

# **Antinomianism - Who Are Antinomianians?**

## **Are they Despicable Characters, or, are they Followers of the New Testament Teachings?**

**By James Poole**

### **Introduction**

The term Antinomian, like all other terms used to berate the character of Predestinarians, requires an especially clear, accurate definition. This is absolutely essential before one can determine what it means, how it is used, and who is, or is not, an Antinomian. Sadly, we have learned over a long period of years that most folks that use this term have simply borrowed it from the vocabulary of the most hardened enemies of election and predestination. Arminians, the most frequent users of the term, are generally in accord with the notion that the old order of Baptists are deep-dyed, rank Antinomians, and unworthy of further existence on this earth.

Worse still, however, is the inclination of many that fly the banner of the Primitive Order to brand other Primitive Baptists with ignominious titles of ridicule, including their rendition of the term Antinomian. In most cases those that do this branding are either open, or "wanna-be" conditionalists.

### **DEFINITIONS**

We offer three distinct definitions of the term, Antinomian, the first from the dictionary, the second from those that oppose Antinomianism, and freely toss around the term, and the third from those that recognize by God's mercies that there is a Bible

Antinomianism: one that is in perfect harmony with the law, and salvation by grace; and further, is consistent with godly living.

1. Antinomian Christian Theol. a believer in the doctrine that faith alone, not obedience to the moral law, is necessary for salvation. Webster's New World Dictionary. Second College Edition. 1984.

We fully believe this definition does much more harm than good in any discussion on the subject of Antinomians. First, the idea that faith alone is necessary for salvation is greatly flawed. Ephesians 2.8 should put that notion to rest. Faith is a fruit of the Spirit in a believer and not the source of life. Spiritual life comes by spiritual birth and faith follows, not leads. Faith in a believer and the faith of Christ are one and the same, but that faith alone is not the sole source of the elect's salvation. Second, we know of no law in the Bible called a moral law. All the laws God ever gave to man were moral, in the sense that we use the expression, moral, but they are never called moral in the Bible. We propose, God willing, to discuss this point later.

2. Antinomian: those professing Christians that are opposed to the law as a rule of life, in particular the law of Moses, also known as the Decalogue, the ten commandments, or the moral law.

This definition is only a skeleton of what the opponents of those they call Antinomians perceive. To this lifeless skeleton many Arminians tack a variety of other slanders, usually with a relish of wild proportions. Those that hold this view also seem to consider those that disagree with their presumptions as the basest of all professing Christians.

3. Antinomian: those that believe they are dead to the law by the body of Christ (Romans 7.4); that they are not under the law, but under grace (Romans 6.14); that "we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter (Roman 7.6)." That "Christ is

the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth (Romans 10.4)."

This definition might be expanded at length, but we hope to review it more fully in proper order. And it will, no doubt, be argued by some keen-eyed Arminians that we miss the real meaning of the word, for "Antinomian" means, in its simplest form, against the law. And so it does, but it is for this very reason that we feel it necessary to become involved in this controversy at all. We shall call those who engage in these wild calumnies Arminians throughout the remainder of this article. Those Arminians who hold to definition 2 above, at every turn, accuse the old order of believers of being against the law. But this is not the case at all! Against the law of God? A little child of the Heavenly King has never dreamed of being against the law of God. By the grace of God we shall prove our assertion.

## **THE PROPER QUESTION**

As can be gathered from our understanding of the word, Antinomian, as we set it forth in definition number 3, the proper question is not, are some believers against the law, but, on the contrary, is the law against the believers? If the law, any law in the Bible, is against believers then we are altogether mistaken in our belief that Christ is our sufficiency. We are satisfied it is a slander of major proportions to accuse Predestinarians of being against the law of God; and by law we include any law mentioned in the Bible. We are as fully satisfied that all those laws Arminians claim they are for as a rule of life are not against the children of the heavenly King. Neither are the saints under any obligation to keep or hold to any of those laws, either for life, justification, or appeasement of God. Neither are the laws believers are accused of being against, the believer's rule of life; in any setting. We cannot stress too strongly that in conjunction with the

proper question given above is the proper Bible question: "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth (Romans 8.33)." That anything in the above verse most definitely includes the law! Nor dare we seek to justify ourselves in law-keeping as a rule of life, seeing how we have a full and complete justification from God Himself.

It has long been the practice of Arminians to phrase their questions on this subject in such a way as to make those they erroneously call Antinomians appear as wicked as possible. The following question is no exception. "Are not these Antinomians opposed to the moral law as a rule of life?" they ask, as if no one could dare be against a "moral law" unless they were reprobates. Our bold response is, how can anyone be opposed to a law that does not exist? We have read our Bible for nearly 40 years without finding this "moral law" mentioned. "But we mean by moral law, the law of Moses; the ten commandments!", the Arminian will continue to argue. We again respond that true believers are not opposed to any law of God, the Ten Commandments included. We are, however, very much opposed to the Ten Commandments as a rule of life. Our reasoning is simple; the Bible never told us the Ten Commandments were in any way, shape, or form, our rule of life.

