

“What does a seventeenth-century theological controversy have to do with Christian living in the twenty-first century? Everything.”

—Guy Prentiss Waters

ANTINOMIANISM

REFORMED THEOLOGY'S
UNWELCOME GUEST?

MARK JONES

FOREWORD *by* J. I. PACKER

“Mark Jones’s book is highly important. He makes it clear that being Reformed is much more than just being Contra-Remonstrant. Thanks to his vast knowledge of historical theology, he ably shows the well-defined Reformed response against antinomianism, and the relevance of the theme for today.”

—**Gert van den Brink**, author, *Herman Witsius en het Antinomianisme*

“We are living in a deeply encouraging day when the sovereignty of God’s grace is being rediscovered far and wide. But as has happened in the past, when such times of biblical *ressourcement* have occurred, the error of antinomianism has made its appearance. This new work by Mark Jones is thus a timely tract for the times. It is rich in scriptural argument, illustrations from church history, and vigorous application. May it have a wide reading and even wider heeding!”

—**Michael A. G. Haykin**, Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Church history records that the doctrinal pendulum often swings from one dangerous extreme to the other. This present day is no exception. The legalistic abuses of recent decades are now being replaced with a hyper-grace license to sin. 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. Often trendy with ‘the young, restless, and Reformed,’ this toxic message is poisonous to the soul. In this excellent work, Mark Jones exercises considerable skill in exposing the fatal flaws of this anti-law, cheap-grace easy-believism. Throughout these pages, you will find the theological clarity needed to reject the twisted errors of legalism and license and embrace a true, grace-inspired, Spirit-empowered obedience to the Scripture.”

—**Steven J. Lawson**, Senior Pastor, Christ Fellowship Baptist Church, Mobile, Alabama

“Law-and-gospel issues continue to claim center stage in our time, as they have in the past. The much-cited adage ‘he who can distinguish law and gospel is a theologian’ has never been more appropriate than now, and on this count Mark Jones is a very fine theologian indeed. A carefully nuanced

analysis of the Scylla of antinomianism and the Charybdis of legalism from a masterly guide. Essential reading.”

—**Derek Thomas**, Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Atlanta; Minister of Preaching and Teaching, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina

“The problem of antinomianism is a hardy perennial for the church. A mischievous movement is afoot at the moment—its soaring rhetoric about grace is matched by an equally casual presumption on grace. Mark Jones’s book is thus to be welcomed: it is biblically grounded, historically sensitive, and above all timely. In addition, through his careful attention to the role of Christ in Scripture and to historical Reformed confessional treatments of sanctification, Jones provides a significant supplement to other recent books pleading for a biblical emphasis on personal piety.”

—**Carl R. Trueman**, Paul Woolley Professor of Church History, Westminster Theological Seminary

“Mark Jones’s book offers a balanced treatment of the errors of antinomianism, not only as it surfaced among some seventeenth-century British and New England theologians, but also as it has resurfaced among some contemporary theologians. The strength of Jones’s case lies in his nuanced definition of the error of antinomianism. Though in the popular imagination antinomianism is often simply identified with a denial of the positive role of God’s moral law in the Christian life, Jones demonstrates that it includes a number of additional elements—a belittling of Christ’s example of holiness as a pattern for the Christian life (*imitatio Christi*); a diminishment of the law of God as a true means of sanctification; an unbalanced conception of the relationship between law and gospel; a reluctance to acknowledge the biblical emphasis on rewards as a legitimate motive for Christian obedience; and a failure to recognize the role of good works as a secondary ground for the believer’s assurance of salvation. But the principal strength of Jones’s argument against antinomianism resides in his emphasis on the fullness of Christ’s person and saving work. Jones shows how a proper understanding of the work of Christ includes the gospel benefits of free justification

and progressive sanctification. In doing so, Jones nicely exposes one of the ironies of antinomianism—in the name of preserving the gospel, antinomianism typically truncates it.”

—**Cornelis P. Venema**, President and Professor of Doctrinal Studies,
Mid-America Reformed Seminary

“What does a seventeenth-century theological controversy have to do with Christian living in the twenty-first century? Everything. With the acumen of a historian and the heart of a pastor, Mark Jones deftly guides readers through one of the most tangled and important set of issues facing the Reformed church today. If you want to preach the gospel with greater biblical clarity, or learn how better to apply the gospel to your daily life, pick up this book and begin reading.”

—**Guy Prentiss Waters**, Professor of New Testament, Reformed
Theological Seminary, Jackson

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P U B L I S H I N G
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FOREWORD

CHRISTIANITY IS THE FAITH in Jesus Christ that mastered the hearts, minds, and lives of the New Testament writers. This faith portrays personal salvation from sin as coming to lost mankind through the mediatorial ministry of Jesus Christ the Lord, whereby a new humanity is being created and a full reconstruction of our sin-spoiled cosmos is guaranteed. By the fifth century, the world church was clear that the New Testament faith was Trinitarian, with Jesus being the second person of the eternal Three-in-One, and was also incarnational, with Jesus' redemptive role resting on his being fully God and fully man. For the next millennium, the church stood steady on these truths. The sixteenth-century Reformation introduced detailed, Bible-based corrections to what had become the conventional conceptualizing of them, and what was arguably the most accurate of these endeavors, namely the Reformed school of thought, began to generate the intense theological energy and the equally intense Christ-centered piety that marks it still.

However, just as the Reformed have seen a need to cross swords with Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant Arminians, and (less violently) Lutherans and Baptists, so have they experienced their own internal dissensions. In this fallen world, where forces of both intellectual and moral corruption are constantly abroad, this was to be expected, and it has certainly occurred. The cluster of deviations that bears the name antinomianism is a case in point.

Antinomians among the Reformed have always seen themselves as reacting in the name of free grace against a hangover of legalistic, works-based bondage in personal discipleship. Characteristically, they have affirmed, not that the Mosaic law, under which Jesus lived and which was basic to his own moral teaching, does not after all state God's true standards

for human living, but that it and its sanctions have no direct relevance to us once we have closed with Christ. Distinctive to Reformed theology from its birth has been its insistence that salvation, both relationally in justification and transformationally in sanctification, is ours entirely by virtue of our grace-given union with Christ in his death and resurrection—a union that God the Holy Spirit creates and sustains. Within this biblical framework, the key error of antinomianism in all its forms has been to treat our union with Christ as involving in effect some degree of personal absorption into Christ, such that the law as a voice from God no longer speaks to us or of us directly. From this starting point, the phalanx of antinomian teachers has spread out, celebrating different aspects of the assured confidence and joy in Christ that this supposedly biblical move of muzzling the law is thought to have opened up for us.

