

Böhl on Justification and Regeneration: Some Implications for Preaching and Pastoring

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Abstract

By the preaching of God's law, the human being is confronted with his fallenness and existence in flesh, sin, and death. Eduard Böhl, with his emphasis on the synchronicity of God's act of justification and regeneration, seeks to maintain the boundary between Creator and creature in creation and history, *and* between sinner and Christ, flesh and the Spirit. From the viewpoint of the power of God's word in preaching, the possibility of a redeeming dialogue is reestablished, and the reality of participation by faith in God is restored. By the gospel as the power of God in which his righteousness is revealed, the believer in the word is powerfully brought to newness of life and sustained in sanctification.

Keywords

Justification, regeneration, preaching, law of God, Holy Spirit, Christ

Louis Berkhof indicated the importance of Eduard Böhl's work on justification in his preface to its English translation:

A careful perusal of this work will bring its reward, for we can also learn from those who differ with us. The real value of the book lies in that which is the burden of the whole work: justification by faith, without the works of the law; salvation by grace only. It was necessary that this note should be sounded in the days of Boehl, and it is just as imperative in our time and in the environment in which we live, with all its Pelagian and Arminian tendencies, and its undue emphasis on the works of man and on humanistic ethics. We hope that by the grace of God this work may prove to be something of an antidote.¹

In this article I propose to introduce Böhl, a relatively unknown theologian, then present his thoughts on the doctrine of justification and regeneration, and finally conclude with some practical implications of the principles of Böhl's thoughts on justification and regeneration for preaching and pastoring.

1. *Who Was Eduard Böhl?*

Eduard Böhl was born in 1836. He passed away in 1903 in Vienna, Austria, where he was professor of Reformed dogmatics.² In his works, he strove for a Reformation-Renaissance in and for his own time.³

Important for the influence and development of Böhl's theology was that at the University of Halle, Germany, he became acquainted with Johannes

¹ Louis Berkhof, preface to *The Reformed Doctrine of Justification*, trans. C. H. Riedesel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 11. The rest of the preface contains some of Berkhof's severe critique of aspects of Böhl's theology. When he writes, "learning from those who differ from us," it is clear that he did not hold back his criticism, all the while supporting the translation of this seminal work of Böhl. Berkhof's critique specifically relates to Böhl's understanding of the image of God, the original state of man, the indwelling of God in the Old Testament, the imputation to Christ of Adam's sin, and the character of regeneration and sanctification and others. "Some of these aberrations also color his work on Justification by Faith" (9). Berkhof does not elaborate on these observations. Since then, two dissertations (see below) have set Berkhof's criticism of Böhl in a more positive light, if not refuting these negative opinions altogether.

² For more extensive details of Böhl's background, see Thomas R. V. Forster, *Eduard Böhl's (1836–1903) Concept for a Re-Emergence of Reformation Thought*, American University Studies, Series 7, Theology and Religion (New York: Lang, 2009), 1–10, 30–40. In the Dutch language, one can consult Willen Balke, *Eduard Böhl: Hoogleraar te Wenen Schoonzoon van H. F. Kohlbrugge* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2001).

³ See Ho-Duck Kwon's dissertation, "E. Böhl's Aufnahme der Reformatorische Theologie, besonders der Calvins: Die Bedeutung dieser Reformatoren-Renaissance für die Lösung theologischer Probleme der Gegenwart [Eduard Böhl's Appraisal of Reformational Theology, in Particular of Calvin: The Significance of His 'Reformers Renaissance' for the Solution of Theological Problems of the Present Time]" (PhD diss.: Heidelberg Fakultät der Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, 1991).

Wichelhouse (1819–1858).⁴ While studying Reformed biblical theology and dogmatics under the tutelage of Wichelhouse, Böhl was convinced he had found the heartbeat of the Reformation.

This acquaintance with Wichelhouse was to have a lasting impact on Böhl's theology, even more so because through Wichelhouse he entered the circle around Herman Kohlbrügge (1803–1901) who was also to have a great influence on his exegesis and dogmatics.⁵ Wichelhouse and Kohlbrügge can be identified as the main influences on his biblical and dogmatic theology.⁶

Historically, Böhl's Reformed theology did not go entirely unnoticed. Many references can be found in the writings of Karl Barth.⁷ In particular, Otto Weber, in his *Foundations of Dogmatics*, remarks with respect to the intention and purpose of Böhl's last major dogmatic work in relation to his liberal contemporary Albrecht Ritschl, "Böhl systematized Kohlbrügge's conception (of *Sola Gratia*) and relieved it of some of its tension, especially in his monograph against A. Ritschl, *Von der Rechtfertigung durch den Glauben*."⁸

Ho-Duck Kwon's recent work highlights Böhl's historical relevance as a Reformation-Renaissance figure, offering, in particular, a rich understanding of the human being for our contemporary often existential concentration on the human-being-in-relation. Focusing on the axioms of Böhl's theology, Kwon claims that his historical significance lies in his nonspeculative

⁴ See in Dutch, Willen Balke, *Johannes Wichelhouse: Hoogleraar te Halle en vriend van Dr. H. F. Kohlbrugge* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2000).

