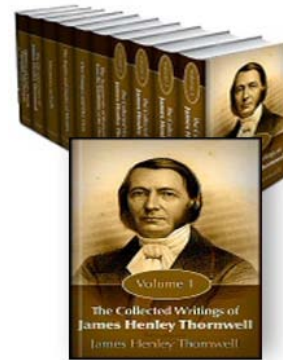


Antinomianism

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The term Antinomianism is employed to denote a system of doctrine which naturally leads to licentiousness of life. Those who deny that the law of God is the measure of duty, or that personal holiness should be sought by Christians, are those alone who can properly be charged with Antinomian principles. The Scriptures are so pointed and explicit in pressing upon believers that "denying ungodliness and worldly lusts they should live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world," that it becomes a matter of no little interest, even to the speculative inquirer, to account for the origin of Antinomianism. We must not confound the origin of the word with the origin of the thing. The latter existed long before a single term expressive of its true character was applied to it. The word was coined in the sixteenth century to denote the peculiar opinions of John Agricola and his followers in regard to the Law. Agricola was a native of Aisleben, and, until he began to propagate his extravagant opinions in the year 1538, a friend and abettor of Luther. The thing existed as far back certainly as the days of Paul and James. That the preaching of the "Word of the truth of the Gospel" should have been attended with Antinomian consequences upon any mind, however illiterate, can be accounted for only by the singular tendency of man to oscillate, in his opinions and practices, from one extreme to another. When, after a dreary night of Arminian darkness and of legal bondage, the doctrines of grace are proclaimed with clearness and power, there are always found men who, unable to endure the light which reveals the folly of their slavish toils and unchristian schemes, pervert the Gospel and turn the grace of God into lasciviousness. If the Pharisees and doctors of the law had not galled and broken the necks of the people by the yoke of servitude which they imposed upon them, Paul perhaps would never have been slanderously reported as teaching men to do ill that good might come, neither would any have been tempted to boast of a faith which produced no fruit.

Christians in his day, no doubt, indirectly and incidentally afforded plausible pretexts to the carnal and profane. Those who had been required to go through the laborious drudgery of establishing their own righteousness—a toil not unlike that imposed upon the Hebrews by the Egyptian taskmasters—who were at all enlightened to perceive the defects and wickedness of their best performances, could not but hail with joy the proclamation of a perfect righteousness which was the "end of the law to every one that believed." And in their anxiety to free others from the same gross and slavish delusions under which they had laboured themselves, it is not strange, it is natural, that in some instances a phraseology

more remarkable for point than accuracy should have been adopted for the purpose of effect. They saw the reigning power of legalism, they had felt its bitterness and knew its curse, and consequently spoke with the energy and pathos of men in earnest when endeavouring to arrest the pharisaical bias of the carnal heart. The dreams of the sleeper may be changed while his slumbers are unbroken. Many, no doubt, received opinions in the head which found no entrance in the heart, and confounding the important distinction between justification and sanctification, and wilfully misled by the incautious statements of true disciples, pretended to receive Christ; but it was a divided Christ, so that they might freely indulge the lascivious propensities of the carnal mind. These are the men whom Jude and Peter denounce, and whose monstrous opinions James refutes.

Three circumstances, therefore, conspired to produce the Antinomianism of the apostolic age:

1. The previous prevalence of legal opinions; and,
2. the reception of the true doctrine of justification as a matter of the head without the concurrence of the heart, and consequently separated from the Gospel doctrine of sanctification. The mutual action and reaction of two such circumstances gave a violent impetus to these extravagant opinions. The natural vibration of the mind is from the extreme of legalism to that of licentiousness, and nothing but the grace of God can fix it in the proper medium of Divine truth. The Gospel, like its blessed Master, is always crucified between two thieves—legalist of all sorts on the one hand and Antinomians on the other; the former robbing the Saviour of the glory of his work for us, and the other robbing him of the glory of his work within us.
3. Another circumstance which should be specially noted as contributing to a spirit of blasphemy among the ungodly was, that the Gospel laid its axe at the root of human pride. It excluded all boasting on the part of man. In the plenitude of his pride he had indulged the golden dream of buying the favour of his God by his vain oblations, his empty sacrifices and his heartless formality of worship; and when assured that even his righteousness, were as filthy rags, when reminded of his native depravity and helplessness, like the engaged but untamed tiger he gnashed his teeth in rage, and vented his blasphemy against God by abusing, perverting and corrupting the glorious Gospel of grace. Such was the spring of Antinomianism in daring blasphemers. To men inflated with conceptions of their own sufficiency and intrinsic goodness, the Gospel, when unaccompanied by saving grace, will produce one of two effects—either contempt for its doctrines or unblushing licentiousness. In the one case its principles are utterly rejected; in the other, they madden and destroy. Both effects flow from the same principles of pride. They are only different streams from the same fountain.

The Antinomianism which sprang up in the time of Luther (if indeed it can be called Antinomianism) seems to have been nothing more than a very violent revulsion in weak

minds to the opposite extreme from the papal doctrine concerning good works. Whatever may have been the errors of Agricola and his followers, Popery should be regarded as their legitimate father. As long as men act upon the principle of *contraria contrariis curantur*, legalism, when the Gospel once comes to be proclaimed, will infallibly be followed among unrenewed men by abuses of some sort. The effect will be different according to the aspect in which the Gospel is most strongly contemplated. If it is seen as coming directly in collision with our pride and natural self sufficiency, the result will be infatuated blindness to its truth or an open profligacy of life. If it is viewed as a system of grace providing a full and free salvation without the works of the law, as a free gift of God, the result will be a greedy appropriation of the blessing, without receiving Him by whom alone it is bestowed. The idea uppermost in the mind is the absolute freeness of Divine grace; and hence that spiritual training by which we are rendered meet for the inheritance of the saints in light is totally disregarded or presumptuously denied, as if an unholy heart could hold everlasting communion with a holy God.

Whatever form, however, Antinomianism may assume, it springs from legalism. None rush into the one extreme but those who have been in the other. If Dr. Crisp was really, as he has usually been regarded, the founder of English Antinomianism, let it be remembered that he was notoriously, at one time, "a low Arminian, who held the merit of good works, and looked for salvation more from his own doings than from the work and grace of a Redeemer." The Antinomianism of Dr. Crisp consisted more, however, in loose and unguarded expressions than in real licentiousness of principles. He was an humble and a godly man. The testimony to his excellence and worth, signed by a divine whom none can charge with the least tincture of libertinism—Rev. John Howe—deserves to be seriously pondered by those who can find no epithets too scurrilous to apply to Dr. Crisp. It may be found prefixed to Flavel's "Blow at the Root." From the statement there given, Dr. Crisp's Antinomianism seems to have been very questionable. His works, published after his death, which took place in 1643, nearly about the time of Traill's birth, gave rise to what has been called the Antinomian controversy in England.

The "middle way" to which Traill alludes is probably the scheme of doctrine borrowed substantially from Vossius and Grotius, and maintained by Richard Baxter among the Dissenters, and Bishop Bull among the Churchmen, who took an active and even a violent part in this controversy against those whom they denounced as Antinomians. Their views, though the one professed to receive the Westminster Confession of Faith and the other the Articles of the Church of England, were substantially Arminian. They maintained that the death of Christ purchased for us a new and an easier law, which they called the law of grace or Gospel covenant, by obedience to which we were justified. This obedience they denominated evangelical righteousness, and contended that it is the matter of our actual justification before God. The new law of grace prescribed repentance, faith and sincere obedience as the conditions of our acceptance and salvation. Whatever opposed this scheme, which is essentially legal and eminently dangerous, was denounced as Antinomian. Hence, it is no marvel that Baxter should have abused Owen, who

triumphantly exposed his futile aphorisms on justification, and maintained the true Gospel doctrine which Traill so ably defends in his Vindication.

