

Introduction

It was the first day of the opening term (semester). Entering the room with purposeful air, the lecturer plonked her books on the table, moved round to its front, leant back – half sitting, half standing – her hands by her side, resting on the table. The conversational buzz quickly died away. The students looked up, open-faced.

‘This term we’re going to look at 19th century literature. Anybody got any thoughts on the subject? Any thoughts they’d like to share with us?’

A young lady raised her arm.

‘Yes?’

‘I don’t like Walter Scott!’

A nervous laugh broke out among the students, followed by a low murmur of approval.

The lecturer slowly pushed herself upright, and, brushing the palms of her hands against her skirt, raised her eyes. ‘So... you don’t like Walter Scott’, she repeated deliberately. ‘Tell me... tell us all’, waving her hand slowly round the room, ‘what is it about Scott that you don’t like?’

‘Well...’. The young lady hesitated. She went on, a little nervously: ‘I haven’t actually read any of his works... But...’.

I wonder, I can’t help wondering, with the necessary slight change of accidentals, if there might not be many who could say much the same about Tobias Crisp, William Dell, John Eaton and John Saltmarsh: ‘I’ve never read any of their books, but I know they’re heretics, and their works are dangerous. They’re antinomians, aren’t they?’

Now... here’s a problem! Actually, there’s more than one! Who says they’re antinomians? And why do they say it? And what’s their definition of an antinomian? May I suggest a little experiment? Lock six theologians in a room; lock any six believers in a room; tell them they can only come out when they agree on the definition of an antinomian. How long would they be in captivity, do you suppose? How many different definitions of an antinomian

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would they end up with? Six? Maybe even more! For some, an antinomian is a hyper-Calvinist. For another, an antinomian is utterly lawless. For another, an antinomian is somebody who thinks the believer is not under the law of Moses, but is under the law of Christ. Another thinks an antinomian is somebody who believes that the more we sin and break God's commandments, the more holy we are. For another, an antinomian is one who is convinced that the more we break God's commandments, the more grace God can show us, and therefore the more we glorify God. And so on, *ad infinitum*.

Let me leave that for now. We haven't finished with it, but let's move on.

In publishing this volume, I realise that I leave myself open to misunderstanding and heavy criticism. Indeed, I'm sure I'll get it! Getting my defence in first, therefore, let me make it quite clear what I am doing in this book. I am concerned with the believer and the law – the believer both before his conversion and after; particularly after. *That* is what I am concerned with. Nothing else. With this in mind, I have chosen four men, men who have been bitterly, though (in my opinion wrongly) attacked as antinomians, and taken certain books which they wrote – works which have been unfairly written off as promoting antinomianism – and distilled those works in order to do what I can to clear the men and their works of the calumny.

In so doing, I have two reasons in mind. *First*, these men support what I tried to say in my *Christ is All*, and to a certain extent, enforce and enlarge upon what I said in my *Eternal Justification*.¹ *Secondly*, because these men and their books have been dismissed out of hand,² many believers down the years have been sadly unaware of the existence of these Christ-exalting works on the believer and the law, the volumes being allowed to gather dust on the shelf, unread. The church of God has suffered as a result. By publishing this brief distillation of certain of their books, I hope to introduce them to others, and so do good to a new and

¹ I will try to avoid constant references to my previous works, but the background to this volume can be found in both those volumes.

² Indeed, as I have mused, I wonder how many who have blackballed them have actually read the works in question.

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wider public. Indeed, I feel very much like the prestigious Ursidean philosopher, Жінніе-Же-Пoo, who confessed: ‘It isn’t much good having [discovered] anything exciting, if you can’t share it with somebody’.³

Of course, I’m not saying that these men were sinless. I’m not saying they were always wise and guarded in what they said and wrote. I’m not saying I agree with everything they ever wrote – not even in the works I have chosen. I’m not saying I agree with their stance on every doctrine. Far from it! Nor am I setting myself up as an expert on their lives, their works or their times. My aim is much more limited than that. All the same, it is not an insignificant aim. I am saying *of the works I have distilled in my book*: if this is antinomianism, then we want a good deal more of it, and quick!