⁵ In his dissertation on Böhl, Forster researched and documented this influential connection in Böhl's life. He concludes, "Having then established the inseparable link between Kohlbrügge and Böhl, one can safely say that Böhl is correctly termed a Kohlbrüggian, a follower of Kohlbrügge's theology." Forster, *Eduard Böhl's Concept*, 49.

⁶ Dissertations on Böhl have shown that he was shaped and formed, in terms of his understanding of the Old Testament in relation to the New, in his hermeneutic and his doctrines by Kohlbrügge (who became his father-in-law) and his professor in Halle, Wichelhouse. See Kwon, "Böhls Aufnahme der Reformatische Theologie," 3. Forster traces this historical-theological link in detail. Under the heading "Böhl's Endorsement of Kohlbrügge's Theology," he specifically mentions the influence of Kohlbrügge on Böhl in the areas of hermeneutics (importance of the Old Testament and the unity of both testaments historically and typologically interpreted), anthropology (the exegesis that the human being was created in the image of God as life-sphere, i.e., in wisdom, righteousness and holiness), Christology, and soteriology. See Forster, *Eduard Böhl's Concept*, 29–49.

⁷ See Karl Barth, *Die Protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert: Ihre Vorgeschichte und ihre Geschichte* (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1947), 581; *Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes: Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* (Zurich: EVZ-Verlag, 1955), 234; *Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes: Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* (Zurich: EVZ-Verlag, 1948), 169, 210, 220; *Die Lehre von Gott: Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* (Zurich: EVZ-Verlag, 1958), 317, 383; and *Die Lehre von der Versöhnung: Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* (Zurich: EVZ-Verlag, 1960), 585.

⁸ Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, trans. Darrel L. Gruder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 2:147 (emphasis added).

theology, which can be of real meaning for our contemporary context in terms of the question concerning the existence of the human being in the face of the question of God and nihilism.⁹ Although Kwon focuses primarily on Böhl's positive and nuanced reception of John Calvin, his study is replete with fascinating comparative references to more contemporary theologians such as Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and Wolfhart Pannenberg, with whom he carries on an interesting dialogue in light of Böhl's proposal for a reemergence of Reformation thought for his own time.

Thomas Forster also presents Böhl's theology as a reemergence of Reformation thought. Approaching the subject matter from a more historical-theological perspective, Forster places Böhl in the context of influences on his theology and the controversies that shaped his mature thought as a Reformation theologian. Forster thus sought to let this almost forgotten Reformed voice of the nineteenth century speak again from a historical-theological perspective.¹⁰ The latter intention is also partly the reason for this article specifically focusing on Böhl's doctrines of justification and regeneration or sanctification. To those doctrines I will turn next.

II. *Böhl on Justification*

Speaking of justification proper in his *Dogmatik*, Böhl refers to Romans 3:21–28 and specifically verse 28, “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law,” which he calls the *locus classicus* for the right understanding of the doctrine of justification.¹¹ So, how does one become righteous before God? The answer is, only by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ and the forgiveness of sins in the tribunal of God (*in foro Dei*).

Böhl emphasizes that justification is a legal and judicial matter. Denying the law (the Decalogue) before or after Christ would therefore undermine the doctrine of justification, both in terms of conviction of sins (repentance) and salvation by way of Christ's active and passive obedience to the law of God on behalf of his elect church. In fact, the righteousness of God, imputed to the one who believes, finds its reason and ground in the substitutionary

⁹ See Kwon, “Böhls Aufnahme der Reformatorentheologie,” 225–34.

¹⁰ “Hopefully, with this historico-theological account on the life and the work of Böhl, we will be able to shed some rare shafts of light on a theologian who has wrongfully fallen into oblivion. Thus we hope to introduce a theologian whose life and theology still speak from the grave and of whom the present author believes has deserved a hearing that is long overdue!” Forster, *Eduard Böhl's Concept*, 6.