Thus, with regard to justification, antinomians affirm that God never sees sin in believers; once we are in Christ, whatever our subsequent lapses, he sees at every moment only the flawless righteousness of the Savior's life on earth, now reckoned as ours. Then, with regard to 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. 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.

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, misbehavior 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.

J. I. Packer

PREFACE

IN A BOOK ON ANTINOMIANISM, every sentence counts, because this is a topic that, by its very nature, has produced as much heat as it has light since the time of the Reformation. Nonetheless, books on antinomianism are few and far between. Apart from strictly academic works, not many books have been written in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries specifically devoted to the subject.¹ The academic works which attempt to analyze antinomianism are typically descriptive in nature, though there are certain social historians who cannot help but comment on the truths or errors of certain groups.

This book aims to move us beyond the notion that antinomians deny that God's moral law is binding on Christians in the new covenant. While they may deny that the threefold use of the law is biblical, or that the law of Moses has been replaced with the law of Christ, few theologians, pastors, or Christian laypersons would deny the plain teaching of Ephesians 6:1–3, where children are told to obey their parents in the Lord. There are literally hundreds of imperatives in the New Testament. For that reason, the idea that people are against God's law (hence, "antinomian"), however that is conceived, may seem like much ado about nothing in Bible-believing circles, particularly in Reformed and Presbyterian churches.

The following chapters will demonstrate, however, that antinomianism is a system of thought that has to be carefully understood in its historical context, rather than simply according to its etymology. Thus, the first chapter shows what antinomianism looks like historically. Those

1. Perhaps Andrew Fuller's sentiment explains why this is so: "There is something so low, foul, and scurrilous in the generality of the advocates of this system [i.e., Antinomianism], that few have cared to encounter them, lest they should bring upon themselves a torrent of abuse." Andrew Fuller, *Antinomianism Contrasted With the Religion Taught and Exemplified in the Holy Scriptures in The Works of Andrew Fuller* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), 335.

with some expertise in post-Reformation Reformed theology are likely to pick up on the subtleties of antinomian thinking that is abroad today. For that reason, several chapters are given to specifically antinomian concerns.

In Puritan England, antinomianism threatened to undermine the foundations of moral and social order (i.e., the normative creational perspective). That would need to be discussed in a purely historical study of antinomianism. But because of the Christological focus of this book, the law as an abiding rule for society in general will not be specifically treated. Nonetheless, in order to evaluate several key theological tenets of antinomianism, we will examine its growth in Britain and New England during the seventeenth century. By that time, many precious truths that had been discovered and rediscovered in the Reformation and post-Reformation eras were being taken in directions that were decidedly un-Reformed and unbiblical. The various threats of Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, and Socinianism were very much alive in England around the time of the Westminster Assembly (1640s), but the Westminster divines found themselves having to contend with an equally pernicious theology that they termed “antinomianism.” The writings of the divines, as well as other Reformed theologians in Britain and on the Continent, reveal that antinomianism was not simply a rejection of the moral law, but a wholesale departure from Reformed orthodoxy on several points of doctrine.

In assessing antinomianism, therefore, the right questions need to be asked in order to get the right answers. Simply affirming that there are passages in the Bible that speak about God’s role in salvation and human responsibility in the Christian life will not suffice. The problem of antinomianism is an acute one, and its errors need to be exposed by making sure that specific questions are asked. The following chapters attempt to do just that. It should be added that this book is not strictly historical theology. It is not merely an attempt to recount the facts of history, a labor that has been accomplished ably in several academic works to date, but also an attempt to evaluate that history (i.e., prescriptively), and so it falls within the realm of systematic theology.

Antinomianism was the lifelong bogeyman of Richard Baxter (1615–91). He believed that he was called by God to deliver the Reformed world, not only from the practical antinomianism (i.e., “loose living”) that he witnessed in different contexts, but also from the theological antinomi-

anism that was finding its way into pulpits and books. While I have great admiration and respect for Baxter’s ministry, his case is somewhat ironic. His view of justification slipped in a “neonomian” direction.² It is useless to combat one error with another; the example of Baxter shows that critiquing a system of theology exposes the polemicist to the real temptation of going too far in the opposite direction.

The grace of God in salvation must be maintained at all costs. On that we are all agreed, I hope. Indeed, even Roman Catholics and Arminians would agree with that sentiment. Specifically, then, the “aloneness” of faith as the instrument by which we receive the righteousness of Christ imputed to us must be upheld, even if it costs us our reputations or lives. Spirit-wrought, imparted righteousness is not enough for us; we also need a perfect righteousness that is better than our own. But, at the same time, the robust doctrine of sanctification that has characterized Reformed orthodoxy for centuries, and which has been and continues to be attacked even in broadly Reformed circles, must likewise be defended. This is not a book on holiness or sanctification per se, but by analyzing and critiquing antinomianism, this work will provide readers with a theological framework within which to approach the Scriptures and make sense of passages that sometimes are explained away in the most ingenious ways. There are a number of topics related to this discussion that are not included in this book. I have chosen to be selective, not exhaustive.

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 seventeenth-century antinomianism. I have chosen not to name names, but there are a few exceptions to this principle in the book. Rather, my aim is to help readers, particularly pastors, understand certain tenets of antinomianism, which will allow them to connect the dots, so

2. Like antinomianism, neonomianism is a complex theological phenomenon. In short, it is the idea that Christ, by fulfilling the requirements of the old covenant, makes it possible for man to be justified according to the more lenient terms of the “new law” (hence, “neonomianism”) of the gospel. Christ’s righteous obedience becomes the meritorious cause of justification, which allows the faith of the believer to be the formal cause of justification. By contrast, most Reformed theologians believed that the imputation of Christ’s righteousness was the formal cause of justification. See Richard Baxter, *A Treatise of Justifying Righteousness in Two Books* (London: Nevil Simons & Jonathan Robinson, 1676); Hans Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn: Richard Baxter’s Doctrine of Justification in Its Seventeenth-Century Context of Controversy* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2003).

to speak, in the contemporary scene. I make no apologies for depending upon Reformed authors. We will see how various Reformed luminaries from different countries in different eras have addressed such topics as the law, the gospel, and good works. Yet there is always room for advancement and clarification in our tradition. In a few areas, especially in relation to Christological concerns, I try to make explicit what has been implicit in a number of Reformed writers over the years. Nonetheless, my commitment to the Westminster Standards is resolute, and so this work unashamedly fits in the Westminster (Puritan) tradition.

