

Antinomianism

Reformed and Mystical

Yes, I know the title is bizarre, but all will, I hope, become clear.

Reformed antinomianism

A Reformed antinomian? As odd an oxymoron as you can get, you might think. But no! The Reformed are deeply concerned about antinomianism within their ranks.

In the second decade of the 21st century, antinomianism is one of the buzz words in evangelical circles. The Reformed are up in arms about it – at least, up in arms about what they see as antinomianism among the advocates of new-covenant theology. But, truth to tell, they are also wrestling with it much closer to home. They have a home-grown antinomianism, an antinomianism flourishing in their own backyard. Naturally, they do not like it, not one little bit!

Mark Jones, a Reformed writer, has gone into print about it, and the title of his book says it all: *Reformed Theology's Unwelcome Guest*.¹ He states:

As someone with some scholarly acquaintance with post-Reformation Reformed theology, particularly in the area of Puritanism, I have been dismayed at some of the theology that passes as Reformed, when in fact it has corollaries to [has counterparts in?] seventeenth-century antinomianism.²

David B. Garner sets out what he sees as the Reformed-antinomian mantra:

Don't you know? You are free. The gospel is free. Do you feel obligated, responsible, duty-bound? That's not grace. Don't you know any sense of obligation, desire for reward, or fear of

¹ Mark Jones: *Reformed Theology's Unwelcome Guest*, P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, 2013.

² Jones xvi.

disappointing God is evidence that legalism still holds you captive? Let go and let God. Celebrate your justification and reject the compulsion!³

So, how do the Reformed propose to deal with this home-grown antinomianism? Judging by Jones' book, and the range of endorsements it has received from Reformed scholars,⁴ their perceived antidote is a repeat prescription of what was tried before; namely, to fall back to the 'cure' attempted in the 1640s in England. And what was that? The Westminster Assembly, called in order to sort out the rampant antinomianism of the time, turned to John Calvin's threefold use of the law of Moses, and, more particularly, to its refinement and extension at the hands of covenant theologians.⁵ Mainstream Reformed teachers today are convinced that the Puritan preventative of antinomianism (and, they hope, its cure) remains the best on offer. They would say it is scriptural. And Jones' book is his attempt to spell it out by making extensive use of Reformed writers and the Westminster standards. As he himself said:

I make no apologies for depending on Reformed authors. We will see how various Reformed luminaries... have addressed such topics as the law [of Moses], the gospel and good works... My commitment to the Westminster standards is resolute, and so this work unashamedly fits in the Westminster (Puritan) tradition.⁶

It is not, of course, my place to offer advice to the Reformed, but even so I will. Before you try to fend off what you perceive as antinomianism, make sure you really understand what it is! That's the first thing. Much of what you dismiss as

³ David B.Garner: 'You Just Might Be An Antinomian', a favourable review of Jones' book. Garner is being ironic.

⁴ At the opening of Jones' book there are endorsements by Gert van den Brink, Michael A.G.Haykin, Steven J.Lawson, Derek Thomas, Carl R.Truman, Cornelis P.Venema and Guy Prentiss Waters. J.I.Packer wrote the Foreword.

⁵ See my 'The Law and the Confessions', 'Preparationism in New England', 'John Eaton: Antinomian?'

⁶ Jones xvi.

antinomianism is, in fact, apostolic teaching. Instead of falling back on the Westminster standards (and the host of writers who have gone into print on the basis of those standards), why not put those standards to one side for once, and actually read Scripture unfiltered? Specifically, I suggest you weigh Romans 6 – 8, 2 Corinthians (especially chapter 3), Galatians, Ephesians 2, Philippians 3 and Hebrews – and that’s just for starters. Once you come to terms with the un-glossed teaching in these passages, then you will be in a position to recognise real antinomianism and deal with it. After all, a man is not an antinomian simply because he disagrees with Calvin, or because he is not a covenant theologian (which Calvin himself was not) or a ‘Westminster man’! Acts 17:11, *sola Scriptura*, in your terms, still rules the roost, I hope. It is worse than useless trying to fight a disease that you have misunderstood in a patient you have misdiagnosed, and then giving him the wrong medicine.

I have a vested interest in making this plea. For I am what is known as a new-covenant theologian, and I have set out my views, and the arguments behind them, in scores of books, articles, videos and discourses. And, for my pains, I have been charged with antinomianism. But just because a man emphasises the believer’s liberty in Christ, and does so based on the exegesis of the passages cited in the previous paragraph, it does not make him an antinomian. If it does, then it puts Paul and the writer of the letter to the Hebrews in the dock!

