

What is Antinomianism?

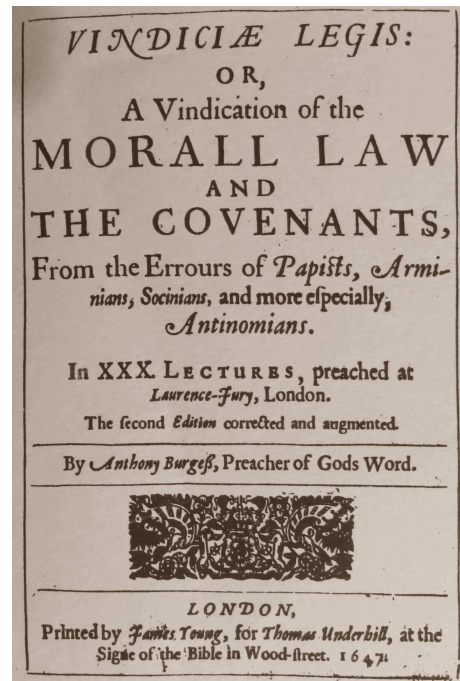
Peter Ditzel

Antinomianism comes from the Greek *anti*, "against," and *nomos*, "law." Literally, it means "against law." It is used to refer to a doctrine that centers on the belief that grace frees a Christian from the law. Detailed definitions differ. Yet, when a theologian labels someone an antinomian, he or she almost always intends it negatively or pejoratively. Antinomian is a dirty word in theological circles. But do those who fit some of the most common definitions of antinomian really deserve such scorn? Is what these definitions describe truly unbiblical? In this article, I want to discuss the most common definitions of antinomianism and compare them with the Bible. I also want to reveal their origin. Could it be that many of us sovereign grace, New Covenant believers fit the definitions of antinomian and don't even realize it? Would that be a bad thing?

Legalism

One way to start defining something is to first define its opposite. The opposite of antinomianism is legalism. I fully discuss legalism in "What Is Legalism?" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/legalism.htm>) but I will give a short definition. Legalism is trying to earn our salvation or any merit with God by law-keeping or other works. Legalism is the antithesis of faith. Faith is putting your trust in someone else. Saving faith is trusting that Jesus Christ has saved you.

Although legalists are often blinded to the fact, legalism is really believing you can do it better yourself. It is the inability to fully trust in anyone else. Legalists give lip service to trusting in Jesus Christ as Savior, but they always take the job away from Him by saying that Jesus has not fulfilled the law, we must keep it, and we must do good works. Legalists are at best spiritual weaklings who simply do not have the faith to trust in Jesus Christ alone. Even worse are the legalists who are totally carnally minded and entirely devoid of



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faith. The very worst legalists are those who imagine themselves as pillars of the faith, upholding the Puritan or Reformed or some other cherished tradition, and condemning all who do not follow their zeal for the law.

The Judaizers were legalists who troubled the early Christians, and legalists have been causing trouble ever since. Legalism is contrary to the Gospel because it always ultimately emphasizes obligation to the law over freedom in Christ, thus denigrating the work of Christ on the Cross.

We see, then, that a legalist either emphasizes the law over grace or tries to mix law and grace. Speaking of salvation, Paul wrote, "And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work" (Romans 11:6). Law and grace don't mix.

The Bible says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). God gives us salvation entirely without our meriting it; He saves us by grace. Jesus' atoning work on the Cross saves us, and we receive that salvation by the gift of faith.

We have seen, then, that law and grace don't mix and that we are saved by grace. Our works of the law, then, can have no part in our salvation. Our works are not part of the formula for salvation, but they are a result of the salvation God is working in us (Ephesians 2:10). It's like saying the cake isn't in the recipe; it's the end product. We must be careful, though. This doesn't give us license to judge others by their works or even to condemn ourselves. Further reading: "How can I know that I am saved?" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/assuranceQA.htm>) and "What is the fruit by which we are to know people? (Matthew 7:16)" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/matthew7qa.htm>).

Dictionary Definitions

I have some questions for you: a) Do you believe that faith alone is necessary to salvation? Or, b) do you believe that the law is useful and necessary for salvation? If you chose "a," congratulations! By some definitions, at least, you are an antinomian. According to *Merriam-Webster's 11th Collegiate Dictionary*, as well as the Merriam-Webster website (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/antinomian>), an antinomian is, "one who holds that under the gospel dispensation of grace the moral law is of no use or obligation because faith alone is necessary to

salvation." Assuming that "the moral law" refers to the Ten Commandments,¹ and that "obligation" means "obligation for salvation," this definition of antinomian fits my beliefs.