## **THE ACCUSED**

The accusation of antinomianism against Predestinarians is no new thing. The following comment by G. Huehns, Ph.D., history lecturer in England sheds some small light on its possible first usage: "The word 'antinomianism' is averred to have been of Lutheran coinage, but the thing itself goes back to the beginnings of the Christian era." Antinomianism in English History, p. 11. We personally have no idea exactly where, or when, the word Antinomian first came

into use, but it can easily be traced back for several hundreds of years. During this period few servants of the Lord Jesus Christ have escaped the accusation of being an Antinomian, especially if those servants did not join with their enemies in holding to the moral law for the believer's rule of life. Neither did the servants of God escape this charge if they warmly preached against the moral law as that rule. For example: "The oldest Baptist Articles of Faith declare that the moral law is a compendious 'rule of life for the Christian;' so did the ablest and soundest Baptist ministers before the nineteenth century. But in the present century some speakers and writers deny that the moral law is a rule of life, and affirm that the precepts of the gospel only are such a rule; and these people have been stigmatized by others as Antinomians, or opposed to the law." Hassell's History of the Church of God, p. 191. Much as we value Hassell's work, we feel this excerpt is misleading. To say that the "ablest and soundest Baptist ministers before the nineteenth century" held to the moral law as a rule of life is the same as saying that those that did not hold to that rule were not able and were, in fact, unsound. Further, he lumps those in "this century" that denied the moral law as a rule of life with those he castigates as "not able and unsound." Clearly, Hassell joined ranks with those that used a broad brush to tar those they considered Antinomians.

Many Baptist ministers, however, that were considered able and sound by Hassell and others, nevertheless were also castigated as Antinomians. Some of those ministers frequently used the expression, "moral" in both their writings and preaching, but not as being the rule of life for believers. Three of them were mentioned in the following:

"The eminently pious and learned Baptist ministers, John Skepp (who died 1721), John Brine (who died 1765), and John Gill (who died 1771), - the latter the most learned man that has ever borne the name of Baptist - entertained precisely the same views of the sovereignty

and efficacy of Divine grace as are held by the Bible Baptists of today. Though they proclaimed to sinners that they were in danger and on the high road to perdition, they did not call upon all men, whether spiritually concerned or not, to repent and believe the gospel. They dwelt much on the Divine purposes, and on the Bible fact that salvation is of the Lord. This method of preaching and writing was, after their departure, stigmatized as "selfish, hardening, refrigerant, soporific, hyper-Calvinistic, Antinomian." Hassell, p. 337. Thus, according to Hassell, the learned and unlearned, the sound and the unsound alike, were abused with the moniker, Antinomian. We may deduce from this then, that to preach or write about free grace and God's sovereignty, beyond the limits of the Arminian's hazy rule of acceptability, was ample grounds for bringing down on one's character that bitter iconium, Antinomian!

Another of those accused of antinomianism was Hansard Knollys, (1598-1691) a signer of the London Confession of Faith of 1646: "In 1636 the High Commission Court, or Protestant Inquisition, arrested and imprisoned him; but, through the connivance of his jailer, he escaped, in 1638, with his wife to America. He arrived in Boston a penniless fugitive, and was treated as an Antinomian, and had to work with a hoe for his daily bread." Hassell, p. 533.

We see that Knollys, like many other free grace preachers, was not only condemned as an Antinomian, but bore public reproach and harsh physical abuse as well. A careful review of Knolly's travels, as well as others of kindred spirit at that period, will be time well spent.

We quote here article 8, of the 1646 London Confession of Faith, with Scripture references, as signed by Knollys: "The rule of this knowledge, faith, and obedience concerning the worship of God, in which is contained the whole duty of man, is (not men's laws or unwritten traditions, but) only the word of God contained in the holy Scriptures, in which is plainly recorded whatsoever is needful for us to

know, believe, and practice, which are the only rule of holiness and obedience for all Saints, at all times, in all places to be observed." Col. 2.23; Matt.15.6, 9; John 5.39; 2Tim. 3.15-17; Isa. 8.19-20; Gal.1.8-9; Acts 3.22-23.

There are several things here worthy of notice; first, there is no mention in this article of any Bible laws, moral or otherwise, for the saints of the Most High to observe as a rule of life. Second, all the Scriptures cited are from the New Testament except the one in Isaiah 8.19-20 referring to the law and testimony as a standard of judgment for those wizards that peep, and those with familiar spirits. It is no wonder then that Knollys and the other signers of the Confession were maligned as Antinomians. They were not legalists. Surely hatred to truth knows no bounds. Especially if that truth exposes man's corrupt desire to be yoked to a legal system, as opposed to Christ's easy yoke and light burden (Matthew 11.30).