¹¹ Eduard Böhl, *Dogmatik*, ed. Thomas Schirrmacher (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2004), 412.

work of Jesus Christ, that is, his active and passive obedience. From this perspective, Romans 3:28 is to be understood as the summary of what is written just before verse 28, that is, the law condemns both Gentiles and Jews, implying that justification (i.e., the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ), happens without any regard to works of the law. One is called and counted righteous by faith alone because of the work of Christ's passive and passive obedience alone.¹²

Consequently, according to Böhl, God's one declaration of justification thus consists of two parts: the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, which are both rooted in the work of Jesus Christ for his church. First, Christ stands in for the sinner in the court of God, so that God will accept the sinner as covered, forgiven—that is, he will no longer count his sins against him. This negative side of justification is especially emphasized in Romans 4:6–8, in accordance with Psalm 32:1–2.

Second, Christ's positive merits also serve to secure a verdict. By virtue of Christ's active obedience, the sinner is counted righteous and conforms to God's law. So, a human being is not only absolved from guilt and the punishment for his sins for Christ's sake, but also, and at the same time, Christ's righteousness is positively imputed to the sinner and accredited to him as if it were his own.¹³

Paul conveys this in a sequence of principal thoughts in Romans 5:12–21. In this passage, he calls the obedience of Christ (*dikaiōma*, δικαίωμα) new life (*dikaiōsis zōēs*, δικαίωσις ζωής—justification that brings life [v. 18]), and from this comes the reign of the justified in this life. “For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous” (Rom 5:19). The Christian is pleasing to God and receives new life for the sake of Christ's obedience, just as he or she was not pleasing, but rather condemned to death, because of Adam's disobedience (Rom 5:16–18; cf. Num 23:21–23).

In short, the condemnation (*katakrima*, κατάκριμα), which entailed death, is here contrasted with the judgment of justification that leads to life (*dikaiōsis zōēs*, δικαίωσις ζωής, cf. Rom 5:15–19). Or, what is the same, the imputation of disobedience and its real effects, sin and death, is contrasted with the imputation of obedience with its real effects, righteousness and new life.¹⁴

¹² See *ibid.*, 414–16, cf. 268–70.

¹³ See *ibid.*, 414–16.

¹⁴ See *ibid.*, 420–21.

From this point on, God looks at the sinner as conformed to the law in Christ or “in-lawed” to Christ (1 Cor 9:21) as he looked at them before in intimate connection with Adam (Rom 5:15–21). The one who is thus justified is now made conformable to the image of the Son of God as this was and is the intention of the foreknowledge and predestination of God, according to Romans 8:29, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined [*proōrisen, προώρισεν*] to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.”¹⁵

When in justification God accepts the sinner for the sake of Christ’s merit as the sentence is passed—“You are righteous, your sins are forgiven you”—immediately faith arises in the heart, through the action of the Holy Spirit, and we, as we are, become children of God, joint heirs with Christ (Gal 4:5–7). This act of justification simultaneously takes place in heaven and on earth, as it has taken place in the raising of Christ from the dead (Rom 4:25).¹⁶

Böhl also emphasizes that justification is justification *of the ungodly* (Rom 4:5). What is important is that the subject of imputation, standing before the tribunal of God, is not to be considered as altered, either by infusion of grace or by a consideration of the new man born within.¹⁷ Biblically speaking, justification happens to the entire person, that is, to the man in himself old, the sinner, who is nevertheless, by way of forgiveness and imputation, new.¹⁸ In this way, no alteration of the subject of justification has taken place. Otherwise, justification would be a verdict without a true subject. “God would have to deal with an entirely different and transformed subject, consequently, the verdict would have no subject.”¹⁹

In theological terms, it is always a synthetic judgment (an effective judgment without any regard for anything that is in the subject) and never in any way an analytic judgment (a judgment that considers something present within the subject justified).²⁰

¹⁵ See *ibid.*

¹⁶ See *ibid.*, 419–20.

¹⁷ See *ibid.*, 414.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 420. See also Eduard Böhl, *The Reformed Doctrine of Justification*, trans. C. H. Riedesel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 275.

¹⁹ Böhl, *Reformed Doctrine*, 276.

²⁰ The language of synthetic and analytic judgments is Kantian. Albert Ritschl (1822–1889) used this language following Matthias Schneckenburger (1804–1848). Robert Mackintosh writes, “God ‘justifies the ungodly.’ As Ritschl expresses it in Kantian language, the decree of justification is ‘synthetic.’ He thinks Protestantism is deteriorating when the divine sentence comes to be viewed as ‘analytic’; the *believer* is justified!” Robert Mackintosh, *Albrecht Ritschl and His School* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1915), 88.