The *Oxford Dictionary of English* (not to be confused with the *Oxford English Dictionary*) defines "antinomian" as, "relating to the view that Christians are released by grace from the obligation of observing the moral law." Assuming the same about "moral law" and "obligation," I must again confess that this definition classifies me as an antinomian.

Collins English Dictionary identifies "antinomian" as, "relating to the doctrine that by faith and the dispensation of grace a Christian is released from the obligation of adhering to any moral law." Making the same assumptions, I find this definition states biblical truth. So, *Collins*, too, shows me to be an antinomian. Based on these definitions, are you an antinomian, also?

Unfortunately, "antinomian" carries a popular connotation of being liars, thieves, and sexually loose people. Yet, equating antinomianism with licentiousness (living without any moral restraints) is not implicit in these definitions. Not being obligated to observe "the moral law," the Old Covenant commands, is not the same as being immoral. Paul taught against licentiousness: "For you, brothers, were called for freedom. Only don't use your freedom for gain to the flesh, but through love be servants to one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, in this: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'" (Galatians 5:13-14). The one thing we owe is love: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the law" (Romans 13:8). We are not showing love when we live selfishly so that we hurt others or withhold help or kindness. The desires of the regenerated Christian change from selfishness to outgoing concern for others. We may not be perfect, but we do try to love one another, and, to state it again, love is the fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:10).

Jude warned of "certain men who crept in secretly, even those who were long ago written about for this condemnation: ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into indecency [*aselgeia*, "licentiousness"], and denying our only Master, God, and Lord, Jesus

¹ "[The commands of the Decalogue] represent the minimum moral and religious requirements for those in covenant relationship with God." *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, s.v. "Law." Edited by Walter A. Elwell. Copyright © 1996 by Walter A. Elwell. Published by Baker Books, a division of Baker Book House Company, PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49516-6287. (<http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/law.html>)

Christ" (Jude 4). Peter said that we are to live "as free, and not using your freedom for a cloak of wickedness, but as bondservants of God" (1 Peter 2:16).

There is no necessary reason to believe that because we are free from the obligations of the law, we lack moral restraint. It is just that born again believers do not need the restraint of an external law; our restraint comes from the law written in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:10; 10:16). Our motivation comes from within. Further reading: "Must We Obey a New Law?" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/newcovenantneonomian.htm>).

Unregenerate people need legal restraints to keep them in line. Further reading: "What is the lawful use of the law as stated in 1 Timothy 1:8?" (http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/1timothy1_8qa.htm). Their motivation to behave themselves lies in their fear of punishment. On the other hand, someone who is born again is motivated by love.

Let's look at a few more dictionary definitions from a page of The Free Dictionary (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/antinomianism>). Most of the definitions on this page are similar to what we have already seen except that they also add that antinomianism believes that the Gospel or grace frees a Christian from such additional things as civil law and the moral standards of the culture.

If by "civil law," this means any of the Old Testament laws, then I agree. Christians are not bound by the Old Testament laws, whether theologians classify them as moral, civil, or ceremonial (see "The New Covenant and the Decalogue") (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/nct10c.htm>). But if "civil law" means the civil laws of our modern nations, then I disagree. Try going through a red light and then telling the policeman who catches you that God's grace frees you from any obligation to keep the traffic laws. I don't think you'll get away with it! Romans 13 tells us to be subject to the civil authorities. Obedience to the civil laws of our land doesn't earn us any merit with God, but it is simply the example God wants us to set. [The qualification is that we must disobey the authorities if what they command us violates what God would have us do (Acts 5:29).]

I also disagree with the idea that grace frees us from the "moral standards of the culture." Peter says, "For let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or an evil doer, or a meddler in other men's matters" (1 Peter 4:15). Paul says, "Remind them to be in subjection to rulers and to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good

work, to speak evil of no one, not to be contentious, to be gentle, showing all humility toward all men" (Titus 3:1-2). Paul also says that those who want to be overseers "must be without reproach" and "must have good testimony from those who are outside" (1 Timothy 3:2, 7). Additionally, Paul instructs, "Repay no one evil for evil. Respect what is honorable in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as it is up to you, be at peace with all men" (Romans 12:17-18). The Christian upholds the moral standards of his culture as long as they aren't contrary to love.