The truth is, the lives of the four men in question were exemplary – as is universally admitted – and they should never have been called antinomians. That is why my title has the word in inverted commas. But it is not only their lives that need to be rehabilitated. The works in question, if they were known and read – and put into practice – would be of huge and vital benefit to this largely spiritually dry and barren generation. We need such works as these! We need such preachers as these!

‘Just a minute! What about their doctrine? If the men and their doctrine have been vilified so much as they have, and almost-universally written off by men of unquestioned eminence and impeccable Reformed credentials, can they really be as profitable as you have claimed?’

Well, reader, you must be the judge of that – but judge it for yourself, is all I ask. Do not take your opinion second-hand. If you read these works and find them unscriptural, so be it. If you find no profit in them, so be it. All I can say is, I know I have been blessed by them. What is more, if you do find them profitable, is it too much to hope that, despite the aforesaid critics, you will have the courage of your convictions and tell others of your experience?

Nevertheless, as I have hinted, I have some reservations about these men and their doctrine. Let me deal with these first, and in this way: I will now set out what these four men believed about

³ Winnie-the-Pooh *aka* A.A.Milne.

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certain controverted points in connection with the antinomian debate,⁴ and say where I do or do not agree with them. It goes without saying that, in doing this, I am being highly simplistic. An entire volume could be written on each point! Nevertheless, bearing that in mind, of these men it could be said:

1. Most of them were opposed to preparationism; that is, they did not believe that preaching the law was necessary, or the right way, to bring sinners to Christ, to make men 'fit' for Christ. *I agree with them in this.*

2. They did not accept Calvin's third use of the law; that is, they did not believe the law is the believer's rule of life.⁵ *I agree with them in this.*

3. Most of them held that faith follows justification. In other words, they preached eternal justification. *I strongly disagree with them in this.*

4. They had reservations about making sanctification the supreme evidence of justification. *In the main, in this I think they were right.*

5. Most of them held that assurance is primarily by faith and the witness of the Spirit. *I have considerable sympathy with them in this.*⁶

6. They held that God sees no sin in believers, no matter what sin they commit. This was, perhaps, the doctrine that most exposed them to the charge of antinomianism. *I think there is precious truth in what they said, but it needs to be carefully nuanced. In this, perhaps, they were not always wise.*

As I say, for preaching sermons and writing books in which they promulgated such doctrines, these men were accused of antinomianism. It was a slur. But the accusation is still being levelled at them. And it is wrong. Let me explain.

⁴ Immediately, I leave myself a hostage to fortune. How can I know what all these men believed on every point in precise detail? I am speaking generally.

⁵ As I will show, Crisp was somewhat self-contradictory on the matter.

⁶ For more on this very important point, see the Appendix.

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An antinomian is, literally, one who is against law; he is lawless; he does what he wants. Whether the law of Moses, or any other law, the real antinomian has no regard for it whatsoever. Such men have existed, and, no doubt, still do exist. Indeed, I have met several of them on my travels, but all of them have been between the covers of a book. And many of them are known as antinomians only because their opponents smeared them as such. It has proved a handy rod with which to beat the backs of doctrinal opponents! To change the figure, it has proved effective dust to throw into the eyes, and so avoid facing up to awkward passages of Scripture. But the slur has gained credence too often more by rumour and association than by hard evidence.

The fact is, antinomianism has had a bad press. Sadly, that press has not always been fair press. It is still the same. The word has been sprayed about far too freely. False accusation, sly innuendo and snide remarks abound, and from many who ought to know better,⁷ many who do know better. True, the word has proved elusive and remarkably susceptible to a variety of definition, but too often heat is more apparent than light when antinomianism is the topic under discussion. So much so, not only has the character of good men suffered, but – and far more serious – real gospel preaching has been dismissed with a quick slap of the label ‘antinomianism’ across it. And *that* is a tragedy.

