

XII.

**Sin Not a Mere Negation.**

“I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind.”—*Rom. vii. 23.*

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Dr. Böhl’s theory, that sin is a mere *loss, default, or lack*, is an error almost as critical as Manicheism.

This should not be misunderstood. This theory does not deny that the sinner is unholy, nor that he ought to be holy. It says two things: (1) that there is no holiness in the sinner; but—and this indicates the real character of sin—(2) that there ought to be holiness in him. A stone does not hear, nor a book see; yet the one is not deaf, nor the other blind. But the man who lost both hearing and seeing is both; for to his being as a man both are essential. A chair can not walk; yet it is not lame, for it is not expected to walk. But the cripple is lame, for walking belongs to his being. A horse is not holy, neither is it a sinner. But man is a sinner, for he is unholy, and holiness belongs to his being; an unholy man is defective and unnatural. Sin, says St. John, “Is unrighteousness,” non-conformity to the law, or, literally, lawlessness, anomaly. Hence sin appears only in beings subject to the *divine, moral law*, and consists in *non-conformity* to that law.

Thus far this view presents only clear, pure truth; and every effort to give sin positive, independent entity contradicts the Word and leads to Manicheism, as may be seen in the otherwise fervent and conscientious Moravian Brethren.

Scripture denies that sin has a positive character implying that it has independent being. Independent being is either created or uncreated. If uncreated, it must be eternal, and this is God alone. If created, God must be its Creator; which can not be, for He is not sin’s Author. Hence Scripture does not teach that the power of evil inheres in matter, but in Satan. And what is Satan? Not an evil substance, but a being intended for, and endued with holiness; who abandoned himself to unholiness, in which he entangled himself hopelessly, becoming absolutely unholy. The doctrine of Satan opposes the false notion that sin has entity. The idea that sin is a power, in the sense of a faculty exercised by an independent being, is inconsistent with Scripture.

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So far we heartily agree with Dr. Böhl, and acknowledge that he has maintained the old and tried conviction of believers, and the positive confession of the Church.

But from this he infers that, before and after the fall, Adam remained the same, with this difference only, that after the fall he lost the splendor of righteousness in which he had walked hitherto. So far as his powers and being were concerned, he remained the same. And this we do not accept. It would make man like a lamp brightly burning but soon extinguished, when it became a dark body. Or like a fireplace radiant with the glow and heat of fire this moment, cold and dark the next. Or like a piece of iron magnetized by the electric current,

which gives it power to attract; but the current withdrawn it ceases to be a magnet. When the light was blown out, the lamp remained uninjured. When the fire died, the hearth remained what it was before. And when the electric fluid left the iron, it was iron still.

And so says Dr. Böhl regarding man. As the current passes through the iron and magnetizes it, so did the divine righteousness pass through Adam and make him holy. As the lamp shines when lighted by the spark, so did Adam shine when touched by the spark of righteousness. And as the hearth is aglow with the fire, so was Adam radiant with the righteousness created in him. But now sin comes in. That is, the lamp goes out, the hearth becomes cold, the magnet is mere iron again. And man stands robbed of his splendor, dark and unable to attract. But for the rest he remained what he was. Dr. Böhl says distinctly that man remained the same before and after the fall.

And with this we do not agree. As a sinner he was still man, undoubtedly, but man as the fathers confessed at Dordt (3d and 4th, Head of Doctrine, art. xvi.): “That man by the fall did not cease to be a creature endowed with understanding and will, nor did sin, which pervaded the whole race of mankind, deprive him of the human nature, but brought upon him depravity and spiritual death.” Dr. Böhl’s statement, “Wenn wir die Creatur aus jenem Stande hin ausgetreten denken, so bleibt diese Creatur intact,”<sup>6</sup> directly contradicts this pure confession of the Reformed churches.

No, the creature did not remain intact, but sin so seriously injured him that he became corrupt even unto death. And tho we acknowledge that sin has no real *being* in itself, yet with equal decision we confess, with our church, that its *workings* are by no means merely negative, nor exclusively privative, but most assuredly very *positive*.

Scripture and our best theologians (Rivet, Wallaeus, and Polyander by name, in their Synopsis) teach this so positively that it is almost unimaginable how Dr. Böhl could reach any other conclusion. Wherefore we are inclined to believe that on this point he agrees with the confession of the orthodox churches, but that he represents this matter in such a strange manner for the sake of something else and for an entirely different reason.

If we may be frank, we would represent Dr. Böhl’s course of reasoning as follows. “My teacher, Dr. Köhlbrugge, used to oppose strenuously the men that proudly say to the unconverted: Touch me not, for I am holier than thou. He used to emphasize the fact that the child of God, considered for a moment out of Christ, lies in the midst of death, just as much as the unconverted. Hence regeneration does not change man in the least. Before and after regeneration he is exactly the same, with this difference only, that the converted man *believes* and by his *faith* walks in reflected righteousness. And if this be so, then regarding the fall the reverse is true; that is, before and after the fall man as such remained the same; the only change was that in the fall he left the righteousness in which he stood before.”

6 “Removed by sin from this state [of righteousness], man remains intact.”

Of course we may be mistaken, but we dare surmise that in this Way Dr. Böhl was tempted to this strange representation, and even to declare, as Rome teaches, that desire in itself is no sin; something which the Reformed Church on the ground of the Tenth Commandment has always opposed.

In fact, the question regarding the fall and the restoration is the same. If the restoration does not affect our being, then neither can the fall have affected it. If redemption means only that a sinner is set in the light of Christ's righteousness, then the fall can mean no more than that man stepped out of that light. The two belong together. As it was in the fall, so it must be in the restoration. A man's confession regarding redemption will, if he be consistent, tell what his confession is regarding the fall.

