives the forgiveness of sins. "Grace is infused before guilt is remitted, because through grace the guilt is remitted." (*Ibid., R. 5. r.*) Here Paltz, following Biel, agreed with Thomas Aquinas, while Duns Scotus held that "God naturally remits an offense before He gives grace to him," *i. e.*, the offender. (*Cf.*



C. T. M., Vol. X, 1939, p. 184.) But Paltz regarded faith merely as the assent to that which the never-erring Church teaches, and therefore it is self-evident that he knew absolutely nothing of the Scriptural doctrine of justification.

To properly understand Paltz's theology, we must remember that Paltz had charge of the so-called jubilee indulgences of 1490 in Thuringia, Meissen, and the Mark; in fact, his sermons held at that time are really the basis of his *Himmlische Fundgrube*, which first appeared in 1490 and later appeared in Latin as the *Coelifodina*. Paltz knew his people well, and therefore he writes: "About all our people who confess in Lent do not have true contrition, nor do they have attrition in the first grade, because they would then do entirely what they can to attain true contrition; but they often have attrition in the second grade, doing in some measure what they can, and such are assisted by the priest in the sacramental absolution." (*Coelifodina*, R. 1. v.) Salvation therefore depends almost entirely on the work of the priest. "Very few are truly contrite, and therefore very few are saved without the priests; but all can in a certain manner make themselves attrite, and such the priests are able to help and make contrite through their ministration and consequently can save them." (Quoted in Kolde, *Die deutsche Augustiner-Congregation und Johann von Staupitz*, p. 187.)

If it be permitted, a short excursus on indulgences. According to Catholic doctrine at that time, grace forgives the guilt of mortal sin and changes the eternal penalty into temporal punishments, for which the sinner must satisfy. Indulgences are only a benefit to ease the temporal punishment. But Paltz maintained that the jubilee indulgence pertained not only to the temporal punishment but also to the forgiveness of sin, for it included, to some extent, the sacrament of penance. (Cf. Kolde, p. 192 f.)

We return to the doctrine of justification. So far the emphasis has been on how little man and how much the Church must do, and all this tended to glorify the sacramentarianism of the Church. In practise, attrition carried the day, but in theory contrition was always spoken of as the chief thing. This is also true of Gabriel Biel.

In order that man may receive grace, he must do "what is in him." Now, the highest and most perfect preparation or disposition for grace is love of God. "The most perfect manner to perform what is in him in order to seek God, to approach God, to return to God, is by the act of friendly love. Nor is another more perfect disposition for [receiving] grace possible to man, for by no other act can we more approach God than by loving God above all things, since it is the most perfect act of all regarding



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God for the pilgrim who is held to do what is possible out of [his] natural powers; therefore it is the immediate and final disposition for the infusion of grace, and none more immediate can be given. Consequently, when this [disposition] exists, grace is infused in the same moment, because the form is immediately infused into a subject which is disposed by the final disposition for that form." (*Sent. III. d. 27. q. 1. a. 3. dub. 2. prop. 2. Q.*) "The act of loving God above all things is the ultimate and sufficient disposition for the infusion of grace. . . . In order to prepare himself to receive the gift of grace, he does not need another gift of grace, except that God himself move him." (*Sent. II. d. 28. q. 1. dub. 1. L.*)

Following in the footsteps of Duns, the "moderns" taught that the will of man is always free. Biel defined original sin as "the privation of the original righteousness owed" (*Sent. II. d. 30. q. 2. a. 2. concl. 3.*) But in spite of sin the freedom of the will remains intact. "The integrity of his natural will, i. e., its freedom, is not corrupted by sin; for that is really the will itself and not separable from it." (*Sent. II. d. 30. q. 1. a. 3. dub. 4.*) But through sin the will has been wounded; for even though it is essentially free, it is "inclined to evil and difficult [to move] towards the good" (*Sent. II. d. 28. a. 1. dub. 2. N.*) The flesh wars against the spirit, and the love of the creature wars against the love of God, and this "rebellion of concupiscence" is something natural to man and is that "tinder" (*fomes*) by which the flame of the sinful act is continually enkindled.