As a pastor, I have also seen the benefit of preaching the whole Christ. In fact, the more I have had a chance to understand the person and work of Christ, the more I have been free to preach sermons that do justice not only to Christ's office as priest, but also to his offices as prophet and king. Good Christology and good application are not enemies, but friends. Bad Christology leads to bad or no application. As readers will (I hope) see, a Reformed understanding of Christ's person and work—not necessarily more imperatives, though they belong in our preaching—is the true solution to the problem of antinomianism. This issue is above all a pastoral one, and there would be no reason to write a book on such a controversial subject if people's souls were not at risk. But love for Christ demands that his glory and honor be defended. For that reason, and that reason alone, I have been drawn into this controversy.

Finally, my own attitude toward those whom I consider to be antinomians or to have leanings in that direction is best summed up by the following from Samuel Rutherford (1600–1661):

If Antinomians offend, or such as are, out of ignorance, seduced, hate me for heightening Christ, not in a Gospel-licence, as they do; but in a strict and accurate walking, in commanding of which, both law and gospel do friendly agree, and never did, and never could jar, or contest; I threaten them, in this I write, with the revenge of good will, to have them saved, in a weak aim, and a far off, at least, desire, to offer to their view such a Gospel-Idea, and representation of Christ, as the Prophets and Apostles have shown in the word of his Kingdom, who opens the secrets of the Father to the sons of men.³

3. Samuel Rutherford, *Christ dying and drawing sinners to himself* (London, 1647), "To the Reader."

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THE EFFORT that went into writing this book was not mine alone. I was helped and encouraged by Bob McKelvey, Mark Herzer, Gert van den Brink, Ruben Zartman, Matthew Winzer, Ian Clary, Ted van Raalte, Paul Walker, Benji Swinburnson, D. Patrick Ramsey, and Ryan McGraw. In different ways they contributed to what merit there may be in this work.

I offer a special thank you to Professor David Garner of Westminster Theological Seminary. He first contacted me about writing a book for P&R Publishing. Eventually I decided on this topic, but without David's help this book may not have been realized. Also many thanks to Jared Oliphint for his encouragement as he read portions of this book before it came to print. Thank you also to Paul Mandry for the inspiration to finish this book.

I would also like to recognize my congregation at Faith Vancouver Presbyterian Church (PCA) for their desire to hear Christ preached. My great privilege as a minister of the gospel is to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ Jesus. Their great privilege is to know and love Christ. We have, I hope, all come to love Christ's person and his work more and more over the years.

P&R Publishing has been a delight to work with. Amanda Martin and John Hughes have ensured that things run smoothly during the difficult process of bringing a book to press. There are others behind the scenes at P&R who also deserve my gratitude. They know who they are, and I am deeply grateful for how diligently they all worked with me on this book.

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words. And my wife, Barbara, is nothing short of heroic as a wife and mother. I simply ask their forgiveness for the antinomian tendencies that remain in my own heart.

Finally, I wish to praise the one who is “chief among ten thousand,” who is God over all, for enabling me to write of his person and work in a manner that, I pray, will bring glory to his name—the name that is above every name.

EDITOR'S NOTES

NOTE THAT OLD ENGLISH spelling and grammar have generally been modernized. All quotations from the Bible come from the English Standard Version (ESV), unless a quote comes from an author in a previous century.

The abbreviation WCF is used for the Westminster Confession of Faith, and WLC is used for the Westminster Larger Catechism.

1

LESSONS FROM HISTORY

“PLUS ÇA CHANGE, PLUS C’EST LA MÊME
CHOSE.”

THE FIRST ANTINOMIANS

Adam was the first antinomian (Rom. 5). In the garden, he was against (*anti*) God’s law (*nomos*) when he transgressed by failing to guard the garden and to forbid his wife to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Eve’s own doctrinal antinomianism (Gen. 3:2–3) led to practical antinomianism (3:6). Thus, antinomianism was birthed by our original parents. Interestingly, though, their antinomianism was in response to Satan’s legalism, for it was he who had (willfully) misconstrued God’s gracious loving-kindness to Adam and Eve and made God out to be a legalist, reflecting his own heart (3:1–5).

The Scottish theologian John “Rabbi” Duncan (1796–1870) has rightly argued that “there is only one heresy, and that is Antinomianism,” for all sin, including heresy, is against God’s law.¹ The apostle John essentially makes this point when he says that sin is lawlessness (*anomia*) (1 John 3:4). A history of antinomianism, when defined this way, could easily be derived from the Bible. Similarly, antinomianism, viewed either as breaking or opposing God’s law, is the picture of society at large and regrettably even the church. Nonetheless, the theological concept of antinomianism is a

1. John Duncan, *Colloquia Peripatetica* (Edinburgh: Edmonston & Douglas, 1873), 70.

lot more complex than simply being against God's law, either doctrinally or practically.²

Most people assume that the Pharisees were the preeminent legalists—that is, those who are generally considered to be the opposite of antinomians—trusting in their own obedience more than God's grace. Some modern scholars, however, have tried to play down the legalistic elements in Second Temple Judaism. In their view, Paul was not concerned so much with self-righteousness as with Jewish nationalism in the form of certain boundary markers (e.g., circumcision, dietary laws, and the Sabbath). While there is some truth in these reassessments, the fundamental problem was still self-righteousness and legalism. Those boundary markers were symptoms of a larger problem: a legalistic heart. But the problem was at the same time antinomianism. Christ makes this clear in Matthew 23:23, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others." The Pharisees did not actually keep the law (Mark 7:8); their Talmudic legalism actually made them practical antinomians insofar as they "neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness." They loved the praise of men more than the praise of God (John 12:43); they were self-seeking, dishonest, murderous hypocrites (Matt. 23). Far from keeping the law, they were lawbreakers, and this culminated in what would be the greatest crime in history, the killing of the only completely innocent man ever to live—Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 2:23).