That being said, true antinomianism has always existed. Some say John Agricola was the first to be called one, so-labelled by Martin Luther who coined the term when engaged in controversy with his fellow-German. But antinomianism started long before. Paul was accused of it (Rom. 3:8; 6:1,15), even though it was not called such in his day. And Jude had some very strong things to say about it (though it was not called such in his day); more

⁷ As one example, take John Gerstner’s suggestion that people like me sing: ‘Free from the law, O blessed condition, I can sin as I please and still have remission’, when the hymn actually reads: ‘Free from the law, O blessed condition, Jesus has bled and there is remission’ (‘The Antinomian Way of Justification’, ligonier.org). Does this kind of annihilation by association not break the ninth commandment? And is it not, itself, approaching antinomianism?

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particularly, he had some strong things to say about those who pedalled the evil doctrine:

Certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ... These dreamers defile the flesh, reject authority, and speak evil of dignitaries... These speak evil of whatever they do not know; and whatever they know naturally, like brute beasts, in these things they corrupt themselves. Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah. These are spots in your love feasts, while they feast with you without fear, serving only themselves. They are clouds without water, carried about by the winds; late autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, pulled up by the roots; raging waves of the sea, foaming up their own shame; wandering stars for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever. Now Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men also, saying: 'Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his saints, to execute judgment on all, to convict all who are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have committed in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against him'. These are grumblers, complainers, walking according to their own lusts; and they mouth great swelling words, flattering people to gain advantage. But you, beloved, remember the words which were spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ: how they told you that there would be mockers in the last time who would walk according to their own ungodly lusts. These are sensual persons, who cause divisions, not having the Spirit.

Peter also spoke of it – see 2 Peter 2, for instance. Oh yes, even in New Testament times, antinomianism was preached and practiced; the apostles hated it and did all they could to contend against it (Jude 3-19) and stamp it out.

Coming to modern times, as I said, Agricola was called such by Luther, who himself was accused of it by some of his opponents; Calvin, who attacked the Anabaptists for it, has himself been called an antinomian, as have many of his followers; Calvinistic Baptists have not escaped, nor have the Independents; the Puritans of New England did not avoid it, nor did their counterparts in Old England. Spurgeon was another to be called an antinomian, and rejoiced in it, but stoutly denied he was any such thing. The list of those accused

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of antinomianism, it seems, is endless. The accusation goes on, even until today.

*The truth is, **not** to be accused of antinomianism is the **real** concern!*

Let me explain what I mean by that. Consider this pivotal text: ‘Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more’ (Rom. 5:20). Paul’s startling statement ought to provoke an immediate response from an objector: ‘That’s all very well, but surely such teaching inevitably leads to antinomianism, doesn’t it? Have you thought this out, Paul? Haven’t you been irresponsible, to say the least? Think, man, think! What safeguards will your teaching raise against sin? More sin – more grace! Really! What bulwark will this raise against antinomianism? How will it produce holiness? Can a believer do what he wants, how he wants, when he wants, live careless of questions of sin and godliness, even saying sin brings more grace? Surely you need to spell out very clearly – and do it now! – that the believer is under the law for sanctification. If you don’t, antinomianism must be the result’. In short: ‘What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?... Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?’ (Rom. 6:1,15); or: ‘Why not say: “Let us do evil that good may come”? – as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say’ (Rom. 3:8).

Paul has one dismissive, short reply to all such talk: ‘Certainly not!... Certainly not!’ (Rom. 6:2,15). Perish the thought! God forbid! It is utterly unthinkable. But notice, reader, what Paul does not go on to say. It is his silence which is so important here, so telling. *He does not say that the believer is under the law, after all!* Certainly not! In fact, it is the believer’s very freedom from the law of Moses which leads to his deliverance from the dominion of sin, and produces a godly life! And that is precisely – precisely – what the apostle does say. Please read Romans 6, 7 and 8 aloud, especially Romans 7:4-6; 8:1-4.