According to Arminians generally, Antinomianism and the system of grace, which is usually called Calvinism, are synonymous terms. Because the Gospel excludes our own works from forming any part of the matter of our justification, they most preposterously conclude that it excludes all personal holiness; because it does not confound justification and sanctification, they take it for granted that it denies the latter entirely. The following beautiful passage from Traill's "Sermons on the Lord's Prayer" may be commended to their special notice:

"Christ represents His Church unto God for their sanctification. Election in Christ is an eternal purpose in God's heart and counsel about His people. Redemption by Christ is a Divine bargain for them and their salvation betwixt the Father and the Son. Justification is a gracious sentence of God in Christ on them that are represented by Him for acceptance. By this act and sentence the state of their persons is favourably changed. But sanctification is a Divine work in them that changeth their heart and nature. The Spirit of sanctification is a precious gift of Divine love, and is only given to them that are in Christ and because they are in Him. Gal. 5:6: 'And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.' All the anointings of the Holy Ghost that believers receive are but some drops that fall down from the head of our High Priest "unto the skirts of His garments." (Ps. 133:2.) "He received the Spirit without measure" (John 3:34), that to His people, even "to every one of them, grace may be given according to the measure of the gift of Christ" (Eph. 4:7); not according to the measure that Christ got, but the measure that Christ giveth. And all of them received it. Rom. 8:9: "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ he is none of His." Let him not "name the name of Christ" (as his Lord and Master) "that departeth not from iniquity." (2 Tim. 2:19.) All whose iniquities Christ did bear for their expiation, in due time Christ "blesseth them in turning every one of them away from their iniquities." (Acts 3:20.) This blessing of sanctification is of pure grace, for as there is nothing of worth in a man, or regarded by God in justifying, so there is nothing of goodness or of fit matter for God to work upon in His sanctifying. God's word is as clear about this as about the other. The account that we have so largely of the natural state of all men without Christ is sufficient to show the absolute necessity all stand in of God's grace to save them, and to declare both the freedom and power of that grace in all its applications to men. Grace is the spring of salvation and of all its parts; Christ is the root of all; and eternal life and glory is the ripe fruit of all that grace of God that "reigns through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord." (Rom. 5:21.) See but these texts and read them, and conclude this truth: 1 Cor. 6:11; Eph. 2:1-7; and Tit. 3:7, 8. In all which places justification and sanctification are joined (as they are certainly and constantly in all that partake of them), unworthiness in the receivers overcome and passed over by the grace of the Giver, and the interest of Jesus Christ, in God's giving and in His people's receiving of both these blessings, is plainly told us."

Holiness so far from being the cause of salvation is a part of it: "He shall be called Jesus because He shall save His people from their sins." Sin is that body of death from which we are delivered by the effectual operations of the Spirit of Christ. Hence, it is perfectly ridiculous to represent works as conditions of salvation, since the ability and disposition to perform good works are blessings which we receive from our Saviour in fulfillment of his office as Redeemer. Holiness is a benefit received, and not a price paid; it is our meetness for heaven, not our title to it. "Gospel justification," says the Rev. Robert Bragge, "is a change of state and condition in the eye of the law and the lawgiver, whereas Gospel sanctification is a blessed conformity of heart and life to the law or will of the lawgiver. The first is a relative change from being guilty to be righteous; the other is a real change from being filthy to be holy. By the one we are made near to God, by the other we are made like Him. By being justified, of aliens we are made children; by being sanctified, the enmity of the heart is slain, and the sinner made not only a faithful, loyal subject, but a loving, dutiful child. This may be set in the clearest light by the following simile: Our children, the day they are born, are as much our children as they are ever after, but they are many years growing up into a state of manhood; their likeness to us as it respects the mind as well as the body is daily increasing. Thus a king's firstborn son is heir-apparent to the crown while lying in the cradle; after-growth adds nothing to his title, but it does to his fitness to govern, and succeed his father. Our right to heaven comes not in at the door of our sanctification, but at that of our justification; but our meetness for heaven does. By Christ's righteousness, it being upon us, we have a right to the inheritance, and by Christ's image, it being drawn upon us, we have our meetness."