III. *Justification and Regeneration*

For Böhl it is impossible to understand justification and regeneration (or rebirth) as separate from the one declaration of forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.²¹ Rebirth or new life does not exist before justification. Therefore, the new birth also cannot be considered as an unconscious happening but must be considered as a conscious occurrence. The spoken word and declaration of justification *is* the seed or power unto new life and regeneration. This living word of God is received by faith, because of Christ the Savior, as worked by his Spirit.

Discussing justification in relation to regeneration, Böhl notes that a too-one-sided emphasis on justification as forensic does not do justice to the whole reality and concept of justification. According to the Hebrew idiom, *to justify* means *to pronounce righteous*.²² However, according to Böhl, the Lutheran Formula of Concord (1577) was not right to assume that its forensic character was the definitive side of justification. Having assumed that the forensic character was the definitive side of justification, the writers of the Formula of Concord sought to supplement what was lacking in the almost exclusive forensic doctrine of justification by way of other doctrines of grace. However, they thereby weakened justification, perceiving it to be merely an entrance beyond which was to be found the real inner sanctuary and thus forced justification out of its central place. The word of justification was supplemented by the inner sphere and activity of the human subject.

First, what is at stake here is the right translation and interpretation of the Scriptures. Many read and interpreted the so-called golden chain of salvation as expressed in Romans 8:30 wrongly. “A preliminary *actus forensis* should not be placed in the second member of the golden chain of salvation (whom he called them he also justified), which should then be followed in the third

²¹ Richard Muller comments on Böhl’s understanding of justification, “Böhl argues strictly for imputation, without impartation of righteousness or holiness, lamenting an *ordo salutis* that distinguishes but includes both,” Richard A. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 162, note 5. This is clearly too narrow. Böhl strongly defends the idea that the act of God justifying the sinner by forgiveness of sins and imputation of the righteousness of Christ includes regeneration. In fact, according to Böhl, theologians undermined the doctrine of justification when they started to distinguish overly, or even separate justification and regeneration. The result was that the imputative act of justification had somehow to be supplemented or complemented, with the further result that the supplementation, in whatever way, became more important than the act of justification.

²² Böhl, *Reformed Doctrine*, 199.

member (he glorified) by the infusion of new qualities, or the *iustitia inhaerens* proceeding from justification.”²³

Second, the remedy against this tendency is to conceive of justification and regeneration together in accordance with the word of God’s Spirit. This was clearly expressed in Melanchthon’s *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*. Böhl comments,

There is, according to the Apology (as Loofs has nicely demonstrated) only one act, justification, in which all the other acts of God are included. ... Melanchthon ... uses the expressions to justify, to render righteous, to regenerate, as equivalent and synonymous expressions and identifies regeneration with remission of sins. With him remission of sins is regeneration or renewal of life.²⁴

In fact, precisely when we deal with justification and regeneration in this way the unity of the message, character, and function of the word of God becomes clear. Separating or chronologically and effectively distinguishing between the two can be considered the error that many have committed and the cause of the subsumption of the word of God under fleshly categories again. Third, the ultimate task, therefore, is not to corrupt the personal and living voice of God. The correct spiritual understanding of justification vindicates the word of God in accordance with its own sphere and power, that is, its regenerative power. Placing regeneration before or above justification, in fact, degenerates the simplicity of the word and corrupts the living voice of God. “Here not merely nature faces nature but person faces person—God facing the creature created in His image.”²⁵

Finally, Böhl’s doctrine of the word of justification as related to regeneration also provides an insight into the doctrine of revelation as determining the limits of our existence as religious creatures under God. Separating or chronologically and effectively distinguishing the two will result in a soteriology that will tend to find its point of concentration in the human being and the horizon of his or her fleshly existence. Let me elaborate on these seminal thoughts relating justification to the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

IV. Justification and the Holy Spirit

Böhl emphasizes that faith in the word of imputation as the work of the Holy Spirit creates a wholly new situation. “This effects peace with God

²³ Ibid., 201.

²⁴ Ibid., 202.

²⁵ Ibid., 211.