So, by some dictionary definitions, I would be an antinomian. So would other Bible believers. Why is this? Where did these dictionary definitions of antinomian come from?

The Antinomian Controversy

In "The Antinomian Controversy" (http://historyproject.ucdavis.edu/lessons/view_lesson.php?id=8) Roland Marchand begins by stating, "One of the most enduring myths in American history is the belief that the Puritans fled to America in search of religious liberty." I agree with him. If the Puritans believed in religious liberty, they would not have persecuted Anne Hutchinson, Roger Williams, Obadiah Holmes, Mary Dyer, and so many others simply because of their differing religious convictions. One writer gives a short list of those the Puritans were on the lookout for: "Catholics, Lutherans, Anabaptists, Antinomians, Quakers, Ranters..." (<https://thehistoricpresent.wordpress.com/2008/07/02/why-the-puritans-persecuted-quakers/>).

To hold the Puritans up to school children as an example of people who came to America seeking religious freedom is to promote a serious lie that distorts history for the sake of national myth. The Puritans who went to America believed that the Massachusetts Bay Colony was a covenanted theocracy in which all had to believe the correct, pure doctrine as Puritans taught it. There was no religious freedom in this. No differing religious conviction was tolerated. While still crossing the Atlantic, John Winthrop, who would be a magistrate and sometimes serve as governor, wrote that he wanted the Massachusetts Bay colony to be a "city upon a hill," a model of God's kingdom on earth, a Puritan example to the world. He believed that failure in this goal would cause God to force them out of the land, much like God's warning to the Israelites when they entered the Promised Land. He wrote,

If we deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause Him to withdraw His present help

from us, we shall be made a story and a byword throughout the world; we shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God and all believers in God; we shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us, till we are forced out of the new land where we are going.

Encyclopædia Britannica Online, s. v. "John Winthrop,"
accessed May 31, 2016

(<http://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Winthrop-American-colonial-governor>)

This aspiration of Winthrop's chilled freedom of expression. Anyone who disagreed with the Puritan dogma was commanded to recant. Those who refused were punished until they did recant, or they were banished or executed. Authorities believed that allowing people to deviate from the approved system of belief risked incurring God's wrath. The Puritans were convinced that only their opinion was correct. No divergence was tolerated. The result was a totalitarian union of church and state that was anything but a model of religious freedom. The persecution got so bad that colonists began fleeing back to England for relief and, in 1661, the King had to issue a missive ordering the colony to stop the persecutions.

The start of what historians call the Antinomian Controversy goes back to at least October 1636 (*Antinomianism in the Colony of Massachusetts Bay, 1636-1638*, Charles Francis Adams, ed. [Boston: The Prince Society, 1894] 11-12). John Winthrop, at that time the deputy governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, warned that Anne Hutchinson, "a member of the church at Boston, a woman of a ready wit and a bold spirit, brought over with her two dangerous errors: 1. That the person of the Holy Ghost dwells in a justified person. 2. That no sanctification ["works"] can help to evidence to us our justification" (Robert Charles Anderson, *The Great Migration, Immigrants to New England 1634-1635*. Vol. III G-H. [Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2003] 483).

Christians today might think it odd that any professing believer would question whether the Holy Spirit indwells a justified person, but this was a very controversial question among New England Puritans. Notice this: "The governor, Mr. Vane [Sir Henry Vane the Younger, who preceded Winthrop's second term as governor], a wise and godly gentleman, held, with Mr. Cotton [John Cotton, Hutchinson's minister in Boston] and many others, the indwelling of the person of the Holy Ghost in a believer, and went so far beyond the rest as to maintain a

personal union with the Holy Ghost; but the deputy Winthrop, with the pastor and divers others, denied both" (Roland Marchand, "The Antinomian Controversy") (http://historyproject.ucdavis.edu/lessons/view_lesson.php?id=8). So, because Winthrop and the others in control of the Bay Colony didn't believe that the Holy Spirit indwelt a Christian, anyone who expressed a belief to the contrary could not be tolerated.