Those who are anxious to see an elaborate and very able effort to reconcile the doctrine of justification by works with the grace of God as revealed in the Gospel will find ample satisfaction in the "Harmonia Apostolica" of Bishop Bull. If my limits allowed, I would present an abstract of the work for the purpose of exposing the radical error which pervades the whole system. The Bishop inveighs severely against Pelagianism and those works which are done by the power of nature without the grace of Christ, and denies that even our evangelical obedience possesses any merit in itself; all its value is derived from the merit of Christ. Christ merited, not that we might merit by our works but that we might obtain. We have no strength in ourselves to do good works. This we derive from grace, but the efficacy of grace depends entirely upon our own wills. Now the reigning error of Arminianism, Pelagianism and this Neonomianism—for they are all substantially the same, they rest upon identically the same principle—is an utter disregard of the true Scripture doctrine of grace, and a fatal misapprehension of the present condition of man in the sight of God. The friends of these systems will all admit that a man is justified by grace, but when they undertake to explain their meaning, "grace is no more grace."

The source of the error in many minds is the unfounded notion that grace is whatever is opposed to merit. They judge of the former by comparing it with the latter, and hence they suppose that they are contending for salvation by grace when they are only denying salvation by merit. According to the conceptions which we usually frame of merit in our

intercourse with one another, it is impossible that man can deserve anything at the hands of his Maker. Wrapped in the blessedness and immensity of His own nature, the Eternal Jehovah stands in no need of any services from us, and our constant dependence upon His benevolence and bounty for all the blessings which we enjoy renders our holiest obedience nothing more than a suitable expression of gratitude. We only give Him of His own. The purest angels that surround His throne strictly and properly speaking deserve nothing at His hands; their joy and blessedness are nothing but the results of unrestrained loving-kindness on His part. To suppose that man can merit any of the blessings of God is just to suppose that the obedience of man is a full equivalent for the favour of his Creator—that it constitutes a value received, an actual benefit, which God is under a moral obligation to acknowledge. If grace, then, is only that which is opposed to merit, such a thing as salvation by grace in distinction from any other scheme is utterly impossible. The necessary relations subsisting between the creature and the Creator preclude for ever, even from the holiest, the most remote approximations to merit. Hence, every scheme of justification would stand upon the same footing on the score of grace, and one could no more be said to be of grace than another. If Adam had kept his first estate, and secured the fulfillment of the promise to him and his posterity, he would have been just as far from meriting eternal life as the sinner redeemed by Christ, and consequently, according to this absurd conception of the matter, would have been just as much saved by grace. We are not, then, to look into the antithesis of merit for just conceptions of grace. The Scriptures nowhere speak of the merit of the creature. This idea, unknown to the holy and the good, is to be found only in the hearts of the ruined and the lost. Its only lodgment is in that cage of unclean birds, the unsanctified heart of man. Strange that the wretch who is so far from God, who is dead in trespasses and sins, should enhance his guilt by inflated conceptions of worth! "Surely men of low degree are vanity, and men of high degree are a lie." To what, then, do the Scripture oppose grace? To works, to works of law. Grace is the opposite of legal obedience. Justification by grace is justification without the deeds of the law. Salvation by grace is salvation which is not of works. "Being justified freely by grace" is used as synonymous with "being justified by faith without the deeds of the law." (Rom. 3:24, 28.) Grace and works are clearly opposed in Rom. 11:6: "And if by grace, then is it no more of works; otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace; otherwise work is no more work." Also in Eph. 2:8, 9: "For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast." The nature of a legal dispensation, or a state of proper probation, is that it is one in which God promises eternal life upon condition of obedience to be rendered to a specified law. The very essence of such a state consists in the prescription of conditions. To prescribe the condition is purely an act of sovereignty and grace; to bestow the blessing when the condition has been fulfilled is an act of faithfulness arising only from the obligation which God by His promise has imposed upon Himself. In this way, and in this way only, a Divine blessing may become a matter not of merit, but of debt. Rom. 4:4: "Now, to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt." It is due to the obedient by the Divine promise.