(Rom. V. 1), and whoever believeth in the Son hath eternal life. A mediating substance is not required.” He adds, referring to Melancthon, “And through the Holy Spirit there are kindled in us a love of God and a joy resting in God, and other such motives as the Holy Spirit Himself is.”²⁶

With this act of God nothing of the human nature or flesh is renewed or restored, but the old, as a whole, is redirected by the Holy Spirit. At the same time, by faith, the believer is an entirely new person in Jesus Christ, and in that new situation the person of the Holy Spirit takes the Christian by the hand and guides him in the ways and works prepared in advance (Eph 2:10). What is most important in this regard is that the Holy Spirit “*is the abiding personal author of all those effects which are customarily comprehended under the term ‘sanctification.’*”²⁷

Here too only faith and complete trust count, as “faith is a living thing, in so far as God’s Spirit makes it alive—it must come forth and manifest itself. It cannot content itself with an inner mystical enjoyment of God;—it must possess itself of the actual affairs of the world and reign in life through Jesus Christ.”²⁸

1. *A Short Historical-Theological Excursus*

I now relate all this to the history of theology, with regard to justification, regeneration, and the Holy Spirit. According to Böhl, the seventeenth century had a habit of making a sharp distinction between God and the gifts of God, the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit. However, he adds, “This contrast between God and the gifts of God which dwell in believers is not admissible in the economy of grace.”²⁹

When such a contrast is made, according to Böhl, the human being is tempted and in danger of falling back into the economy of the old creation and the law. In that scheme, the created human being is then someone

for [whom] God awakens the necessary disposition, (*habitus*), by offering a reward; but all that is thus accomplished in man is a natural strength, talent and excellence (*habitual state*) inculcated by numerous repetitions, and not an *opus Spiritus sancti*, the fruit of the Spirit. The same result is attained by training. Everything which in philosophy is praised as character and virtue belongs to the sphere of the *opera legis* [the works of the law].³⁰

²⁶ Ibid., 34.

²⁷ Ibid., 236 (emphasis his).

²⁸ Ibid., 242.

²⁹ Ibid., 170.

³⁰ Ibid.

For these reasons Böhl opposes the introduction of terms like habit and the habitual into biblical exposition and theology. According to him they are, by definition, alien to the sphere of God's grace-revelation. Such terms and concepts belong to the economy of unjustified rational or ethical thinking and practice.

Consequently, (re)-introducing such Aristotelian methodological terms cannot be considered a neutral procedure.³¹ They are not neutral but already conditioned by unjustified and unregenerated qualities and categories. From the perspective of the fundamental contrast between nature and grace, law and gospel, terms like habit and habitual belong to the realm of fallen nature, rationality, and law and therefore should not be used in the realm of faith, grace, and the gospel.

With these thoughts Böhl looks back in time, and his thoughts hark back to the early Lutheran categories and confessions as related to justification and regeneration. To demonstrate this, I will refer to and elaborate on Article 5 of the Schwabach Articles, which were written in 1529, and then come back to Böhl.

Therefore, because all people are sinners and are subject to sin, death, and the devil, it is impossible by one's own power or good works for a person to do enough to become once again righteous and upright. Certainly one cannot prepare oneself for, or bring about, righteousness. On the contrary, the more a person tries to work it out alone, the worse it becomes for that person. There is, however, only one path to righteousness and redemption from sin and death: that a person, apart from any merit or work, believes in the Son of God, who suffered for us, and so forth, as said above. This faith is our righteousness. God intends to impute righteousness to and regard this faith as our righteousness, uprightness, and holiness. All who have such faith in the Son of God are given the forgiveness of all sins and eternal life. For the sake of the Son of God, they shall be accepted into divine grace and are children in

³¹ Muller and his methodology can best be understood as having come out of this turn to history and scholasticism. See Richard A. Muller, *The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary Formulation*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 6 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991). John Frame quotes Muller: "The reason that Scripture is authoritative—apart from our traditional doctrinal statements concerning its divine inspiration and its authority as a doctrinal norm—is that its contents are mirrored in the life of the church and that, in this historical process of reflection, the believing community has gradually identified as canon the books that rightly guide and reflect its faith while setting aside those books that fail to reflect its faith adequately." John Frame, "Muller on Theology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 56 (1994): 146. Even the Scriptures are thus approached from a so-called objective historical point of view of seeing things together in their development, historically, experientially, and systematically, besides what we believe concerning them. Hereby, revelation and the history of its interpretation are placed in the domain of human experience, rationality, with an assumption of neutrality correspondent to an assumption of a would-be autonomous individual or process.

the kingdom of God, and so forth, as St. Paul and St. John in his Gospel teach so richly: Romans 10[:10], “For one believes with the heart and so is justified”; Romans 4[:22], “his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness.” John 3[:16b] says, “everyone who believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”³²

It is clear from this article that, first, it is impossible for anyone to prepare themselves for justification in any way. In fact, such an endeavor will only make worse those who strive to do so. Second, Christ, the Son of God, is the primary object of faith. Third, justification by faith is described in terms of being reckoned righteous, that is, it is not a process, but it is punctiliar³³ and so at the same time includes forgiveness of sins, the gift of eternal life, and adoption into the spiritual kingdom of God. In other words, forgiveness of sins and being reckoned righteous are two elements of the same declaration and the gift of God given to the subject of justification. To this is simultaneously added adoption as children and the gift of eternal life. There is no temporal gap between any of these gracious acts and the gifts of God. They are all aspects of justification, according to this article.