I want to point out that by sanctification, Winthrop meant works. Works were sanctification. Further, Winthrop and a great many of the Bay Colony establishment believed that the works of the law, not faith or a profession of faith, were the evidence of someone's justification.

Here, we see the beginnings of the basic definitions of antinomianism found in dictionaries today. The definitions have their roots in Puritanism. Even definitions, such as those on the Free Dictionary sight, that expand antinomianism to include a belief in freedom from civil law and the moral standards of the culture have their roots in the Antinomian Controversy. Because of the intimate ties between church and state in Massachusetts, any doctrinal deviation was also a violation of civil law. This led to the Puritan leaders charging members of the antinomian party with sedition. Though completely a product of their accusers' imagination, the antinomians were also accused of immoral behavior and free love.

The New England Puritans believed that only the elect could take communion, but how could they tell who were elect? Instead of accepting an individual's profession of belief as a sign of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Romans 10:9-10; 1 Corinthians 12:3), the Puritan leaders judged a person's works to determine his or her conversion. To these Puritans, law-keeping was the sign of sanctification. They claimed that they didn't believe in salvation by works, but they also taught that without works there was no salvation. They invented an elaborate system for preparing people for conversion, preparing them for justification, and making a conscious effort toward sanctification. Earlier, I spoke of the recipe producing the cake. These Puritans had fallen into the error of trying to train people to produce cakes and then saying these cakes were evidence of the recipe. In other words, as a few people in the colony perceived, this was an attempt to bring about salvation through works. The church leaders saw the works as an outward sign that justification had taken place in the individual, and they then permitted the person to take communion.

Anne Hutchinson perceived the fault in this system, and she accused the Puritan church of teaching a covenant of works. For speaking out

against their works-based sanctification, the Puritans condemned Hutchinson as an antinomian.

For her views on law and grace, as well as other subjects (scholars have debated for centuries exactly what she meant by some of the things she said), Anne Hutchinson underwent stressful civil and church trials while pregnant and imprisoned. A synod condemned her as an antinomian heretic, and she was labeled a Jezebel. The "Christians" of the colony then expelled Hutchinson (delaying her expulsion from November until March, but it was still cold) so that she had to travel while pregnant with her children and without her husband on foot through the snow to Rhode Island. Shortly after, she miscarried a deformed mass that her doctor described as looking like a handful of transparent grapes. Winthrop then wrote, "See how the wisdom of God fitted this judgment to her sin every way, for look—as she had vented misshapen opinions, so she must bring forth deformed monsters" (Eve LaPlante, *American Jezebel, the Uncommon Life of Anne Hutchinson, the Woman who Defied the Puritans* [San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2004] 218). When, about five years later, she and her family were massacred by Indians, the Puritans in Massachusetts again wrote nothing but invectives against her and thanked God for ridding them of her.

The New England Puritan doctrine espoused by Winthrop logically implied a works-based, legalistic salvation. People had to perform good works visible to and approved by the leadership to be considered justified and worthy of taking communion. As we've seen, the basic definition of antinomianism found in even modern dictionaries comes from this Puritan viewpoint. I can't help but see these definitions as saying that if you are not a legalist, you are an antinomian. No wonder, then, that so many of us find when we look at these dictionary definitions that they seem to be describing our belief in salvation by grace alone.

Our standard must not be Puritan doctrine or dictionary definitions. It must be the Word of God. Yes, Paul tells Titus that we should "be careful to maintain good works" (Titus 3:8). But he also explicitly excludes good works from having any part in any aspect of our salvation:

But when the kindness of God our Savior and his love toward mankind appeared, not by works of righteousness, which we did ourselves, but according to his mercy, he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and

renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly, through Jesus Christ our Savior; that, being justified by his grace, we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Titus 3:4-7

If that makes us fit some dictionary definitions of antinomian, then so be it. We are in the company of Jesus and Paul and all the apostles. We mustn't be afraid to be labeled antinomian. We must stand up for the grace that saves us and point out the error of preaching the law. Our good works are the fruits of our regenerated life, and they are to God's glory. We mustn't let anyone judge us by our works or think that we have to return to the works of the law to prove anything.

Stand firm therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and don't be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.

Galatians 5:1

You are alienated from Christ, you who desire to be justified by the law. You have fallen away from grace.

Galatians 5:4

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

Galatians 5:18