Hence if Dr. Köhlbrugge had confessed that the restoration leaves our being unchanged and only translates us into a sphere of righteousness, then it should be conceded that he also represented the fall as leaving man and his nature intact. And this is the very thing which we can not concede. Dr. Köhlbrugge has uncovered the actual corruption of our nature so forcibly and positively that we will never believe that according to his confession the fall left our being and nature intact. Neither can we concede that, according to his confession, in the restoration our being is left unchanged, even tho he connected that change, very rightly, with the mystic union and with the dying to sin in death.

If he had actually intended to teach what many of his followers allege that he did teach, then we would call his tendency very definitely *erroneous*. But since we can not interpret him without taking into account the misrepresentations which he so strongly opposed, and especially since his confession concerning the corruption of our nature was so complete, we maintain that he did not teach what many of his followers offer in his name.

Hence our way is in the very opposite direction. Dr. Böhl says in other words: "Dr. Köhlbrugge, in his doctrine of redemption, starts from the idea that redemption leaves the sinner essentially unchanged; hence neither can sin have affected him essentially." While, on the contrary, we say: "The confession of Köhlbrugge regarding the corruption of our nature is so complete that he could not but confess that in the fall, and therefore in the restoration, our nature was changed."

But be that as it may, this is sure, that, according to the word and the constant doctrine of our Church, sin, altho it is essentially and exclusively privative and lacking independent existence, is yet in its *consequences* positive and in its *workings* destructive.

Our nature did not remain *unchanged*, but it became corrupt; and *corruption* is the significant word which indicates the fatal, positive effects which resulted from this loss of life and light.

A plant needs light to flourish; light excluded, it not only languishes, but soon withers, decays, and at last mildews; and this is, corruption. Cancer and smallpox are not merely



loss of health; but have a *positive* action, which destroys the tissues, creates morbid growth, and *corrupts* the body. A corpse is not merely a lifeless body, but the seat of dissolution and corruption. In like manner we are conscious that sin is not merely the *deprivation* of holiness, but we feel its fearful activity, corruption, and dissolution which destroy. Strongest proof is the fact that we do not joyfully welcome God's grace entering the heart, but with our whole nature oppose it. There is conflict which would be impossible if that deprivation and loss had not developed evil which opposes God.

This corruption does not stop until the body is dissolved into its original constituents. We do not know what became of the bodies of Moses, Enoch, and Elijah. The Scripture makes exceptions. Christ did not see corruption, and believers living at the Lord's return will escape bodily dissolution. But all others, millions upon millions, will sicken and die; and return to the dust. Physical disease and death are types of soul-corruption which mere words fail to express.

Scripture and experience show clearly that Satan is not merely bereaved, emptied, and lacking, but that he causes a positive, corrupting activity to proceed from him. And so, tho in less degree, the soul has become corrupt; not only in the sense of being dark instead of light, chilled instead of warm, but that this deprivation has resulted in positive destruction and corruption. Cold is loss of heat, which on reaching the freezing-point causes positive injury to the body. And such is sin. As to its *being*, it is loss, deprivation, and nakedness. And these cause in body and soul a destructive working which affects man's whole nature, binding him with the fetters of corruption, altho he ceases not to be man.

We reconcile sin's *privative being* with its *positive working* as follows: depriving the ceaseless activity of man's nature of correct guidance, it runs in the wrong direction, and wrests and destroys itself.

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## XIII.

**Sin a Power in Reversed Action.**

"If ye live after the flesh ye shall die."—*Rom. viii. 13.*

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Altho sin is originally and essentially a loss, a lack, and a deprivation, in its working it is a positive evil and a malignant power.

This is shown by the apostolic injunction not only to put on the new man, but also to put off the old man with his works. The well-known theologian Maccovius, commenting on this, aptly remarks: "This could not be enjoined if sin were merely a loss of light and life; for a mere lack ceases as soon as it is supplied.

If sin were merely a loss of righteousness, nothing more would be needed than its restoration, and sin would disappear. The putting off of the old man, or the laying down of the yoke of sin, etc., would be out of the question. The light has only to dispel the soul's darkness, and its health will be restored. But experience shows that after we are enlightened, and the Holy Spirit has entered our heart, there is still a fearful power of evil in us; and this together with the oft-repeated command not only to accept the righteousness of God which is by faith, but also to put off, to lay aside, to be separate from all that is evil, proves sin's positive character and evil power in individuals and in society, in spite of its privative character.

Hence the Church confesses that our nature has become corrupt, which of course refers us back to the divine image. Our nature did not disappear, nor cease to be our nature, but in its original features and organs it remained the same; the divine image was not lost, not even partly lost, but remained stamped upon every man, and will remain even in the place of eternal destruction, simply because he can not divest himself of his nature except by annihilation. But this being impossible, he must retain it *as man* and in *man's nature*. Wherefore Scripture teaches long after the fall that the sinner is created after the image of God. But concerning the *effects* of its features in the fallen human nature, the very *opposite* is true: these features have totally disappeared; the ruins which remain speak at the most only of the glory and beauty which have perished.

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Hence the two meanings of the divine image should no longer be confounded. Forasmuch as it lies *in our nature* it will remain evermore; so far as its effects upon the quality, *i.e.*, the condition, of our nature are concerned, *it is lost*. The human nature can be corrupted, but not annihilated. It can exist *as nature*, even tho its former attributes be lost, and replaced by opposite workings.

Our fathers discriminated between our nature's *being* and its *well-being*. In its *being* it remained uninjured and unharmed, *i.e.*, it is still the real, human nature. But in its *condition*, *i.e.*, in its attributes, workings, and influences, in its *well-being* it is wholly changed, and corrupt. Tho a poisoned insect-sting destroys the sight, yet the eye remains. So is the human