Why is this important to maintain confessionally? It is vital because the presupposition of justification is that *God* speaks, acts, and gives gifts for the sake of Christ and his glory. To presuppose human acts, methods, or givens as part of the process of salvation itself, in part or in whole, is to subvert and undermine the doctrine of justification. Precisely the latter was later done with respect to regeneration and faith. Regeneration came to be regarded as a seed planted *in* man and faith as a disposition or habit *of* man, and so the old economy of law was reintroduced.

For Luther, therefore, any rational, physical, psychological, or moral correlation or cooperation with God, in or by man, falls under the condemnation of the law of God. To base justification upon any of it, in any way, is illusory. To do so would be to return to medieval theology.

God’s acts of justification and regeneration cannot be fitted or suited into a rational, moral, or physical system. The human rational, moral, or physical spheres, unlike justification and regeneration, belong to the economy of the law and never to the economy of grace. The two should not be mixed. Only faith counts here. Only Christ and his righteousness count here. Only the Holy Spirit counts here. Only God’s justifying grace and love count here.

³² Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen, eds., *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 85.

³³ If this were not so, it would completely contradict the fact that Luther compared justification “to a mathematical point” (*ad punctum mathematicum*). See, Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, trans. Walter A. Hansen (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 94.

Therefore, Luther and the early Lutheran confessions refined justification by faith in all its components “to a mathematical point” (*ad punctum mathematicum*).³⁴ Only in this way is the gospel of Christ and his righteousness a continuous power unto salvation while the subjects of God’s justifying grace go from faith to faith as sinful beggars, at the same time justified and sinner (*simul iustus et peccator*).

In his second lectures on Galatians (Gal 3:6), Luther states, “The Christian is righteous and a sinner at the same time (*simul iustus et peccator*), holy and profane, an enemy of God and a child of God. Only those who understand the true meaning of justification will understand this apparent paradox.”³⁵

To say all this from another perspective, God’s justifying action involves two persons: God and the human being who trusts in him. Nothing in this relationship can be reduced to parts, because the word of God determines the whole of the believer, God speaking to the whole man who trusts in God’s *creative* word. The whole identity and life of the believer depend on this. Therefore, it would be unimaginable to temporally, or otherwise, conceive of a gap or lack of synchronicity between justification, new birth, regeneration, and existing as a new creature. In this context Robert Kolb states,

Luther explored both the noun “righteousness” and the verb “to make righteous” or “justify” in biblical contexts, concluding that God acts to restore the human righteousness he had created in the first place by speaking the “new creature” (Gal. 6:15) into existence through forgiveness of sins. Paul spoke of the conversion of the wicked, “which happens through the Word”, “a new work of creation”, in 2 Corinthians 4:6, Luther told his students in 1535. ... Justification is also an act of new creation. ... he wrote, “justification is in reality a kind of rebirth in newness” (John 1:12–13; 1 John 5:1), “a washing or regeneration and renewal” (Titus 3:5), new birth (John 3:3); the Holy Spirit calls God’s people “righteous, a new creature of God and the first fruits of God’s creatures, who, according to his will brought us forth by his Word” (2 Cor. 5:17; Jas. 1:18).³⁶

Nature or law should, therefore, not be mixed or confused with grace or the gospel. The wisdom of man or philosophy should not be confused with the wisdom of God or revelation. It is not that such terms cannot be useful,

³⁴ See Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 94.

³⁵ As quoted in Gerald Bray, *God Has Spoken: A History of Christian Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 841.

³⁶ Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 125, 127.

but they should remain and continue to be used in their proper spheres and domains. When this is not done, the word of God and the Holy Spirit are pulled into the sphere of the rational, the seeable, the graspable. In this process, the faithfulness of God is turned into *an aid*, and the law and the Holy Spirit of God into handmaids of the human being.