Even so, *this* is the sort of question which Paul’s doctrine *must* provoke; that is, if this is what Paul was saying. Do we find such questions? We certainly do! A glance through Romans 6 and 7 will prove it. We know, therefore, we are drawing the right conclusions

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from Romans 5:20, because it is precisely this sort of objection and question which led to Paul's response in Romans 6 and 7. Seeing this is such an important point, let me repeat myself: to get the force of what I am saying, please read the entire section, aloud, and in more than one version.

The question in Romans 6:15, though bluntly dismissed by Paul, needs to be asked, and inevitably will be asked of all who teach scripturally on the law, since the biblical teaching on the matter sounds so startling: 'What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?' Legal preaching, of course, would never, could never, can never, provoke such a question. And this is as fatal a mark against it as anybody could wish. Biblical teaching on the law and sanctification – that is, gospel preaching – *must* provoke such a response, such a question, such an accusation. Sadly, those who advocate the biblical position on Romans 6 and 7 are dismissed as antinomians, but the fact is, unless a man can be accused of antinomianism he is not preaching the gospel properly. Truth to tell, the advocates of the law are legal preachers rather than gospel preachers, and their doctrine tends to outward conformity, not to say, legalism.

The point I am making is this: Paul met the accusation of antinomianism. Many others have faced it. Every man who preaches free grace will come up against it. Even so, the unjust accusation hurts! *Not* to get it, however, ought to hurt far more!

Coming to the substantial issue: the antinomianism, real and so-called, that we are faced with, started with the Puritans of the 17th century. Let me quickly paint the background to the four works in this present volume. The New England antinomian controversy flared into life in Massachusetts during the years 1636-1638, the main participants being Anne Hutchinson, John Wheelwright and John Cotton – all originally from Old England. Although I will say no more about it here,⁸ the ripples were felt back in the old country. In the 1640s, the Scot, Robert Baillie, who chronicled the Westminster Assembly debates, deplored what he saw as antinomianism rearing its head at the time. Samuel Rutherford was another to write against it and its advocates. Furthermore, the books

⁸ See my *Christ*.

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of Henry Denne, John Eaton and Tobias Crisp were cited in a petition to the House of Commons, and the affair reached the Star Chamber.

Now I admit at once that real antinomianism existed in the time of my chosen subjects. So much so, the Rump Parliament of 1649/50 felt it necessary to pass an Act to try to stamp out the practice. While I am convinced that the passing of laws will never make men godly – it is only the gospel made effectual by the Holy Spirit that can do that – Parliament at the time clearly thought such an Act would go some way at least to stemming the rising tide of antinomianism. Leaving that to one side, I quote from the Act in question,⁹ simply to show what real antinomianism is:

9th August, 1650. Declaration of 27th September 1649: Any person maintaining any of the opinions here enumerated, shall suffer six months imprisonment without bail... Whosoever shall presume... to profess that... these acts of denying and blaspheming God, or the holiness or righteousness of God; or the acts of cursing God, or of swearing profanely or falsely by the name of God, or the acts of lying, stealing, cozening [artful coaxing, wheedling] and defrauding others; or the acts of murder, adultery, incest, fornication, uncleanness, sodomy, drunkenness, filthy and lascivious speaking, are not things in themselves shameful, wicked, sinful, impious, abominable and detestable in any person, or to be practiced or done by any person or persons; or shall... profess that the acts of adultery, drunkenness, swearing and the like open wickedness, are in their own nature as holy and righteous as the duties of prayer, preaching or giving of thanks to God: or whosoever shall... profess that whatsoever is acted by them (whether whoredom, adultery, drunkenness or the like open wickedness) may be committed without sin; or that such acts are acted by the true God, or by the majesty of God, or the eternity that is in them; that heaven and all happiness consists in the acting of those things which are sin and wickedness; or that such men or women are most perfect, or like to God... which do commit the greatest sins with least remorse or sense; or that there is no such thing really and truly as unrighteousness, unholiness or sin, but as a man or woman judges thereof...