In reality, legalists are not much different from antinomians, if indeed they are different at all. Pharisaic selective obedience is disobedience. Oliver O'Donovan perceptively notes that legalism and antinomianism are in fact two sides of the same coin because they are "fleshly" ways of living life. Christian ethics is not a matter of finding a middle ground between

2. As the Particular Baptist theologian Andrew Fuller remarked in his work against Antinomianism: "The name signifies that which is contrary to the law; because those who are denominated Antinomians profess to renounce the moral law as a rule of conduct, and maintain that as believers in Christ they are delivered from it. This appellation, so far as it goes, seems to be appropriate; but it is far from expressing all the distinguishing opinions of which the system is composed." Andrew Fuller, *Antinomianism Contrasted With the Religion Taught and Exemplified in the Holy Scriptures in The Works of Andrew Fuller* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), 338.

legalism and license. Rather, as O'Donovan notes, "such an approach could end up by being only what it was from the start, an oscillation between two sub-Christian forms of life. A consistent Christianity must take a different path altogether, the path of an integrally evangelical ethics which rejoices the heart and gives light to the eyes because it springs from God's gift to mankind in Jesus Christ."³ According to O'Donovan, then, not only are legalism and antinomianism "fleshly" ways of approaching ethics, but also there can be no middle ground between these two realms since they are fundamentally the same error, albeit dressed up differently from case to case.⁴ The grace of God in the person of Jesus Christ, properly understood, is the only solution to these twin heresies. In essence, the mistakes of legalism and antinomianism are Christological errors.

The following will be a brief survey of antinomian debates in the Reformation and post-Reformation eras, ending with the Marrow Controversy in the early eighteenth century. Many of the theological issues debated in these centuries are only given a cursory glance in this chapter. Subsequent chapters will give more detailed consideration to various questions that arise here. This chapter merely sets the stage for the rest of the book.

LUTHER AND THE LUTHERANS

During the Reformation, the doctrine of justification by faith alone was rediscovered. With its rediscovery, Protestantism emerged. Reformation and post-Reformation theologians held that there could never be union with Rome so long as she insisted, as she still does today, that justification is not by faith alone. Historically, when a glorious truth is discovered, or even rediscovered, a number of half-truths or complete untruths are also birthed along with it. Not long after Martin Luther's (1483–1546) teaching on justification by faith alone had become public, one of his zealous disciples, Johann Agricola (c. 1494–1566), began to quarrel during the late 1520s with another one of Luther's disciples, the

3. Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), 12.

4. Again, Fuller remarks: "It has been said that every unregenerate sinner has the heart of a Pharisee. This is true; and it is equally true that every unregenerate sinner has the heart of an Antinomian. . . . The quarrels between Antinomianism and Pharisaism arise, I think, more from misunderstanding than from any real antipathy between them." Fuller, *Antinomianism*, 338.

learned Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560), over questions relating to the law and the gospel.⁵ At first, the principal issue between Melanchthon and Agricola was whether the preaching of the law was required for repentance and salvation. Agricola believed that the preaching of the gospel (and not the law) produced repentance, and that Melanchthon held an essentially Roman Catholic view. Luther would himself become embroiled in the controversy with Agricola, which resulted in Luther writing *Against the Antinomians* (1539).⁶

Luther was a colorful figure and had a penchant for hyperbole. His rhetoric is something to be admired, but not necessarily copied. He lived in remarkable times, when the theological landscape was constantly changing. So while his early enemies were the “papists,” and they would remain so until he died, later he had to contend with the “false brethren” and various radical Protestants, including Agricola. His disputations with the latter caused him some grief, but Luther was never one to allow friendship to supersede the truth of God’s Word. He coined the term “antinomian” in response to the excessive rhetoric against the law coming from those who supposedly belonged in his camp. Of course, the “softly singing Antinomians” (to use Luther’s words) were a little bemused by his response to them. After all, Luther could be guilty of antinomian-sounding rhetoric himself. In fact, the hero of the English antinomian theologians in the seventeenth century was not Calvin, though he was cited by them (not infrequently out of context), but Luther. The seventeenth-century Scottish theologian Samuel Rutherford noted “how vainly Antinomians of our time boast that Luther is for them.”⁷

David Como makes a telling statement in connection with this: “Luther confessed that some of his early writings had indeed stressed the notion that believers were free from the Law, but claimed that such excessive rhetoric had been necessary to deliver men from the bondage of papal works righteousness. ‘Now, however, when the times are very dissimilar from those under the pope,’ such rhetoric was no longer necessary, and if misunderstood, could lead men to an amoral, fleshly security

5. See Timothy J. Wengert, *Law and Gospel: Philip Melanchthon’s Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over Poenitentia* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997).

6. On Luther’s debate with Agricola, see Mark U. Edwards, *Luther and the False Brethren* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 156–79.

7. Samuel Rutherford, *A survey of the spirituall anticbrist* (London, 1647), 1:69.

that threatened . . . moral and social order.”⁸ Luther was not only a man of his times, but a man who understood his times. Just as Paul’s negative statements on the law typically arose from his conflict with Judaizers, so Luther’s negative statements on the law must be understood in relation to his sixteenth-century opponents. His writings, even more so perhaps than the writings of any other figure in church history, must be historically located.⁹ Context, in the case of statements made by Luther, is half the interpretation!

Interestingly, it seems that Luther would not have been surprised by his heroic status among later antinomian theologians. In his treatise *Against the Antinomians*, Luther comments that if he had died at Smalcald, he would have “forever been called the patron saint of such spirits [i.e., the antinomians], since they appeal to my books.”¹⁰ But Luther was no “antinomian”; that is, he was not against God’s law—specifically, the Ten Commandments. Luther expounded the Ten Commandments in various places, sang them, and prayed them as well. In fact, he writes: “I know of no manner in which we do not use them, unless it be that we unfortunately do not practice and paint them with our deeds and our life as we should. I myself, as old and as learned as I am, recite the commandments daily word for word like a child.”¹¹ As David Steinmetz acutely observes, Luther “does not reject good works except as the basis for justification. On the contrary, Luther wishes to stress as much as possible the importance of good works in the life of faith.”¹² Likewise, Mark Edwards captures well Luther’s objection to the antinomian preachers of his day, who were “fine Easter preachers but disgraceful Pentecost preachers, for they taught only redemption through Christ and not the sanctification through the Holy Spirit.”¹³ This particular criticism would resurface again, roughly a century later in Puritan England.

8. David Como, *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 113.

9. In his work on the moral law against the antinomians, the Puritan theologian Anthony Burgess showed that the emphases in Luther’s earlier works were different from those in his later works. See Burgess, *Vindiciae legis: or, A vindication of the morall law and the covenants, from the Errours of Papists, Arminians, Socinians, and more especially Antinomians* (London: T. Underhill, 1646), 19–20.

10. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, American Edition (Philadelphia: Muehlenberg and Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–86), 47:108.

11. *Ibid.*, 47:109.