2. *Back to Böhl*

I now return to Böhl. Kolb writes that one must understand that

this law of works has once for all been abrogated and is an abomination to God—yea, the slightest cooperation on our part, (for this would pertain to the law) is an abomination to Him, since Christ bowed His head on Calvary and since the voice came from his lips: “It is finished.”³⁷

Böhl singles out Petrus van Mastricht (1630–1706), for whom faith is a disposition described in terms of an Aristotelian method. For him faith is the *habitus fidei*;³⁸ he does not understand faith as an empty hand. In turn, when the language of *habitus-actus* is used, the subject of investigation becomes what is received internally for the purpose of orderly arranging, methodizing, and living according to theoretical-practical skills accrued. In fact, Mastricht defines theology entirely in terms of habits. He writes, “According to its eminence, theology is all of the habits,”³⁹ since it possesses the perfection of them all. For this reason we have most carefully defined it as ‘doctrine,’ which implies all those habits and does not restrict theology to any habit.”⁴⁰

From this it follows—since *habitus* can be understood as acquired dispositions of thoughts and actions—that theology is preeminently practical. “Rather, we call it practical, even preeminently practical.”⁴¹

So, the grace of God becomes a theoretical-practical or “scientific” object as it is drawn into the physical, psychical, and active sphere of the human being. We can also say very simply, grace perfects nature, since grace possesses the perfection of all the natural habits as found, in this case, in Aristotle’s

³⁷ Ibid., 171.

³⁸ See Adriaan C. Neele, *Petrus van Mastricht, 1630–1706: Reformed Orthodoxy; Method and Piety*, BSCH 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 110–11.

³⁹ By “all of the habits,” he means all of “Aristotle’s intellectual habits, discussed in book 6 of his *Nicomachean Ethics* ... theology is all of the habits, since it possesses the perfection of all of them.” Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, vol 1: *Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 104–5.

⁴⁰ Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 1:105.

⁴¹ Ibid., 1:107.

natural philosophy. This clearly is a return to medieval theology in the tradition of Thomas Aquinas and others.⁴²

For this reason, Böhl writes, “With Peter von Mastricht, a genuine type of the Reformed Middle Ages, justification by faith grows very dim.” For Mastricht the mystical union stands central; it “is introduced by faith; this faith has been cast into the heart as a seed to sprout and grow.”⁴³ In Mastricht’s doctrine of salvation, regeneration *precedes* justification: “By regeneration the seed of faith is cast into the heart of the called; in conversion the seed comes forth from the soil, and now follows the mystical union with Christ. And among the attendant results justification comes first followed by sanctification.” In fact, with this, Mastricht was typical of much of the seventeenth century.

Concerning Mastricht and others, Böhl concludes,

It is impossible to extract one’s self from the physical processes but especially does the assumption of sanctifying powers in sanctification give rise to unevangelical fruits. The doctrine of the old and new man, of spirit and flesh, lies prostrate, and the Christian has relapsed to be entirely a creature of the law, a mixture of flesh and spirit, of heavenly and earthly, (everything by halves) and is not perfected by the testing furnace of life. ... In this process the true doctrine of justification is entirely forgotten—that such a representation should cause spiritual pride to reach an intolerable degree, yea, that sincere Christians should be horrified, is quite conceivable.⁴⁴

Therefore, for Böhl, justification and the gift of the Holy Spirit must consequently be understood as *absolute* in relation to the human being. “The new man that is daily raised up needs no gifts; the one gift, the Holy

⁴² In the work of W. J. van Asselt, P. L. Rouwendal, et al., *Inleiding in de Gereformeerde Scholastiek* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1998), a special chapter is dedicated to Aristotle. In it, T. T. J. Pleizier and P. M. Wisse discuss the philosophy and terminology of Aristotle as important for understanding the scholastic tradition. They note that Aristotle considered circular reasoning (*petitio principii*) as faulty reasoning (*drogredenatie*; see T. T. J. Pleizier and P. M. Wisse, “Aristoteles,” in *ibid.*, 33). However, I would stress that we should not hesitate to apply this mode of reasoning when speaking of God and his revelation. In fact, such presuppositional reasoning is precisely the way to prevent the biblical and dogmatic questions, as rooted in God’s revelation, from falling into the domain of human subjectivity and human rationality. Any other way presupposes a certain independence or neutrality of the human subject vis-à-vis God’s revelation and thereby introduces a determinative human subjectivity into the process of understanding its meaning, effect, and execution. Positively appropriating Aristotle, even if merely on the level of method, as many (Reformed) scholastics have done, assumes that one can separate method from content. However, such reasoning can perhaps better be termed faulty reasoning. The medium is never neutral, especially when one speaks of fallen human reason.