Having said that, I readily admit that there is such a thing as real antinomianism, and that some contemporary teachers are getting pretty close to it. And it needs stopping! I am not for a minute defending real antinomianism – if I need to say such a thing. After all, I have written and spoke often enough against the accursed error. Even so, I state it categorically once again.

However, as I have said, it is not really my place to offer advice to the Reformed on how to deal with their own problems, and that’s not my reason for writing this article. My real purpose in raising this internecine fight in the Reformed camp is somewhat different. The truth is, I was struck by some comments by J.I.Packer in his Foreword to Jones’ book, and I thought them worth pursuing a little further.

Packer pinpoints the problem. The issue is progressive sanctification.⁷ Quite right! And, having nailed the issue, Packer goes back to history to trace the source of the trouble:

With regard to [progressive] sanctification, there have been mystical antinomians who have affirmed that the indwelling Christ is the personal subject who obeys the law in our identity once we invoke his help in obedience situations, and there have been pneumatic antinomians who have affirmed that the Holy Spirit within us directly prompts us to discern and do the will of God, without our needing to look to the law to either prescribe or monitor our performance. The common ground is that those who live in Christ are wholly separated from every aspect of the pedagogy of the law.

I pause. As you can see, Packer rightly divides antinomians into two – mystical and spiritual (or pneumatological). The mystical antinomians say it is Christ, himself, who actually lives the holy life in, through and for the believer. The pneumatological antinomians attribute this godliness of life to the Spirit using the law written on the believer’s heart. The link between the two, the common bond between them, is that the believer is not accountable under an external law, and that he is passive in his progressive sanctification. So far so good with Packer.

But when he speaks of ‘the law’, because of his Reformed position, Packer is, of course, referring to the law of Moses. And in the case of Reformed antinomians (whether mystical or spiritual), he is right to do so. The Reformed are convinced that the law the believer has to deal with is the law of Moses. Since Reformed antinomians teach that the believer is not under the law

⁷ The sinner, on coming to faith, is united to Christ and is justified and positionally sanctified. Thus, in God’s sight, in Christ he is accounted or made righteous, free of sin and condemnation, and perfectly separated unto God. See, for instance, 1 Cor. 1:2,30; 6:11; Eph. 5:25-27; Heb. 10:10-18; 13:12. In his Christian life, he has to work out his perfection in Christ, and he will be moved to do so by the Spirit under the direction of Scripture; this is his progressive sanctification or holiness of life. But this, alas, is imperfect. The believer will only be absolutely sanctified in the eternal state. I will set out my arguments on all this in my forthcoming *Fivefold Sanctification*.

of Moses, Packer's concerns apply strictly only to them. For the Reformed, following Calvin, the Mosaic law (or rather, as they define it, 'the moral law', or the ten commandments) is the believer's perfect rule and the whip to drive the believer to attain to it in his progressive sanctification. Packer deplors that some Reformed teachers are leading their followers away from submission to the law of Moses.

But this is not the real issue. Christ has fulfilled the law of Moses, and thus rendered it obsolete (Matt. 5:17-20; Rom. 8:1-4; 10:4; Heb. 7:11-19; 8:6-13). What is more, the believer has died to the law of Moses in order to be married to Christ. Above all, it is only because he has died to the law of Moses and is united to Christ that there is any possibility of him living a sanctified life, bearing fruit to God (Rom. 6:14; 7:4-6).⁸ And this means that the Reformed antinomianism Packer deplors simply reflects his failure to grasp apostolic teaching.

Nevertheless – nevertheless – Packer does make a valid point. Indeed, he makes a *vital* point. Although the believer is free from the law of Moses (Gal. 5:1), this does not mean that he is free from all law. Antinomianism (of whatever variety) rears its head when believers think themselves free of all law all together, when their mis-exegesis of Scripture leads them to maintain this so-called freedom. Mis-exegesis? Yes. Take, for example, Paul's words to the Romans: 'Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace' (Rom. 6:14). If men grab this verse out of context – as some do – they can so easily run away with the idea that believers are free of all law altogether.⁹ But this is utterly wrong. The context makes it clear. The believer no longer lives in the old age, the age of the old covenant. He is free from the law of Moses since it has been fulfilled by Christ and rendered obsolete. Yes, it still acts as a paradigm for the believer, but, even so, he has died to that law. And that is why sin

⁸ For my arguments behind all this, see my works, especially my *Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law*.