Foremost among the English Baptists of the last century bearing the censure of "Antinomian" was William Gadsby, (1773-18~). Probably no gospel minister ever lived that stood above reproach as did Gadsby. Probably too, no minister ever suffered vilification at the hands of Arminians as did he. We quote again from Hassell: "His character was irreproachable. Like Huntington, he maintained that the gospel, and not the Law, is the rule of life for the believer; and for this he was stigmatized and persecuted as an Antinomian." Hassell, p. 617. From the introduction of Gadsby's excellent work, *The Perfect Law of Liberty*, we quote the following as an example of his assessment of the appalling opinion in which he was held: "It is an awful fact, that we live in a day when the best name which the truth as it is in Jesus can obtain among the bulk of the professing world, is that of 'Antinomianism;' and whoever dare be bold to declare, in the language of the Scripture, that the believer is 'dead to the law by the body of Christ,' is sure to be published, far and near, as an enemy to holiness

and a propagator of licentiousness, unless, after he has so said, he be dexterous enough to make the Scripture speak what it never thought of; and if he can do this, he may go through the world without being besmeared with religious slander; but if he be not able to do this, his name must be cast out as evil; and whatever malicious lie is forged, and is fathered on such a character, it is received with the greatest glee, as being a real truth.

"It is certain that the old trade of 'Report, and we will report it,' never was in a more flourishing state than at this time. Indeed, could government only hit on a plan to fix a duty on this trade, it is not to say what an immense revenue it would produce."

Based on that which Hassell said regarding those "ablest and soundest ministers" that preached the moral law was the believers rule of life, we would inquire, who were these unsound speakers and writers so lacking in ability, charged as Antinomians? Surely, Gadsby would have to be one among them. So too would be Elders Samuel Trott, Gilbert Beebe, Thomas Dudley, J.F. Johnson, Thomas Poulson, Gabriel Conklin, David Bartley, Silas Durand, P.D. Gold, H.M. Curry, Robert Leachman, Horace Lefferts, John Leland, Ephriam Rittenhouse, and a whole host of others whose names graced the Old School and Primitive periodicals of the last 175 years. There would be too, those hundreds, probably thousands others, that faithfully toiled in the Master's vineyard, unloved and unknown to most but their beloved flocks, and those mockers outside the camp that despised their doctrine and conduct. We may fairly say these all died in the faith, never bowing the knee to the image of Baal, nor tarnishing the message of free grace with such Ashdod language as "the moral law is your rule of life" even if it meant they were cast out from the polite religious society of the day as base Antinomians. All the accusations of "unsound and unable" against these dear soldiers will never gain



currency in heaven, nor will it sully their reputation with that great cloud of witnesses who rejoice in the anthems of free grace.

## **THE ACCUSERS**

John Wesley, the Methodist; Andrew Fuller, a supposed Baptist; the vast dark empire of the Established Church hireling clergy, with few exceptions; the greater part of those "Puritan Authors"; the General Baptists, at least those that rose to an intelligence level to know there even existed a controversy; these and countless others in England joined in the common cry, "Antinomian", against the scattered few called by grace to feed the flock. In this land, at the head of the pack, was David Benedict, followed closely by numerous other so-called historians and authors, determined to smear the good name of those that dared follow Him Who took the law and its curse away, nailing it to His cross. Commenting on what he called "Our old Baptist divines" Benedict gives the following caustic observation: "In expatiating on the strong points of their orthodox faith, they sometimes ran Calvinism up to seed, and were accused by their opponents of Antinomian tendencies" David Benedict, Hassell's History of the Church of God, p. 760. We will pass Benedict by without further consideration, except to give this astute comment on him: "...and he then being a 'Missionary' advocating all the new schemes of the day, took decided ground against the Primitive Baptists, of course, treated them quite unceremoniously, and declared they were so few and worthless that they would likely become extinct before his book reached his more distant subscribers." Hasell, p. 751.

Never to be overlooked, however, are those disciples of law, better known as New-Schoolers. As soon as the Old School - New School division took place in 1832, and in a great measure before, from these advocates of salaried ministers, Sunday schools, missions, and all the other contrivances so popular among the daughters of the

Old Harlot, came the popular harangue, "Antinomianism." It was piously thundered about everywhere.

From these boasting New School Baptists, described as the "other party" in the following, we give a sample of their opinion: "The other party treated the Old School with a great deal of contempt on account of the paucity of their numbers, their old-fashioned creed, their experience of grace, their want of education, and general deficiency in human polish. And they declared wherever they went (supposing no doubt it would be so) that the Old Party would soon become extinct - out of the way entirely, and give them no further trouble. Various names were applied to the Old School by the New, such as "Hard Shells," "Straight Jackets," "Ignoramuses," "Lawrenceans," "Osbornites," "Antinomians," etc., etc.," Hassell, p. 748. It requires little difficulty to see that the New School party in the United States were of the same stripe as the general run of Arminians in Europe. Those old saints of the Most High that preached the gospel, not the law, was the believer's rule of life, were persecuted as Antinomians wherever the Lord cast their lot. And their accusers were legion.

## **SUMMARY**

It should be apparent from what we have briefly written in this introduction to Antinomianism that there are really only two lines of thought on the subject; that of the Arminian, who holds the law as his rule of life, and that of the Predestinarian, who despite much ridicule and abuse, nevertheless, adheres to the perfect law of liberty, the Gospel, as his rule of life. And, should the Lord be pleased to bless us, we will in a future article examine the Scriptures to give a basis for the Predestinarians' position.

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The Remnant

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