12. David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 119.

13. Edwards, *Luther and the False Brethren*, 170.

Antinomian debates among Lutheran theologians did not end with Luther's death in 1546. During the latter half of the sixteenth century, there were a number of tensions among Lutheran theologians relating to the law and the gospel.¹⁴ Melanchthon, in fact, changed his view on repentance and agreed that the gospel was alone able to produce evangelical repentance. Perhaps even more controversially, he held to a "Reformed" view of the gospel, which included the whole doctrine of Christ, including repentance. The Gnesio-Lutherans disagreed with Melanchthon's view (i.e., the Philippist position) and defined the gospel narrowly as pure promise, which excluded repentance from consideration. Because he supposedly confused the law with the gospel, and argued that the gospel produced repentance, Melanchthon was accused of antinomianism. These debates show that among Lutheran theologians there were competing views on the law and the gospel, particularly in relation to the doctrine of repentance. And, in the midst of these debates, including the Majoristic Controversy, charges of antinomianism and popery were not infrequently used in order to get the upper hand.

ANTINOMIANISM IN PURITAN ENGLAND

The antinomian movement in England during the seventeenth century was in part a rebellion against Puritan piety and practice. It was also a theological movement that lacked the sophistication found in the writings of the best Reformed theologians. This lack of sophistication was a great cause of consternation among some Reformed divines, who frequently had to defend themselves against the charge of antinomianism from their Roman Catholic opponents. A further complication was the rising Arminian movement within Protestantism. The antinomians may have lacked the precision required to stay clear of various errors, while maintaining historic Reformed truths about *sola gratia*, but they were experts with their rhetoric—for they were the true defenders of free grace, or so they believed!¹⁵

14. On this, see Martin Foord, "A New Embassy: John Calvin's Gospel," in *Aspects of Reforming: Theology and Practice in Sixteenth Century Europe*, ed. Michael Parsons (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2013), chap. 10. Incidentally, in this chapter Foord provides an excellent essay on Calvin's view of the law-gospel distinction.

15. See John Saltmarsh, *Free Grace* (London, 1645), and Robert Towne, *The Assertion of Grace* (London, 1645).

Studies of antinomianism in England during the seventeenth century have not always been kind to Puritan Reformed theologians. Como's impressively detailed study of antinomianism during this period suffers from some basic misunderstandings of Reformed theology and indeed the Bible itself, which is fairly common among social historians who make theological assessments. For example, he suggests that Puritanism "was a movement that attempted to preserve and reconcile the antinomian and the moralizing elements of the Pauline epistles."¹⁶ John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim make a valid claim about Puritan theology in relation to Luther's law-gospel schema, but they incorrectly accuse the Puritans of legalism: "And like the Reformed, they typically qualified Luther's antithesis between law and gospel, emphasising the role of God's law within the Christian life and the local community, and trying . . . to recreate godly Genevas in England and America. This legalism provoked an 'antinomian backlash' from within, but even when radical Puritans rejected orthodox Reformed ideas about the moral law or predestination or infant baptism, they still defined themselves in relation to the Reformed tradition."¹⁷ Incidentally, noteworthy is the claim that the antinomians often viewed themselves as part of the Reformed theological tradition, not in opposition to it.

Scholars today who accuse the Puritans of legalism are simply echoing a pattern well established in the seventeenth century by antinomian theologians, who hurled the "legalist" epithet—as well as "crypto-papist" and the like—at those who were thoroughly Reformed in their theology. This was often a reaction against Reformed theologians who had described the theology of men like John Eaton (1574/5–1630/31), Tobias Crisp (1600–1643), John Saltmarsh (d. 1647), John Traske (c. 1585–1636), and Robert Towne (1592/3?–1664) as "antinomian." These theologians had different emphases and did not entirely agree with each other.

Therefore, the "antinomians" were not a monolithic group of theologians, but a group of theologians who were in error—sometimes serious—according to many orthodox divines.¹⁸ Of course, the antinomian divines

16. Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 130. Como's comments in the first paragraph of page 109, where he accuses Paul of contradicting himself, are similarly alarming.

17. John Coffey and Paul Chang-Ha Lim, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3.

18. There are typically problems when *-ism* is attached to a word, even in the case of "Puritanism." The Puritans were not a monolithic movement in terms of their theology. There were a number of

rejected the label that was imposed upon them. John Saltmarsh, for example, makes use of what was typically powerful rhetoric in the debate: “Can the Free-grace of Jesus Christ tempt any one to sin of itself? Can a good tree bring forth evil fruit? And shall we call every one Antinomian that speaks Free-grace, or a little more freely than we do?”¹⁹ In other words, Saltmarsh and his friends essentially claimed that if to speak of “free grace” made them “antinomian,” then they were guilty as charged. If the antinomian theologians evinced clever rhetoric in justifying themselves, the orthodox Reformed divines had a few tricks up their own sleeves too. Anthony Burgess (d. 1664), a prominent Puritan theologian, strongly asserted that the law cannot justify, which means that “we are all Antinomians in this sense.”²⁰ But that was the only sense in which the orthodox could be “antinomian.”

Those who criticized the antinomians were not fringe theologians who had been seduced by Arminian or Roman Catholic theology. No, they included the Westminster divines. A close reading of the Westminster documents reveals how opposed to antinomianism they were. Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, and Socinianism were major theological threats in England during the 1640s. But so too was antinomianism. Perhaps this was the case because of what antinomian theology might lead to, rather than what in fact it was. Even so, stalwart Reformed theologians such as Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680), Thomas Gataker (1574–1654), Samuel Rutherford (c. 1600–1661), Thomas Shepard (1605–49), and John Flavel (bap. 1630, d. 1691), some of whom had international reputations, wrote copiously on the errors of antinomians. Their polemical works on the subject reveal that the debate was more complicated than the question whether the moral law is still binding for Christians in the new covenant. The various debates involved the following questions:

1. Are there any conditions for salvation?
2. Is the moral law still binding for Christians?

Puritans who were not Reformed, for example. Equally, one has to affirm “shared characteristics” (see Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 33–38) in order to speak of “antinomianism.” But while there are dangers involved in this approach, lumping (as opposed to splitting) does have its advantages. Scholars have described the theology of certain individuals in England and New England during the seventeenth century as “antinomian,” and so I will do likewise, even though there can be problems with such an approach.

19. Saltmarsh, *Free Grace*, “An Occasional Word.”

20. Burgess, *Vindiciae legis*, 151.

3. What is the precise nature of, and relationship between, the law and the gospel?
4. Are good works necessary for salvation?
5. Does God love all Christians the same, irrespective of their obedience or lack thereof?
6. Who is the subject of spiritual activity, the believer or Christ?
7. May our assurance of justification be discerned by our sanctification?
8. Does God see sin in believers?
9. Is a person justified at birth or upon believing?²¹

These are some of the issues that were debated during the seventeenth century in England. The question of the abiding nature of the moral law was indeed central to the debate, but the other questions listed above were all related to that question. Debates on these issues were not taking place only in England. New England had to contend with many of the same questions.