⁹ The 'consistent' Reformed get round this by glossing the text to read 'the curse or condemnation of the law', or by calling on one of the other various 'escape routes' they are so fond of. See my *Christ* pp99-110,392-408. Do not skip the extracts!

will no longer rule over him. But the apostle is not for a moment suggesting that the believer is free of law altogether! The context, as I say, puts it beyond doubt. For Paul immediately goes on (Rom. 6:15 – 7:6) to teach that the believer is under law to Christ. Although the apostle does not use the phrase in the context, nevertheless by his two illustrations he makes this very point: the believer is under the rule, the governance, the law of Christ. Christ is both his slave master and his husband. He is under the law of Christ. As the apostle declares:

Though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings (1 Cor. 9:19-23).¹⁰

Paul is clear: he is not under the law of Moses, but he is under the law of Christ; the law of Christ is the law of God for him. Packer's words, therefore, need correcting here. Although he talks of the law of Moses, the real law is the law of Christ. Steven J. Lawson (in his endorsement of Jones' book) supplied the necessary adjustment to Packer:

Sad to say, portions of the Reformed community have given shelter to this new antinomianism, claiming that personal obedience to the law of Christ is merely optional.

So, properly nuancing Packer's words, antinomianism does arise when men say that believers are free from the law of Christ. This is doctrinal antinomianism. And we must not be surprised if the very suggestion today that believers are not under the binding law of Christ leads to practical antinomianism tomorrow.

¹⁰ See my 'Believers Under the Law of Christ'.

With that vital adjustment to his words, let Packer go on with his description of the antinomianism he wants to correct. This is how antinomians (as he defines them) talk:

The freedom with which Christ has set us free, and the entire source of our ongoing peace and assurance, are based upon our knowledge that what Christ, as we say, enables us to do he actually does in us for himself. So now we live, not by being forgiven our constant shortcomings, but by being out of the law's bailiwick altogether; not by imitating Christ, the archetypal practitioner of holy obedience to God's law, but by burrowing ever deeper into the joy of our free justification, and of our knowledge that Christ himself actually does in us all that his and our Father wants us to do. Thus the correlating of conscience with the Father's coded commands and Christ's own casuistry of compassion need not and indeed should not enter into the living of the Christian life, as antinomians understand it.

Let me unpack this. It is a proper mixed bag, I'm afraid. Packer wants believers under the law of Moses, whereas the New Testament teaches that believers have died to the law of Moses, and are under the law of Christ. So in reading the above from Packer, 'law' has to be understood in two ways: the law of Moses and the law of Christ. As I have explained, for the Reformed, antinomianism, as they see it, arises when believers do not submit themselves to Calvin's view of the law of Moses as their perfect rule and whip to produce progressive sanctification. For new-covenant theologians, however, antinomianism arises when believers do not submit to the law of Christ. That's the first correction which must be made to Packer's words.

Secondly, within Packer's garbled account, we come across some biblical gems, which, alas, he dismisses. Contrary to Puritan teaching, the believer's assurance does not come from the evidence of his progressive sanctification, but from the inner witness of the Spirit taking him to Christ, and to his sinless standing before God in Christ.¹¹ And, contrary to Packer's dismissal of it, the believer *is* moved to progressive sanctification by setting his mind and heart on Christ (Col. 3:1-17, for instance), not by concentrating on rules and regulations. On the other hand,

¹¹ See my *Assurance in the New Covenant*.

Packer is right to stress the authority of the Scriptures in the believer's life. But, there again, it is not the Scriptures alone. It is both the Scriptures and the inward work of the Spirit. But the point that Packer wants to make – and I agree with him in this – is that antinomianism looms when men weaken the role of Scripture in the law of Christ.

To put it another way, we are talking about the objective and subjective. The Reformed are heavy on the objective – the Scriptures, the word (actually, they mostly talk of the ten commandments in this connection). Antinomians are heavy on the subjective – the inward Christ, the inward Spirit, the inward law on the believer's heart. But the scriptural position is that it is both, with the objective Scriptures instructing, monitoring and calibrating the subjective.