Man can of his natural abilities keep the commandments of God and love God above all things. "In the state of uncorrupted nature man could fulfil all the commandments of the Law as far as the essential act is concerned, but not in that manner which consists in loving out of love meritoriously. But in [his] corrupt nature he could not fulfil all of them as far as the essential act is concerned, because that first and greatest precept to love God above all things (cannot be fulfilled) without healing grace. But in both states the aid of God, who first moves [him to act], is required for anything which is to be performed. But in order to prepare himself to receive the gift of God, he does not need another gift of grace, only that God Himself move him." (*Sent. II. d. 28. q. 1. B.*) In other words, man before the Fall could fulfil the commandments, but he needed grace in order that he might act and then act meritoriously. However, after the Fall man needs the same grace of God which moves him to act, but he can without grace prepare himself for the reception of that gift of grace which makes it possible that he may love meritoriously. Exactly what he means Biel explains further when he says: "When we speak of purely natural abilities, the general influence of God is



not excluded, which, as the first cause, works together with the second agent, i. e., with the created agent, in every act that is done, since no positive act can be performed if God, as the first cause, is not coacting. For the first cause has more influence on the effect than any second cause. . . . But by 'purely natural conditions' is understood the soul's nature, or essence, together with the qualities and actions that follow naturally, whereby the habitus and gifts which are supernaturally infused by God alone are excluded." (*Sent. II. d. 28. q. 1. a. 1. not. 2. F.*) Biel knew of many objections to this view, and therefore he writes: "Because of these two reasons some have said that man's nature is not sufficient [able] to love God above all things without an infused quality. But these reasons prove nothing, because they argue about natural inclination; one doubts in regard to (such) inclination whether it is free, since as such it is not determined as one thing, but is able (to choose) either one of opposites and different objects which are not opposed to each other. And therefore, since it is free to will or not to will, it is able by a produced act to will that it be not. Therefore, according to the opinion of Scotus, Occam, Peter, and others, it should be answered concerning this doubt, namely, by five sentences. First, the human will of the pilgrim is able by his natural (ability) to love God above all things. This will is rightly able to conform its obedience to every dictate of reason out of its natural (abilities); but to love God above all is with right a dictate of reason; therefore to this (dictate) will can conform itself out its natural (power) and can consequently love God above all things. Besides, erring man can love a creature above all and enjoy it out of purely natural (powers); therefore he can likewise love God above all and enjoy Him out of his natural (power). It would be highly astonishing if the will could obey an erroneous dictate and not a correct one." (*Sent. III. d. 27. q. 1. a. 3. dub. 2. Q.*) We have quoted Biel somewhat in detail to give the reader a taste of later scholastic theology.

The "moderns" were accused of being Pelagians, and rightly so; for in some respects they out-Pelagianized Pelagius. For he spoke of the "helps" of grace, of the Law, the revealed doctrine, and the example of Christ; but they spoke only of the "dictates of reason." Man can through his "purely natural powers" fulfil the commandments of God according to their essence and submit to the dictates of reason (*Sent. II. d. 28. q. 1. a. 2. concl. 2. K.*). And yet the "moderns" condemned Pelagius and rejected the charge of Pelagianism; and in some respects they were better than Pelagius, for they insisted that man "cannot merit eternal life" by his natural powers (*Sent. II. d. 28. q. 1. a. 1. dub. 2. M.*), and they insisted that "we live through grace" (*Sent. III. d. 27. q. 1. a. 3.*