⁴³ Böhl, *Reformed Doctrine*, 65.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* See also Eduard Böhl, *Von der Rechtfertigung durch den Glauben: Ein Beitrag zur Rettung des protestantischen Cardinal Dogmas* (Amsterdam: Leipzig & Scheffer, 1890), 55–56.

Ghost in persona, is sufficient for him. This first and last guarantee of his (the new man's) existence (Ps. LI. 13) he never loses. Likewise, the life which has been obtained for the sinner by Christ, in place of the death environing man, cannot be lost."⁴⁵ This *is* assurance.

When the Holy Spirit bestows special gifts on us, it is so we can pursue a particular calling or office for the benefit of the church. Good works, or a special goal in terms of *fleshly* improvement or transformation, "are not the object of justification."⁴⁶ Being guided by the power of the third person of the Trinity is God's and Christ's gift to the believer.

To conclude, when one has understood the true nature of justification by faith, one also acknowledges the true design and purpose of divine revelation. Faith acknowledges God's word in its sovereignty and power. The result is that the human being can be the human being, sin can be sin, death can be death, and God's law can be God's law. Everything must be left in its own place, as the sinner by faith and justification is placed in a righteous new life. In this way, faith accepts and rejoices in things as they are judged, created, given, and directed by the living God for sanctification.

V. *Preaching and Pastoral Ramifications*

In the last sections of his book on justification, which contain practical advice, Böhl remarks that the life of the justified is a life certainly filled with real temptations and trials. He asks, "Did not Luther have temptations and give offense in consequence of which he had to bear the cross? Oh, in abundance. ... The flesh, the world, and the devil did not cease to molest him; but he deemed such temptations highly necessary."⁴⁷

Yes, the pangs of conscience, temptations, and struggles are real, and they must be, also for us. He writes, "As if any one could dispense therefrom, save God alone. We as teachers of the Church can at least not do otherwise than to permit the gate to be strait and the way narrow.—We must also insist on this conflict and be satisfied with the words of Jesus: 'and few there be that find it,' (the way)."⁴⁸

Therefore, according to Böhl, one must always first reckon with God as judge and so also understand real temptation, sin, and the cross. "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, they will

⁴⁵ Böhl, *Reformed Doctrine*, 172–73.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

not behold the dawn' (Isa. VIII. 20)."⁴⁹ But at the same time, Böhl writes, "God no longer sees any evil or unrighteousness in his people. In place of judgment, which had death as its result, stands here the righteousness unto life, that is to say, the declaration of righteousness, which brings life (cf. Rom. 5:15ff.)."⁵⁰

Thus, and in this way, is promoted faithful preaching of law and gospel, so needed in our days. This, in turn, will and can bring about a true understanding and real comfort of the doctrine of justification of the ungodly: ungodly, yet wholly delivered by Christ and so guided by the sovereign Spirit of God in word and deed.

To put it somewhat differently, the word of declaration of judgment upon sin, and its real effects, stands over against the word of declaration of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ and its real effects. To quote once more,

Paul states definitely (Rom. V. 21,) that just as sin hath reigned in death, that is, that it exercised its dominion through death as medium, so now grace reigns through righteousness, (righteousness characterizes the nature and manner of this reigning,) unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.⁵¹

This, in turn, can and perhaps must be translated into the practice of preaching and pastoral work, in which God is left God; his word, his word; and his Spirit, his Spirit. Only in this way will the honor be truly allocated to God, Christ, and the Spirit. His sovereignty in justice and righteousness—in the application of law and grace, repentance and faith—will once again become central in faith and practice, so justifying God in all his ways and works.

What this asks for is that in preaching, the old must be acknowledged as standing over against the new, death over against life, sin over against righteousness, and even the devil over against the Triune God. And so, in this way the preaching of faith in God's word of declaration and action, based on the merits of Christ (justification), and a personal *faith* in the gift that accompanies it, namely, the Holy Spirit, can no longer admit of any new law or marks in the human being, or of works done by the human being. At the same time, in this way the Spirit, as the other Comforter, glorifies Jesus and will bring sinners again and again back to the feet of the cross of Christ. "And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us

⁴⁹ Ibid., 308.

⁵⁰ Böhl, *Dogmatik*, 420.

⁵¹ Böhl, *Reformed Doctrine*, 234.

wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’” (1 Cor 1:30–31 esv). This is in the end the song of Böhl’s *Dogmatik*, according to Dr. Willen Balke,⁵² a song we can still sing today.

⁵² See Balke, *Eduard Böhl*, 131.

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