Packer comes to his conclusion thus:

The bottom line of all this? The conclusion of the matter? Here, as elsewhere, the reaction of man does not lead to the righteousness of God, but rather obstructs holiness. In God's family, as in human families, an antinomian attitude to parental law makes for pride and immaturity, misbehaviour and folly. Our true model of wise godliness, as well as our true mediator of God's grace, is Jesus Christ, our law-keeping Lord. Mark Jones's monograph is the work of a Puritan-minded scholar and theologian who understands these things well, has researched historic antinomianism with thoroughness, and has many illuminating things to say about it. His book is a pioneering overview that I commend most warmly, particularly to pastors. Why to them? Start reading it, and you will soon see.¹²

Certain things stand out in all this. 'Mystical antinomians... and... pneumatic antinomians... have affirmed that the Holy Spirit within us directly prompts us to discern and do the will of God, without our needing to look to the law [nuanced, as I have explained] to either prescribe or monitor our performance'. 'The Father's coded commands... need not and indeed should not enter into the living of the Christian life, as antinomians understand it'. And then we have Garner's: 'Don't you know any sense of obligation, desire for reward, or fear of disappointing God is

¹² J.I.Packer's Foreword to Jones x-xi.

evidence that legalism still holds you captive? Let go and let God. Celebrate your justification and reject the compulsion!

These antinomian mantras are serious errors. So, while Packer is confused and confusing, he does put his finger on some vital points. What is the role of the Scriptures in the law of Christ? Are believers under that law? Are believers passive in their progressive sanctification? Or are they decidedly active? Is it all a question of love? Or is there a measurable, verifiable standard of obedience?

Mystical antinomianism

Unfortunately, with few exceptions, Jones deliberately did not name those he had in mind,¹³ so I have drawn examples of mystical antinomianism from the writings of John Crowder¹⁴ and Steve McVey.¹⁵ Not all the following is bad, let me say at once, but there are clear indications of which way the wind is blowing. And as always, don't forget it is what people think they read, what they take away, that is all important. And on that score, I am categorical. If these principles gain ground, antinomianism will run rampant.

In what follows from Crowder, note his emphasis against the believer's personal effort and obedience to Scripture, his teaching that the believer is assimilated into Christ, and that progressive sanctification is not to be thought of in terms of the believer's obedience to Scripture by the Spirit, but by his subjective thinking of Christ.¹⁶

¹³ Jones xvi.

¹⁴ In what follows from Crowder, unless otherwise stated, I have quoted from his *Mystical Union: Stuff they never told you about the finished work of the cross*, Sons of Thunder Ministries & Publications, Kindle Version, 2010.

¹⁵ Steve McVey: *52 Lies Heard in Church Every Sunday: and why the truth is so much better*, Harvest House, 2011.

¹⁶ The new-covenant motive and standard for the believer's obedience is, of course, Christ (Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Cor. 6:14 – 7:1; Eph. 4:32 – 5:2; Col. 3:1-2; Tit. 2:11-15; 3:3-8, and so on), but all this is to be calibrated by Scripture, and is brought about by the believer's personal obedience to Scripture, in the power of the Spirit.

Mystical antinomianism – a working description

Crowder:

There is a growing interest in authentic, mystical Christianity: a mysticism rooted in a person (him knowing us and us knowing him), not in human attempt at spiritual disciplines or mental ascent... As a new creation, you have been liberated from the struggle of self-improvement. Absolutely flawless, our old, fearful, sinful, blemished, selves have been eradicated once and for all. Perfected once and for all by [Christ's] sacrifice, we can drink daily from the fountain of our union with him, no longer expecting defeat. As our mind changes regarding the truth of our identity, our outward lives bear corresponding fruit. No longer believing the false humility... that we are 'still sinners'... We are sons and daughters – our true identity shines from the inside out chock-full of inheritance. Right here. Right now.

So many see Jesus as the one we must 'imitate'... rather than the our substitute who accomplished all things pertaining to salvation on our behalf.

Mystical union... we are talking about our union with Christ. We are in him, and he is in us. Mysticism is the experience of this union with God.

The Reformers did not go far enough... They missed it on the topic of indwelling sin in the believer. This is where the Puritan derailed and took the ship into a downward spiral... The Reformers were not reformed enough... The cross united us to Christ, not just positionally, but effectively. It doesn't just cover our sins, but eradicates sinfulness itself from us.

Passive progressive sanctification

Crowder again:

The centrality of the new birth and new creation is found in the saving act of Christ – not in our feeble attempts at mustering faith. Our faith-response to that saving act – however important – relies for its validity of the act itself. Our response is merely a recognition and experience of facts.