⁹ ‘August 1650: An Act against several Atheistical, Blasphemous and Execrable Opinions, derogatory to the honour of God, and destructive to humane Society’ (Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642-1660 pp409-412) (british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=56410).

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And so on... Well, here it is – in the raw: antinomianism. With such real (or approaching real) antinomians, both past and present, I am in total disagreement. I can say what I think of their doctrine in a very few short words. Such teaching, with its consequent practice, comes from the pit of hell. It will deceive thousands and harden them to the gospel of Christ. The harvest will be horrific. I abhor it. Let those who have the energy and time to ravage it, do so. Let them trace its errors and expose its consequences in the minutest detail. Let them tear it to pieces. I, for one, will not say a word against their action. Except... the truth is, I have only a little talent and, with the passing of each day, less and less time at my disposal, and I am determined, therefore, to cast my mite into this debate *on the positive side*. I want to draw wholesome and profitable lessons from this controversy.

And there is profit to be had!

My four chosen subjects were participants in the controversy during the 1640s. While many other works were involved, the leading publications were those by John Eaton in 1642, Tobias Crisp in 1643, and John Saltmarsh in 1645. Crisp and Eaton were the principal ‘antinomian’ writers, but under John Saltmarsh and William Dell so-called antinomianism flourished in Cromwell’s New Model Army. With the coming of the Levellers, however, and their drive towards communism, the antinomian controversy died down. For a while.

It burst into flame again in the 1690s, with Samuel Crisp’s republication of his father’s sermons – eight further sermons in addition to the fifty already published in the 1640s. Twelve ministers (six Presbyterian, five Independents and one Particular Baptist), men of the stamp of Hanserd Knollys, John Howe, Isaac Chauncey, Increase Mather and George Cokayn authenticated these sermons. Following the re-publication of Crisp’s works, controversy immediately broke out – Richard Baxter and John Flavel leading the attack – whereupon seven of the ministers tried to row back by saying they only signed to certify that the eight extra sermons were authentic! Hmm!

So much for the historical background to this present volume. By confining my attention to those days, I do not wish to give the

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impression that antinomianism – real and imaginary – died out three hundred years ago, but I have to keep my book in bounds.

The men that I write about have been defined as *moderate* antinomians. That is to say, they themselves lived godly lives, and preached for the godliness of all who professed to be believers. Indeed, they unequivocally demanded it, categorically stating that if a man shows no measure of sanctification, he is not justified – whatever his profession! As such, they were not *practical* antinomians; they were known as *doctrinal* antinomians. The fear was – by those who opposed them – that the latter would lead to the former. The answer is, of course, if so-called doctrinal antinomianism is in fact pure gospel, then we must have faith here as everywhere else, and trust God to look after his truth and his people. We dare not play at being Uzza and think we have to protect God’s ark (1 Chron. 13:9-10). ‘Let God be true but every man a liar’ (Rom. 3:4). We must preach the gospel as it is revealed in Scripture, and leave the consequences to God.

In my view, my four chosen subjects were commendably zealous for the free grace of God in Christ. They wanted to exalt Christ, and Christ alone. They wanted sinners to look to Christ for salvation. They wanted to encourage saints to look to Christ for sanctification and assurance. Christ is all! Take note of the titles of the works in question:

Christ Alone Exalted

The Crucified and Quickened Christian

Free Grace; or, The Flowing of Christ’s Blood Freely To Sinners...

The Honeycombe of Free Justification by Christ Alone...

Doesn’t it stand out a mile? These men were driven men – driven by the desire to exalt Christ in the freeness of his grace. In particular, they rightly stressed that both justification and sanctification are the work of the Holy Spirit who applies the person and accomplishments of the Lord Jesus to the believer, and does so apart from the law. In this they were right. And for this they should be commended, not censured.

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Enough! By now, reader, I shouldn't be at all surprised if you find yourself agreeing with my aforesaid Ursidean mentor when he said: 'Perhaps the best thing to do is to stop writing introductions and get on with the book'.