

Antinomianism

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Antinomianism is the view that Christians are exempt from the demands of the moral law by reason of their reliance upon divine grace alone for salvation.

Although the word is not found in Scripture, it is evident that Paul was libelously accused by his detractors of holding such a false doctrine. In Rom. 3:8 he denied heatedly the accusation that he had called right conduct irrelevant to Christian experience, and again made this repudiation in Rom. 6:1f, 15f.

The gospel brings freedom *from* sin but not freedom *to* sin. It is true that in the new dispensation of Christ the believer is no longer under obligation to the Mosaic law, in the sense that he is emancipated from its frustrating impositions upon an incapable human will. His obedience is not rendered directly to the commandment, but represents his response to the person of Christ. But this reorientation does not supply him with a license to transgress with impunity.

“The freedom from the moral law which the believer enjoys,” writes Robert Haldane, “is a freedom from an obligation to fulfil it in his own person for his justification—a freedom from its condemnation on account of imperfection of obedience. But this is quite consistent with the eternal obligation of the moral law as a rule of life to the Christian” (*Epistle to the Romans* [repr 1966], p. 259).

The Epistle of James provides a further NT corrective to any such misconception of the Christian faith. James would appear to have been confronting a popular abuse, perhaps current in gentile Christian circles (as Sieffert conjectures), which laid such exaggerated emphasis upon faith in the scheme of salvation that a certain indifference to morality was inadvertently encouraged. James’s stress on “the perfect law of liberty” (1:25) and “the royal law” of love (2:8), combined with his recognition that works must necessarily evidence the reality of faith, completes Paul’s protest against the

unwarranted preference of any antinomian charge against Christianity. Positive warnings about the insidious nature of the heresy are found in 2 Cor. 6:14–18; 12:21; Eph. 5:9; 2 Pet. 2:18f; and 1 Jn. 3:7f.

The reference in 1 John reminds us that some of the Gnostic sects of the 1st and 2nd cents were antinomian in their teaching. The Nicolaitans, mentioned in Rev. 2:6, 14f as well as in the writings of the early fathers, advocated a return to sub-Christian morality. The Ophites inverted the accepted standards of moral judgment, and the Cainites exalted Cain and others who withstood the God of the OT. In the Valentinians we meet “the most frank and definite statement of antinomianism in its widest and most immoral form” (J. M. Sterrett, ERE, I, 582). The licentious practices of these Gnostics (standing in such marked contrast with the severe asceticism of other schools within the movement) arose from an unscriptural dualism that erroneously divorced matter from spirit. Since matter was thought to be irredeemably corrupt, the bodily passions could be indulged without inhibition, and in fact should be, so that the soul might shine in brighter splendor by comparison. The maxim of Gnostic antinomianism was: “Give to the flesh the things of the flesh and to the spirit the things of the spirit.” The Circumcellions of the 4th cent laid themselves open to the charge of antinomianism, and one of Augustine’s treatises was entitled *Against the Enemies of the Law and Prophets*.

The actual term “antinomian” was first employed, so far as is known, by Martin Luther in his controversy with Johannes Agricola. The latter denied that the preaching of law should precede or accompany the preaching of the gospel in order to arouse a sense of sin. “The decalogue,” he declared, “belongs to the courthouse, not the pulpit.” His slogan was “To the gallows with Moses.” In the later Majoristic dispute even more extreme forms of antinomianism were defended by Andreas Poach and Anton Otto on the ground that the Christian is “above all obedience” (see R. Seeberg, *History of Doctrines* [Engtr 1952], II, 251,365f).

Luther opposed his former pupil Agricola in six disputations against the antinomians. The reformer maintained that, although the new obedience of the believer no longer requires the coercive stimulus of the Mosaic code, the law nevertheless serves as a mirror, a guide, and a restraint. A specific proscription of antinomianism was written into the Formula of Concord, where it was firmly asserted that the liberty of Christians with respect to the demands of the law must not be misconstrued in the sense “that it were optional with them to do or omit them or that they might or could act contrary to the Law of God and nonetheless could retain faith and God’s favor and grace” (Art. IV). Bente shrewdly assessed the situation when he asserted that the intrusion of antinomianism was “a veiled effort to open once more the doors of the Lutheran Church to the Roman work-righteousness which Luther had expelled” (F. Bente, *Concordia*

Triglotta, Historical Introductions, p. 161).

Antinomian echoes may be heard in succeeding centuries among the Anabaptists in Germany and Holland, the Illuminati in Spain, and the Camisards in France. During the Evangelical Awakening in Britain, John Wesley had occasion to warn his followers against “the bane of true religion” (*Letters*, ed Telford, VII, 169) and John Fletcher issued his celebrated *Checks to Antinomianism*. While some of the conclusions drawn, e.g., by R. A. Knox in his study of Enthusiasm, are to be resisted, the caveat of Wesley ought to be observed: “I have found that even the precious doctrine of salvation by faith has need to be guarded with the utmost care, or those who hear it will slight both inward and outward holiness” (*Letters*, V, 83).

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