The church is obsessed with her own transformation, evidenced by a mountain of self-help books. The contemplative journey is not a path of becoming. It is a path of realising what we've already become in him. We are awaking to a transformation that

has already taken place. Our journey is a discovery of the true self. And this is but the by-product of something much greater – the discovery of Christ in us... Beyond simple – the gospel is an absolutely effortless unveiling of the truth of the Godhead in you. We are not arriving into him, but realising he arrived into us.

It's high time the church gets delivered from God pleasing... Does happy, effortless Christianity sound scandalous to you? Does a daily walk of joyful, sinless existence seem like an impossibility? If the answer is 'yes' then allow me to introduce you to the gospel. At least, the gospel as you may have never heard it before. The original version is so easy and pleasurable that it's offensive... It is a gloriously happy message of effortless union with God.

This is a book [Crowder's] designed to challenge the believer... You will be challenged to stop striving to get closer to God.

God didn't save you so you could do good. He saved you so you could be dead and he could work through you. He doesn't want you trying to please him. He is only pleased with Christ... God doesn't help you. God does things for you.¹⁷

Scripture

Crowder again:

The Bible is not the word of God. Yes, the Bible is fully inspired and it's the means by which we see Jesus. But Jesus Christ – not the Bible itself – is the word.... Christ is the ultimate text... In the Scriptures, I can no longer see regulations and legalisms that seem to come 'in addition' to him... Grace must be the lens through which I see all else. I begin to see him – the fulfilment of the law – jumping off every page.

Summing it up

Crowder confused positional and progressive sanctification:

Sanctification is not a process. It is a Person. The Bible tells me so! And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and

¹⁷ Crowder: *Mystical* pp54,88, quoted by Kelly M.Kapic (editor): *Sanctification: Explorations in Theology and Practice*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2014, p245.

redemption (1 Cor. 1:30, ESV). He is your sanctification. Any system that tries to draw your attention away from the person of Christ and onto your own efforts is antichrist in nature. Your union with God is not an incomplete relationship that comes progressively. Time is not the magic formula that makes you holy. Jesus' sacrifice made you holy. Christ's work was enough to purify you, spirit, soul and body... Christ has replaced you!¹⁸

And, finally, Steve McVey. I allow that his statements are provocatively simplistic – and, no doubt, deliberately so – but, once again, I repeat my warning: it is not only what we say or write, but what people think we say or write, that counts – and the latter more than the former in many respects. What will men gather when they are told that the following are lies?

When we do wrong we are out of fellowship with God
You should live by the teachings of the Bible
God only speaks today through the Bible
Your sins can disqualify you from being used by God
We need to seek spiritual power
We should live by Christian morals
You grow in holiness
You should pray to love Christ more
We are positionally righteous
Christ empowers us to keep God's law
If you don't forgive others, God won't forgive you
It's better to burn out for Christ than to rust out
The truth will set you free

Conclusion

The antinomians I write against teach in a way that may be summarised thus: The Holy Spirit, Christ formed in the believer, releases the believer from all law. The believer has no duty to obey the law of Christ. The way to be holy is to do nothing, but rest in God's action. To demand obedience to Scripture in order to produce a life of holiness is to fall back into legalism. We should stop talking about 'law', 'command', 'rule' and 'duty';

¹⁸ John Crowder: 'Sanctification is Not a Process', being an article drawn from his *Mystical*. See my forthcoming *Fivefold Sanctification*.

rather, we should stress the inner Christ, the inward work of the Spirit, and the law written on the heart.

Although there are elements of truth in some of this, the overall effect is disastrous, and represents a tragic misunderstanding of the new covenant. The scriptural position is that the believer is free from the law of Moses (Gal. 4:21 – 5:1), but by walking in the Spirit (Gal. 5:25) – that is, living by the power of the Spirit in obedience to Christ as revealed both within him and in the external Scriptures – he fulfils the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2).

Listen to the apostle (and this is only one of scores of such passages) as he calls believers to holiness of life:

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law [that is, the law of Moses] but under grace. What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord... My brothers, you... have died to the law [of Moses] through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the

dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law [of Moses], were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are released from the law [of Moses], having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code (Rom. 6:14 – 7:6).¹⁹

¹⁹ The ‘written code’ (literally, ‘the letter’), of course, refers to the Mosaic law, not to the external Scriptures.