Any plan of salvation, therefore, which lays down anything to be done by man, no matter what and no matter how, whether with or without the assistance of Divine grace as a condition of the Divine favour, is a legal plan, and rests upon the same fundamental principle, and is precisely of the same essential nature with the scheme on which the hopes of the race were suspended before the Fall. By a condition is meant that for sake of which the blessing is bestowed, that to which it is promised, and without which it would not be bestowed. It is not a value received for the blessing, or a strict and literal equivalent; the blessing becomes due to it only by the grace and sovereign appointment of God. The term condition is sometimes employed to express that which is prior in the order of nature or of time. In this sense it is what Boston calls a condition of connection; it denotes that one of them must take place before another in consequence of their connection in the scheme of grace. Thus, in this sense, faith is a condition of justification; not that it is a something to be done, for the sake of which we are justified, but we must be united to Christ before we can become partakers of his everlasting righteousness. Holiness is a condition of seeing God; it is necessary to the full enjoyment of the beatific vision. The successive rounds in the ladder must be passed before we can reach the top. When used in this sense, the word condition conveys no dangerous idea, but as an ambiguous word liable to be abused it should be laid aside by all sound ministers of the Gospel.

If, then, God has made our salvation dependent upon anything to be performed by us, it is not a matter of grace, but of works. The notion that legalism is avoided by ascribing our power to comply with the conditions to the grace of God is a mere evasion of the difficulty. A legal dispensation necessarily supposes power in its subjects to comply with its requirements. We would instinctively revolt at the tyranny involved in the supposition that Adam was destitute of the power necessary to fulfil the condition of the Covenant of Works. It is hardly conceivable that God would make a covenant with man, and solemnly ratify it, without giving man the power to obey its requirements. It signifies little whether this power come from nature or from grace (in either case it is from God); man must have it before he can be the subject or the party of a legal covenant. Neither is the principle affected by the thing required to be done; whether it be obedience to the whole moral law, or only sincere obedience, or only faith, repentance and perseverance which are required, something is to be done—a condition is prescribed—and God's favour ultimately turns upon man's will. The principle of works is as fully recognized in a mild law as in a strict one. He as truly buys who pays only a farthing as he who pays a thousand pounds. If these principles are correct, the Arminianism of Bishop Bull and Baxter, and all who coincide with them, is common ground with barefaced Pelagianism. There is no medium in principle between Pelagianism and Calvinism. Man is either not under a legal dispensation at all, or there is no such thing as salvation by grace. Man is saved either by works or not by works. There is no halfway ground, and all the efforts to find one have proved unsuccessful. Calvinists maintain that man is not in a state of legal probation—that he is condemned already; destitute of life and power, and therefore incapable of being the party to a legal covenant, and that God has never qualified him by grace to become so. He is under the curse of such a covenant, and therefore cannot hope for its blessing. He is delivered from

the guilt and dominion of sin by the power and grace of a Redeemer. Being destitute of all things in himself, he is justified by the righteousness of another and sanctified by the Spirit of another. Salvation, as a harmonious whole embracing pardon, acceptance, adoption, peace, holiness and everlasting joy, is the free gift of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. This is our testimony. In the faith of these principles we would live and die, and consequently we would glory in nothing but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is all our "salvation and all our desire."