ANTINOMIANISM IN NEW ENGLAND

While antinomian debates were raging in England from the 1630s to the 1650s, another antinomian controversy was taking place in New England. It involved (among others) a theologian (John Cotton), a politician (Henry Vane), and a laywoman (Anne Hutchinson). Michael P. Winship has shown that John Cotton (1585–1652) affirmed that “the dispute revolved around how to best magnify the free grace of God.”²² This dispute, which took place in the Massachusetts Bay Colony from 1636 to 1638, could be called the “free grace controversy,” because it “seems both descriptively accurate and prejudicial to none of the actors.”²³ This is a useful name, because antinomian debates have invariably been driven by the question of what it means to preach and teach the “free grace” of God.

Anne Hutchinson (bap. 1591, d. 1643) eventually came to the conclusion that only a few ministers were gospel preachers. The others, such as

21. This is my own list. Readers of Dutch may consult the sketch provided by G. A. van den Brink in *Herman Witsius en het antinomianisme: Met tekst en vertaling van de Animadversiones Irenicae* (Apledoorn: Instituut voor Reformatieonderzoek, 2008), 51n12.

22. Michael P. Winship, *Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636–1641* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 1.

23. *Ibid.*

Thomas Shepard and Thomas Hooker (1586?–1647), she thought, were basically legalists. One minister of whom Hutchinson approved was the well-known Congregationalist, John Cotton. Hutchinson’s approval of Cotton only complicated matters for him. But, as Theodore Bozeman has noted, without Cotton’s participation the “famed Antinomian Controversy of 1636–38 is difficult to imagine.”²⁴ In fact, the controversy involved theologians from across the Atlantic as well. Cotton ended up writing a response to one of the Scottish commissioners at the Westminster Assembly, Robert Baillie (1602–62), who had accused him, among other things, of being antinomian.²⁵ Cotton staunchly denied the charge, but Hutchinson’s approval of his ministry was enough evidence for those who were already suspicious of his theology. In his response to Baillie, the questions he answered, particularly on the relation of faith to union with Christ and justification, reveal the complexity of the debate. Cotton’s view on the relation of faith to justification and union with Christ is highly technical. In short, he claimed that union with Christ takes place before the act of faith. Regeneration and union are roughly synonymous in his schema. As a result, because union precedes faith, so too does justification. But this is essentially an antinomian view, not the typical Reformed view that faith precedes justification.²⁶ Cotton, however, was fully aware of what he was doing when he departed from orthodox Reformed views, such as when he rejected faith as the instrumental cause of justification.

These questions were related to other theological issues that were being discussed at the time. With a clear eye on antinomian theology, the Synod of Elders, when Cotton was present, declared in 1637 that certain theological views were “unsafe.” The “unsafe” propositions included the following statements from antinomian theologians:

1. To say we are justified by faith is an unsafe speech; we must say we are justified by Christ.
2. To evidence justification by sanctification or graces savours of Rome.

24. Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain: Disciplinary Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 241.

25. John Cotton, *The way of Congregational churches cleared* (London, 1648).

26. Cotton supposedly retracted his “antinomian” position after debate with the New England elders. See David D. Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636–1638: A Documentary History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 411.

3. If I be holy, I am never the better accepted by God; if I be unholy, I am never the worse.
4. If Christ will let me sin, let him look to it; upon his honour be it.
5. Here is a great stir about graces and looking to hearts; but give me Christ; I seek not for graces, but for Christ . . . I seek not for sanctification, but for Christ; tell me not of meditation and duties, but tell me of Christ.
6. I may know I am Christ's, not because I do crucify the lusts of the flesh, but because I do not crucify them, but believe in Christ that crucified my lusts for me.
7. If Christ be my sanctification, what need I look to anything in myself, to evidence my justification?²⁷

These statements get to the heart of the issues involved in the antinomian debates during the 1630s in New England—and indeed in England. They reveal that a century after Agricola's debates with Melanchthon and Luther, “antinomian” had taken on a new meaning.

NONCONFORMING ENGLAND

Even after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, after the Civil War, the antinomian debates did not go away in England. In the 1690s, the controversy erupted between Presbyterians and Congregationalists. The highly respected Dutch theologian, Herman Witsius (1636–1708), played a role in this English nonconformist debate.²⁸ One of the things that set off the debate was the reprinting of Tobias Crisp's controversial sermons, *Christ Alone Exalted*. In the early 1640s, these sermons had caused a firestorm of controversy, and they did so again decades later by bringing Richard Baxter into the debate. Baxter's involvement was a little unfortunate for those who claimed to be orthodox, because his doctrine of justification was not orthodox. In fact, during these debates the term “neonomian” was coined by Isaac Chauncy (1632–1712) to describe Baxter. It appears that with a

27. Joseph B. Felt, *The Ecclesiastical History of New England* (Boston: Congregational Library Association, 1855–62), 1:318 (“Detrimental Speeches”).

28. See Herman Witsius, *Conciliatory, or Irenical Animadversions, on the Controversies Agitated in Britain, under the unhappy names of Antinomians and Neonomians*, trans. Thomas Bell (Glasgow: W. Lang, 1807).

friend like Baxter on your side, enemies were unnecessary. Nonetheless, after Baxter died in 1691, his friend Daniel Williams (c. 1643–1716) became the leading spokesman against antinomian theology. Scholars have generally not been kind to Williams, but their negative assessments of his theology pale in comparison to the rhetoric that flowed from Isaac Chauncy’s pen. Chauncy repeatedly referred to Williams as a “neonomian” because he spoke of the duties of the gospel as well as conditions for salvation. The specific point about “conditions” for salvation shows how complex the debates in the seventeenth century were.