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dub. 2. prop. 2. Q). Before man can produce a righteous work, he himself must be righteous. He is made righteous through the infusion of grace. However, though man can and must dispose himself for grace, he cannot demand grace, for the infusion of grace is due to "the liberality of God." (*Sent. II. d. 28. q. 1. dub. 1. L.*) Thus the "moderns" returned to the fold of the Church and maintained the necessity of grace and spoke even of *sola gratia*. "By the ordained power of God guilt is not remitted unless grace, which makes the receiver acceptable, is infused, since God has made the order that He will deliver none from the due of eternal death except him whom He accepts to the glory of everlasting bliss. However, whom he ordains or accepts to glory, to such a one He infuses grace, by which he is made worthy of such great glory, according to that (saying) of the apostle, Eternal life is the grace of God." (*Sent. IV. d. 14. q. 1. not. 4. K.*) In their opposition to Pelagius and in opposition to work-righteousness the "moderns" even quoted the words of Paul, Rom. 11:6. Biel writes: "And if again you would reply: If the Passion [of Christ] were the cause of meritorious grace, then grace would be the fruit of merit and thus grace would not be grace, as the apostle argues Rom. 11, Scotus answers: Grace is not the fruit of merit of him who receives grace, at least (not) the first grace; it can be the fruits of another one, for some one can merit grace for another one, as has been said in Lib. II. d. 27. a. 3. Any one can also merit for himself an augmenting of grace, and this is what the apostle means when he says: 'But if of grace, it is not of works,' sc., our works; 'else grace would not be grace.' Therefore it can be conceded that in the works of God ordained for our salvation there has been no deserving of grace; i. e., (they are done) without any merits except that of the incarnation of the Son of God." (*Sent. III. d. 2. q. 1. a. 3. dub. 1. F.*)

According to the "moderns" the doctrine of grace was in reality a doctrine of merit. Man must through his natural powers merit a merit of fitness and through the infusion of grace, due to the merits of Christ, it is possible for him to merit eternal life. The "moderns" condemned Pelagius, but their teaching was only another form of Pelagianism.

Christ merited final grace and glory "only for the predestinated," and no one is finally saved "unless he was predestinated from eternity." Predestination or reprobation is dependent on God's foreknowledge. "For even as those who are to be damned are rejected because they are foreseen as such who will sin to the end, so such are predestinated who are foreseen that they will persevere in love to the end." (*Sent. I. d. 41. a. 2. concl. 2. D.*) But God wills this or that because He wills it. He, as the absolute Lord of the



world, rules as He wills and can damn and save as He wills without doing any wrong. This arbitrariness on the part of God is the final cause of man's predestination or reprobation. "It is manifest that predestination or reprobation is in agreement with the divine will, which wills to give to the one eternal life and to the other perpetual punishment, because (His) will is nothing else but God Himself, and there is no cause of predestination or reprobation on the part of the creature itself or why the same is eternal and uncaused." (Coll. in *Sent.* III. d. 26. q. 1. nota 2. D.) Here we have the same arbitrariness that we find in the theology of Duns Scotus. It is true, Biel says, that God does not "withhold what is necessary for salvation from any adult who has the use of reason and does what is in him" (*Sent.* I. d. 41. summ. 7. G), but such thoughts cannot comfort the sinner seeking a gracious God and continually asking himself whether he has really and sufficiently done what is in him in order to obtain the grace of God.

Morrison, III.

THEO. DIERKS

### Teaching the Postconfirmation Bible Class

The postconfirmation Bible class, in our circles commonly known as the junior Bible class, has always presented peculiar difficulties to pastors and other leaders of youth who realized that the years of early adolescence in many cases are extremely difficult years for our juniors to negotiate, that they represent in more than one respect the dangerous age. But whenever a condition offers a challenge to leaders, this challenge should be met without hesitation, although always with great care and upon the basis of a most careful study of all pertinent circumstances. The very fact that work with junior adolescents calls upon practically every resource of pastors, counselors, and leaders in general should cause the latter to study every problem with painstaking care, in order to give the juniors the benefit of an encouraging, positive approach and a constructive program, in order that we may not merely keep them with the Church, as the common saying is, but also give them such an opportunity for integration with the work of the Church, in keeping with their developing talents and abilities, as to make them cooperating units in the building of the Kingdom.

If we keep these facts in mind, we must realize at once that much of the success of the Bible class in the postconfirmation age depends upon *the teacher*—his personality, his interest in the work, and his mental, pedagogical, and spiritual equipment for this work.

The personality of the teacher is an important factor in the