

Antinomianism

We Are Not Set Free to Sin

Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he (Christ) is righteous.

1 John 3:7

Antinomianism means "anti-law-ism" and is an ethical system that denies the binding nature of any supposedly absolute or external laws on individual behavior.

Antinomianism is a name used for several views that have denied that God's law in Scripture should directly control the Christian's life.

As Christians, and as we have already learned, we are not under law but under grace, meaning that we have been set free from the law as a system of salvation. The great error of antinomianism is that freedom from the law as a way of salvation brings with it freedom from the law as a guide to conduct. However, while the civil and ceremonial laws of ancient Israel have been rendered obsolete, the moral law (as expressed in the Ten Commandments and expounded by Jesus) remains the standard by which we will be judged and the guide we strive to adhere to as, with the Spirit's help, we imitate God. In fact Paul, who was emphatic in expressing that the law can't save us, appealed to the moral law as the standard looked to in directing Christian conduct.

Galatians 5:13-14

¹³ *You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature^[a]; rather, serve one another in love.* ¹⁴ *The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."*

The moral law continues to have three uses in the New Covenant: to restrain sin in God's common grace (the "civil" use), to act as a schoolmaster to lead us to Christ (the "pedagogical" use), and to instruct Christians in godliness (the "normative" use). This "third use" of the law (its primary use, according to John Calvin) is not recognized by all Christians, but is an important part of the broader Reformed tradition.

It must be stressed that the moral law, as crystallized in the Decalogue and opened up in the ethical teaching of both Testaments, is one coherent law, given to be a code of practice for God's people in every age. In addition, repentance means resolving henceforth to seek God's help in keeping that law. The Spirit is given to empower law-keeping and make us more and more like Christ, the archetypal law-keeper. This law-keeping is in fact the fulfilling of our human nature and Scripture holds out no hope of salvation for any whom, whatever their profession of faith, do not seek to turn from sin to righteousness.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

⁹ *Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders ¹⁰ nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*

Romans 5:20-6:2

²⁰ *The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, ²¹ so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Romans 6

Dead to Sin, Alive in Christ

¹ *What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?*

In Christ, we have been delivered from the penalty of sin, are being delivered from the power of sin, and will be delivered from the presence of sin. We have been set free, are being set free, and will be set free! To deliberately and happily sin without a desire to be holy is not a mark of the redeemed in Christ, but of the unbelieving pagan. Out of a thankful heart and an awareness of being set free, believers recognize sin as an offense to the holy God who saved them. For He saved them not because of righteous things they had done but because of His mercy.

Antinomians, desiring to honor the unlimited pardoning grace of God, maintain that the sins of believers are not accounted as such to the new man but only to the old, and that it is quite unnecessary for them to pray for the forgiveness of sins. For fear of this Antinomian position even some Reformed theologians had scruples about teaching that the future sins of believers are also pardoned in justification.

Regarding sanctification, Antinomians feel no need of carefully avoiding sin, since this affects only the old man which is condemned to death, and not the new man which is holy with the holiness of Christ.

Scripture teaches otherwise.

2 Corinthians 7:1

¹ Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

1 Peter 1:22

²² Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.

Regarding works, Antinomians maintain that they are not necessary at all claiming that since Christ not only bore the penalty of sin, but also met the positive demands of the law; the believer is free from the obligation to observe it.

However, there can be no doubt about the necessity of good works properly understood.

They (works) cannot be regarded as necessary to merit salvation, nor as a means to retain a hold on salvation, nor even as the only way along which to proceed to eternal glory, for children enter salvation without having done any good works.

At the same time good works necessarily follow from the union of believers with Christ.

John 15:5

⁵ *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*

They (works) are also necessary as required by God.

Romans 7:4

⁴ *So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God.*

Romans 8:12-13

¹² *Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. ¹³ For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live,*

Works are the fruits of faith.

James 2:17

¹⁷ *In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*

Works are an expression of gratitude.

1 Corinthians 6:20

²⁰ *you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.*

Good works are to be done to bring glory to God.

John 15:8

⁸ *This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.*

So clearly the Antinomian position of good works not being at all necessary does not agree with Scripture.

Regarding the Word of God (Holy Scripture) as a means of grace,

Antinomians do not regard the external Word as necessary at all and display a Mysticism which expects everything from the inner word or the inner light, or from the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit. To Antinomians, the external word belongs to the natural world and is unworthy of the really spiritual man and can produce no spiritual results.

In opposition to this view, the Reformers maintained that in the work of redemption the Word and the Spirit work together. Further, they maintained that the Word becomes efficacious in leading to faith and conversion only by an accompanying operation of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of sinners. They refused to consider this efficaciousness as an impersonal power resident in the Word.

A New Kind of Legalism?

Ironically, antinomianism can lead to a new kind of legalism. Antinomians often give the impression that sanctification is after all a human work, even if it is expressed in exhortations to "let go and let God," "abide," and to abolish all consciousness of self. Antinomianism never leads to genuine freedom, but returns to legalism by a different route.

As we have seen, not even the rule of love is anything different from the moral law (see Galatians 5:13-14 above). *Every* exhortation in Scripture is a form of law.

The third use of the law (to instruct Christians in godliness) ensures that we are freed from the burdensome rules, techniques, and formulas for sanctification often imposed by those who dispense with God's moral law.

The law says, "Do this and live." The gospel says, "This is what has been done, now live and use the moral law as a guide. It was given by God the Law Giver (Father), perfectly adhered to by God the Law Keeper (Son), and believers are progressively enabled to keep it by God the Law Enabler (Holy Spirit)."

*Most of the foregoing material was taken from "Concise Theology" by J.I. Packer, "Systematic Theology" by Louis Berkof, "The Christian Faith" by Michael Horton, and "Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms" by Grenz, Guretzki & Nordling.