As noted above, Baxter’s involvement in the debate was not entirely helpful, because his peculiar theological beliefs—he was *sui generis*—meant he was also opposed by a perfectly orthodox theologian named John Owen (1616–83). Like Baxter and Williams, Owen was opposed to antinomianism, but, unlike Baxter, he was not a neonomian. Owen affirmed that there were conditions for salvation, which was what got Williams into trouble with Chauncy. But Owen was able to explain what he meant by conditions for salvation in a manner that was more precise and theologically sophisticated than the explanations of Williams.²⁹ Thus, the antinomian debates in the latter part of the seventeenth century revealed that just as there is a spectrum of antinomian theology (Saltmarsh vs. Crisp), so also is there a spectrum of neonomian theology (Baxter vs. Williams), as well as slight disagreement among orthodox theologians in expressing certain points of Reformed theology (Goodwin vs. Owen). It is far too simplistic and historically naïve to suggest that someone is antinomian only if he denies that the moral law has a place in the life of a believer. And it is likewise wrongheaded to suggest that “neonomians” are those who speak only of imperatives without the indicatives. In the seventeenth century, both antinomians and neonomians were typically reactionary theologians. Their reactions to the perceived excesses of certain groups were not always helpful or clearly articulated. For every John Owen or Thomas Manton, there was a Richard Baxter or a Tobias Crisp. The application for us today is really no different. In our zeal against errors and heresies, we are perhaps the

29. On Owen’s opposition to antinomianism and his scholastic distinctions used in the debate, see Gert van den Brink, “Impetration and Application and John Owen’s Theology,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2012).

ones most vulnerable to infelicitous statements and hyperbolic rhetoric that often creates more heat than light.

THE MARROW

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were not the beginning and end of antinomian debates. In fact, perhaps the debate best known to present-day Christians on the topics of antinomianism and neonomianism (i.e., legalism) is the Marrow Controversy in the Church of Scotland from 1718 to 1726. Because of its close proximity to England, and because of the relatively short period of time between the English antinomian debates and the Marrow Controversy, as well as the fact that a certain book from England played such a significant role in the debate, the importance of the English context for the Scottish one cannot be overstated.

In 1645, a tract entitled *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* was published by Edward Fisher (b. 1611/12, d. 1656 or later), though only “E. F.” appeared on the title page. Como records that *The Marrow* was a “minor bestseller,” going through seven editions by 1650, but lost its public notoriety after the Restoration. However, seventy-three years after it was first published, “a Scotsman named Hog dusted off *The Marrow* and reissued it, occasioning a heated controversy that threatened to tear the Scottish Church in two. Defenders of the volume—so called ‘Marrow Men’—claimed that the book represented a powerful practical exposition of the doctrine of grace. Its detractors saw it as a deceptive threat to the orthodoxy of the Church, a work of disguised antinomianism.”³⁰

Fisher’s work was written as an attempted *via media* between the errors of antinomianism and legalism. Interestingly, however, Fisher’s claims to be charting a middle ground did not impress his critics, either in the seventeenth or in the eighteenth centuries. Critics claimed that, if anything, *The Marrow* revealed Fisher’s antinomian sympathies. The Presbyterian John Trapp (1601–69) actually called Fisher a “sly antinomian.”³¹ A number of scholars today tend to agree with that assessment, partly because Fisher

30. Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 1.

31. See *ibid.*, 4. James Buchanan remarks: “In regard to this question of fact, in the case of the ‘Marrow,’ we shall only say, that a book which is held even by its admirers to require explanatory or apologetic notes, may be fairly presumed to contain some unguarded expressions, which might be understood in a sense dangerous to some part of the scheme of divine truth; and that this remark applies equally to Fisher’s ‘Marrow of Modern Divinity,’ which was annotated by Thomas Boston,

associated with antinomian ministers in the 1630s. Winship, for example, speaks of the “London barber who wrote the controversial antinomian-tinged *Marrow of Modern Divinity*.”³² In Scotland during the early eighteenth century, *The Marrow* would fall under similar condemnation by the Church of Scotland.

The controversy in Scotland involved many of the same issues that emerged in England and New England during the seventeenth century, but there were also new questions arising that previously had not been vigorously debated. The new issue that began the Marrow Controversy arose in 1717, when the Presbytery of Auchterarder required licentiates and ordinands to sign a series of propositions, one of which was: “I believe that it is not sound and orthodox to teach, that we must forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ, and instating us in covenant with God.” According to the General Assembly, the Presbytery of Auchterarder had grievously erred, and a commission of the Assembly similarly disagreed with the proposition. As David Lachman notes, “it was in this context that *The Marrow* was republished and, on being attacked by Principal Hadow and defended by James Hog, became the occasion of controversy.”³³

The abovementioned proposition should never have been condemned by the General Assembly, but their condemnation and the resulting conflict show that legalism, flowering in the form of “hyper-Calvinism,” was firmly entrenched in the Church of Scotland. As so often is the case, when one falls into error on one point of theology, other points necessarily follow. But those in the Church of Scotland who condemned the teachings of *The Marrow* firmly believed they were upholding Reformed orthodoxy against the incipient universalism of Edward Fisher. In other words, the Westminster Confession was (supposedly) defended by the opponents of *The Marrow*. One of the major points of contention in the debate was the phrase found in *The Marrow*, “Christ is dead for him.” Interestingly, this phrase originally came from John Preston (1587–1628), who was an English hypothetical

and to Dr. Crisp’s ‘Sermons,’ which were annotated by Dr. Gill.” *The Doctrine of Justification* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1867), 183.

32. Winship, *Making Heretics*, 57.

33. David C. Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy, 1718–1723: An Historical and Theological Analysis* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1988), 7.

universalist.³⁴ Commenting on Preston’s well-known phrase, Jonathan Moore suggests that Preston, “in common with all hypothetical universalists, explicitly grounded the universal call of the gospel, at least in part, in a universal aspect to Christ’s satisfaction. . . . This is the language of hypothetical universalism and was identified as an error by some in Preston’s circles, including the particular redemptionist Thomas Goodwin.”³⁵ Thomas Boston (1676–1732) actually defended Preston’s understanding of the Great Commission, but wrongly claimed that Preston held to particular redemption. Scholars such as Lachman have also adopted Boston’s position that Preston was not a hypothetical universalist. Typically, particularist theologians wishing to defend Preston and Boston have tried to distinguish between “Christ died for you” and “Christ is dead for you.” But, as Moore shows, Preston viewed these statements as roughly synonymous.³⁶

Reformed theologians since John Calvin (1509–64) have actually disagreed on the nature of the free offer of the gospel.³⁷ Thomas Manton (bap. 1620, d. 1677) did not hold to the same position as John Owen, and John Preston’s hypothetical universalism meant that his own view on the free offer of the gospel was also different from the positions of Owen and Manton. Opponents of the phrase “Christ is dead for him” were not wrong to pick up on the “universalism” of the statement, even if Fisher and Boston were thoroughgoing particularists. However, in reacting against that somewhat infelicitous phrase, the Scottish Assembly moved in the direction of hyper-Calvinism and legalism. As Boston and Hog correctly argued, the free offer of the gospel is not contingent upon the hearers meeting certain degrees of conviction. The Auchterarder Presbytery was correct to deny that Christians must forsake sin in order to come to Christ. After all, apart from Christ we can do nothing (John 15:5). But opponents of *The Marrow* believed that the elect are those who forsake sin, and therefore that grace is given to those people alone. In their view, one must forsake

34. See Jonathan D. Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism: John Preston and the Softening of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

35. *Ibid.*, 117.

36. *Ibid.*, 121.

37. See Martin Foord, “John Owen’s Gospel Offer: Well-Meant or Not?” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, ed. Kapic and Jones. Foord claims that Owen holds essentially to a hyper-Calvinistic position on the gospel offer, as opposed to Thomas Manton.

sin in order to come to Christ.³⁸ In the preaching of the gospel, then, the benefits of Christ should only be offered to those for whom Christ died (i.e., the elect). But how do we know, in the preaching of the gospel, who it is for whom Christ died? The answer, according to the majority in the Church of Scotland: those who show enough contrition to receive Christ. The free offer became a conditional offer; Christ was divorced from his benefits; therefore, one could argue that this position was a Christological error more than anything else.

This specific debate during the Marrow Controversy sheds light on the nature of theological debates in which accusations of antinomianism and neonomianism are being made. First, unguarded phrases, either wrongly worded or wrongly understood, often lead to further unguarded ways of theologizing. Second, Boston was called an antinomian by legalists.³⁹ But just as Luther was no antinomian, so Boston was not one either. If Boston was guilty of anything, it was poor historical theology. All of this is to suggest that this brief historical survey reveals that hostile appellations in the context of theological debate are sometimes misplaced. But sometimes they are not. Just as there have been genuine legalists over the course of history, so too have there been genuine antinomians. But questions of who are genuine “antinomians” can only be answered by asking the right questions! By the end of this book, we hope to be able to set out the characteristics that justify someone being labeled an antinomian.

CONCLUSION

History has not always been kind to certain individuals. Nestorius (b. after 351; d. after 451) seems to have been one such figure, who lost the political battle and thus his claim to theological credibility. However, his archrival, Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), had his flaws too. Centuries later, Martin Luther’s discovery of the doctrine of justification by faith alone in the context of Roman Catholic legalism led him to speak about the law in ways that might raise a few eyebrows. There must be a reason, after all,

38. However, this is something that even Herman Witsius says, albeit he is speaking about the experience of the believer, which is not always how the *ordo salutis* is conceived. See *Conciliatory, or Irenical Animadversions*, 119–20.

39. See William VanDoodewaard’s introductory essay in the modern reprint of Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2009), 28–29.

why the English antinomians loved Luther so much. But whatever excessive language Luther may have used in some of the unguarded statements in his pre-1925 writings, he was not an antinomian in the sense of being against God's law. Likewise, John Cotton wrote and said things that were infelicitous, and he even constructed his view of union with Christ, justification, and faith in a way that was representative of antinomian thought. In general, however, Cotton was sound, but that did not mean he did not occasionally confuse others.

In seventeenth-century England, several prominent antinomian theologians were fiercely criticized. But one of them, Tobias Crisp, was defended by sound Reformed theologians, even centuries after his death. Likewise, Edward Fisher had his critics and his defenders, even among orthodox Reformed theologians. Indeed, he was not a theologian in the sense that John Owen and Francis Turretin were. They were far more sophisticated than Fisher, who had a sort of "Bunyan-esque" way about him. This might explain why *The Marrow*, while fitting within the bounds of Reformed orthodoxy, was nevertheless controversial. Also, despite the iconic status of the Marrow Men in Reformed circles, they were not guiltless in the debate that caused a firestorm of activity in the eighteenth century, even though they were heroic in the cause of truth. In other words, this short survey of debates over a few centuries has revealed that history is messy.

What hope is there, then, in coming to measured, sustainable conclusions about antinomianism? The answer depends on several factors. First, the right questions need to be asked. In contemporary Reformed circles, simply acknowledging and even affirming the "indicative-imperative" model will not suffice for guarding against legalism and antinomianism.⁴⁰ However important that model is—and I would say it is fundamental to the Christian faith—more specific questions need to be addressed, which will be a central focus of later chapters in this book. Second, Christology will always prove to be decisive in debates on antinomianism. In relation to the questions that are being asked, the answers must always have a Christological focus. A Reformed view of Christ's person is as important as a Reformed view of his work in this whole issue. The general neglect and subordination of

40. This phrase is now a theological commonplace in Reformed circles, referring to what God has done (indicative) and what we are commanded to do (imperative). The phrase itself would be anachronistic if attributed to seventeenth-century Reformed divines, but the concept is clearly present in their writings.

Christ's person to his work in many circles today has, as it did in the past, disastrous consequences for theology. Antinomianism is fundamentally a Christological problem (a point I intend to defend), as much as it is a problem of the heart and mind. Third, the importance of historical theology to the tasks of exegetical and systematic theology cannot go unnoticed. A number of errors that are popular today have been addressed before, and with great clarity. But resurrected errors require resurrected answers that build on and clarify Reformed orthodoxy. There are indeed areas for disagreement and debate within the Reformed tradition, as I have pointed out elsewhere.⁴¹ But there are views that simply fall outside the bounds of Reformed orthodoxy. Even more importantly, they cannot be sustained by the Scriptures. Finally, as this chapter has shown, the term "antinomianism" is a lot more complex than its etymology might suggest. The following chapters will reveal that acknowledging a place for the moral law in the life of the believer may not be sufficient if other truths are either neglected (as is often the case) or denied (as is sometimes the case).

41. See Michael A. G. Haykin and Mark Jones, eds., *Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).

an·ti·no·mi·an *noun* [an-ti-'nō-mē-ən]

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.

—Merriam-Webster's dictionary

Hotly debated since the sixteenth century in the Reformed theological tradition, and still a burning issue today, antinomianism has a long and complicated story. This book is the first to examine antinomianism from a historical, exegetical, and systematic perspective. More than that, in it Mark Jones offers a key—a robust Reformed Christology with a strong emphasis on the Holy Spirit—and chapter by chapter uses it to unlock nine questions raised by the debates.

“The problem of antinomianism is a hardy perennial for the church. A mischievous movement is afoot at the moment—its soaring rhetoric about grace is matched by an equally casual presumption on grace. Mark Jones’s book is thus to be welcomed: it is biblically grounded, historically sensitive, and above all timely.”

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“We are living in a deeply encouraging day when the sovereignty of God’s grace is being rediscovered far and wide. But as has happened in the past, the error of antinomianism has made its appearance. This new work by Mark Jones is rich in scriptural argument, illustrations from church history, and vigorous application.”

—**Michael A. G. Haykin**, Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville

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